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Social media and the COVID-19 pandemic: The dilemma of fake news clutter vs. social responsibility

ABSTRACT

This article examines the relationship between fake news and social media as increasingly important sources of news, at a time when mainstream media no longer have exclusive control over news production and dissemination. It has been evident that few media outlets and professionals tend to draw conflicting news about COVID-19 from social media feeds, which are largely produced by common citizens with mostly no journalism training. This pervasive use makes social media key sources to scores of media outlets for news, whether it is related to COVID-19 or public affairs issues, even though it is susceptible to torrents of credibility and accuracy issues.

As a result, of the overwhelming spread of fake news on coronavirus, which is contributing to framing events from several angles, media professionals are now obliged to track and vet information circulating on social media. Due to the scale of disinformation spreading on the Web, it has become imperative that the credibility and accuracy of news is thoroughly verified. Media organizations have already been putting in place various mechanisms to monitor false news.

KEYWORDS

fake news
COVID-19
social media
social responsibility
media ethics
fact-checking

This article will attempt to identify and assess these monitoring efforts in the Arab world. For this purpose, I have put together a list of Arab observatories launched on the internet in order to monitor fake news circulating in relation to COVID-19, and to discuss their methods of monitoring work, in the context of mobilization carried out by governments and many organizations such as the World Health Organization.

This article is pinned down on social responsibility approach which helps pave the way the different propositions to combat fake news and avoid abuses in social media uses. This article proposes an evaluation of the monitoring initiative via-a-vis fake news and proposes a set of guidelines for improving the work of such monitoring bodies. Hence, this research reveals that social media outlets have diversified their goals to match the power of the conventional media in disseminating information and bringing up issues for debate. However, in the light of the framework of social responsibility, social media actors have to constantly develop a set of ethical practices to be observed by users, establish codes of conduct regulating content production, and lay down a code of integrity to assure accuracy in news and information transmission.

INTRODUCTION

The spread of rumour and fake news is not a new phenomenon. What is new is the speed at which it can travel across the world. The new technologies and means of communication have facilitated an informational environment that makes it easier for misinformation to circulate, with social media becoming a breeding ground for fast-spreading fake news. Misinformation and fake news is especially insidious when coinciding with immense challenges, such as the coronavirus pandemic. 2020 witnessed an upward trend in the spread of fake news with COVID-19 virus outbreak. Social media were accused of contributing to widespread misinformation about the virus in absence of any censorship measures, compared to mainstream media.

According to *The Lancet*, a weekly peer-reviewed medical journal owned by Elsevier, with the COVID-19 epidemic, fake news has circulated on social media at the highest and most alarming rate to date. 'Previously, the world witnessed epidemics such as SARS breaking in China in 2003, and H1N1 in Mexico in 2009. But communication sites had not yet developed as they are now, and there was no emergency to fight fake news' (*The Lancet* 2020).

In response to this, *The Lancet* conducted a study about misinformation that garnered trust during the spread of the coronavirus pandemic,

the most important of which was mother-to-child Corona womb transmission, with reference to Chinese sources. Many people believed it because they do not understand Chinese. The study showed that examination of tissue samples of pregnant women in Wuhan has found no evidence that COVID-19 is passed from women to foetus. Although limited to a small sample of nine women, the Chinese study proved the unreliability of news published about mother-to-child Corona womb transmission.

(*The Lancet* 2020)

Another widely spread example of misinformation regarding the coronavirus emerged in Iran, where alcohol was wrongly touted as a COVID-19 cure. As a result, at least 27 people died by alcohol poisoning in attempts to prevent the coronavirus. Many people underestimated the virus and failed to respect preventive health measures like quarantines, physical distancing, washing hands, and wearing masks, which allowed the pandemic to transmit faster, to become more virulent and to spread into a pandemic. The United States, where the outbreak of the pandemic shows no sign of slowing down, has become the most bereaved country in the world with more than 347,500 dead from the virus (World Health Organization 2021).

Misleading information about coronavirus spread widely and rapidly, such that the director-general of the WHO declared that they are not only battling the challenge of the epidemic but also the equally dangerous challenge of the 'infodemic', the overabundance of fabricated, misleading and potentially harmful information about the pandemic and the preventative measures. A major part of this infodemic has come from social media.

To combat false information and limit its potential harm to public health, the WHO had to access social media platforms. The organization had monitored more than 1,400 local epidemics in 172 countries around the world between 2011 and 2018, but none of those epidemics was as covered by media as COVID-19 epidemic' (Asharq Al-Awsat 2020). What has increased tension and fear around the world is that now any person can publish news all over the world and people share news fast without checking its accuracy. Taking this misinformation as a reliable fact only worsens this fearmongering.

Conceptual and semantic definition of fake news

The term 'fake news' in English, and *al-akhbar al-zaiifa* in Arabic, refers to false news stories aimed at manipulating or misleading a specific audience with incorrect information, for financial, economic or political purposes. In Arabic, 'lying' is defined as the opposite of 'truthfulness' and the person who tells lies is a 'liar'. You identify someone as a liar when you attribute him/her with telling lies.

Conceptually, to lie is to deliberately misinform or unintentionally mislead someone about something. According to Al-Nawawi, lying is: 'telling inaccurate information about something, intentionally or in good faith, in the past or the future' (Almaany 2020). For Al-Ragheb,

Lying is either an invention of a story, an addition or omission in the story with a change in the meaning, or a distortion by changing an expression. Inventing information is called fabrication. Adding or omitting information is called slander. Story invention in the presence of the concerned is called a falsehood while that in his absence is called a lie. Sharing false information without checking its truthiness is called mendacity.

(Almaany 2020)

Fake news has multiplied with the widespread popularity of the internet and social media platforms. The source of fake news can be individual or institutional and use any type of media. It has become possible for anyone to publish news, photos and videos on blogs and social media, where neither

the publishing process nor the news sources are subject to scrutiny. Fake news is often based on catchy headlines, exciting photos, and short focused videos that are meant to elicit emotional reactions and the need to share. Politicians and arts or sports stars may be subject to rumour, with the aim of garnering greater viewership and public sharing.

Fake news in journalism is defined by Silverman (2020) as

information that is widely used and disseminated to a large-scale or private audience, believed to be true, pretended to be true, or of which the sources are not verified. This usually occurs due to the lack of information sources such as media blackout by official sources, or with the aim of achieving a press scoop. It is a common phenomenon since ancient times, which became more common thanks to free publishing on Internet.

With the fast development of social media, fake news has become easy to spread, since communication is now instant and streamlined. While this is facilitated by smartphones, technological progress is not to blame for fake news. Those involved in the transmission of inaccurate information, namely the transmitter and recipient, are responsible. Therefore, as a human-managed publishing process, fake news should be tracked through publishers and mass publications, going back to the journalist.

Fake news and social networks: A reciprocal interactive relationship

To understand the relationship between fake news and social media, we will first try to understand the relationship between media and advertising. A basic rule in media training is to comprehend the contractual or reciprocal relationship between advertising and journalism. Media rely on advertising for their financial balance, just as companies and products' advertisers rely on the media for profits and added value.

By analogy, there may also be a reciprocal relationship between social media and fake news. Fake news cannot flourish, spread and be influential if not embraced by social media. Social media ensures fast publication, free circulation, and lax censorship, which is all a rumour needs to spread widely. Rumour and fake news depend on several factors to stir public opinion, such as the element of surprise in the publication and the wit and shock-factor of the story. This incentivizes the recipient to surf the net and social media to gain insight about the authenticity of the published content. This is what the publisher of any story is looking for in order to attract views and potential advertisers.

In the context of the relationship of fake news with social media, it is worth noting the important changes witnessed in the media landscape and public sphere. Specifically, the idea of the press industry being the major trustee of news reliability and authenticity – is no longer true.

The news industry has changed more dramatically with the advent of the internet than at any time since the origin of the journalism profession in the eighteenth century. This was confirmed by a report published by the European Journalism Observatory (<http://en.ejo.ch>), showing that social media infiltrated all fields, 'starting with political propaganda and banking systems, passing to

personal adventures and literature industry, and ending with rumour and fake news industry' (Dor 2016).

For example, in tracking the role of social media networks during the US presidential elections between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney in 2012, between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump in 2016, lately between Donald Trump and Joe Biden in 2020, and during the Arab Spring revolutions since 2011, it is clear that social media has gone beyond being an internet phenomenon into being a real news-making machine. Such networks have changed how audiences perceive television and how inevitable immediate interaction has become nowadays. It has created more space for comments and established new bridges between television as a mainstream news source and the requirements of new and renewed social communication networks. In this context, the new appearance of Al Jazeera on its twentieth anniversary in 2016, having adapted itself to instant publishing, is considered an important response to the inevitability of social media. The strategic connection between television and social media as a means of communication is no longer ignorable. Numerous indicators have shown that the Al-Jazeera channel has turned into the most followed Arab satellite channel on social networks, with more than twenty million followers (Zran 2017: 15).

With social media defining our interactions, the latter has gained new connotations. Television programmes have started to be designed around interaction and comments of social network users, such as on Twitter or Facebook. In many television talk shows on French, American and some Arab news channels, like Al-Jazeera, France24 and BBC, journalists share the topic for discussion and comments prior to broadcasting. They invite social media users to interact, comment and ask questions, and carry out a kind of referendum about the relevance of the opinions to be broadcasted.

The value and popularity of TV programmes have become measured by the degree of audience interaction on social networks. This is carried out by social network managers from conventional media as an alternative to the traditional call centre interviews, a technical interaction tool, no longer preferred by citizens.

In addition to interaction, social media has facilitated an instant transmission-reception process, in contrast to conventional media's time lag between message design and transmission. Today, the user broadcasts directly through Twitter, Facebook and Snapchat, without being physically present at the place of filming or recording, thus providing a simultaneous-sharing process between the sender, the message and the receiver.

This new datum signals the necessity to review mass communication tradition of a passive receiver and a dominant transmitter, with a single message broadcasted to a heterogeneous audience in terms of preferences, watching time, and cultural and social beliefs. This has made social media an important source of news. It has become evident that a journalist may draw information from social media like any citizen, which makes these networks an essential source of news about public issues. For example, the French Minister of Justice, Christine Tobira, announced her resignation from the Netherlands government in 2016 on her Twitter account, consequently prompting various media outlets to report the news based on her Twitter feed. Equally, the official Twitter account of outgoing US President Donald Trump has been a source of news for many Americans and media professionals working in various media outlets.

The spread of communication networks and their growing role as a source of news has contributed to many professional shocks and difficulties for journalism's status in society. They make it evident that the journalist is no longer the monitor or the first source of news. We should admit that conventional media are no longer the sole, dominant platform for news broadcasting and circulating, and that journalists do not have absolute control over the news producing process.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research work employs observation and monitoring as one of the scientific research tools that are used to collect information related to the phenomenon in question or study. I adopted these two tools to prepare a database on foreign and Arab observatories interested in monitoring false news on social media. The next step was to understand what news monitoring is and how significant it was in combating false news on social media networks. Consequently, this process has enabled me to identify the key codes of professional monitoring of fake news by traditional media institutions based on investigation, correction and response to the omissions and unintended errors that the journalist may fall into. This has also allowed the researcher to come to a clear picture regarding the nature of the work carried out by the Arab observatories – both governmental and non-governmental – with regard to monitoring fake news in social media networks.

On the one hand, this research draws on the social responsibility approach which provides mechanisms to resist fake news and rumours. Ultimately, the findings will, on the one hand, attempt to provide a theoretical rooting for an approach to social responsibility and an explanation of the ways in which its mechanisms work to resist fake news and rumours on social media networks by adopting ethical rules for all those involved. On the other hand, it will seek to develop a set of codes of conduct that may encompass all parties involved in producing media content, by dedicating an ethical barometer by which to investigate the accuracy in transmitting news and information on social media networks.

Social media as incubators for fake news and indicators of public opinion trends

With the flourishing of social media and the decline of the journalist's absolute control over the news production process, it has become possible for any citizen to record or film any event they have lived through and share the details (Dollé 2012: 20). This phenomenon has become known as citizen journalism, taking advantage of fast and free publication. This has confused the work of journalists, who must investigate news stories and verify various sources for more details before releasing the news (Zran 2013: 29). This new situation has resulted in conventional media granting citizens' broadcasts on social media a professional status, through the creation of Social Media Managers. Their job is to seize news, pictures and videos that may be material for news stories, and not to skip potentially important news that a citizen journalist might record.

Faced with this social media frenzy, it has become vital for media professionals to consider a new phenomenon such as fake news. Many news stories

circulated by citizens are disproved later on or may be riddled with misinformation, such as news surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, political life, public issues or celebrity stories.

With the above variables in mind, we can conduct further research into the factors behind the ubiquity of rumour and fake news in social networks. The most important factors which help facilitate fake news are the following:

A secret transmitter and recipient.

Fast broadcasting and live streaming.

Dramatized reporting of fake news especially the abuse of disasters and crises like the corona pandemic.

Free and real-time access to social networks due to mobile phones.

The possibility for anyone to share inaccurate information with friends or family members.

Fake news breeding on social media through free, fast and automatic circulation.

Rumours or misinformation are inevitably more easily and quickly spread, rather than disproved.

Access to artificial intelligence programmes to further spread misinformation across social media, especially if such news divulges information about internal political competition or hidden international political, economic or intelligence wars.

The community's acceptance or rejection, at a specific moment in history, of what is rapidly and overtly transmitted by social media, is an indicator of public opinion trends in general. The recipient's refusal or acceptance of the story's content may also have a political or socio-ideological impact, since what is acceptable in social media and cyberspace has also become acceptable in society.

Media professionals should consider how social media content now contributes to the framing of events. They must follow cyber public opinion trends to see how they compare with the political, cultural and social reality. Social media has become a virtual space for measuring public opinion trends. Accordingly, many posts may be framed in various ways to test the recipients' reaction to news, products, ideas or opinions presented on social media.

Moreover, social media has become a countering force against power abuses by those in positions of authority. Since the events of the Arab Spring, social media have proven their ability to communicate what mainstream media failed to. Social media incorporates local public opinion and provides more opportunities for citizens to participate in public debate. Thus, this pumps new blood into our democracy, which is a shared life system (Zran 2017: 17).

Today, these networks can become the voice of a wronged employee or a child in need of medical treatment, or divulge a bribing policeman red-handed. This gives power to social media users, who can directly address the public, the concerned authorities, and everyone involved in a political or humanitarian case (Farah 2016: 14). Indeed, many complaints against officials have resulted in trials and dismissals after network users showed solidarity with victims.

Overall, social media is not only a new, crucial player for countering power abuses, but for making salient issues that mainstream media often ignore

due to interests of political or financial lobbies (Saada 2011: 2). On the other hand, fake news and rumour is a prevalent issue, which has peaked with the 2020 coronavirus crisis. The current challenge is to spot and combat fake news and to prevent it from infiltrating social networks, since they are accessible to anyone.

Monitoring fake news and social media: Reality and challenges

To understand the importance of news monitoring in thwarting fake news on social media, we must differentiate between conventional media monitoring and civil and non-civil organizations interested in monitoring fake news on social media. The former is led by mainstream media institutions who investigate and correct any inattentiveness or unintended inaccuracy that a journalist may fall prey to. Regarding the latter, literature on Arab media institutions monitoring fake news on social media indicates that there are not many affiliated institutional structures or scientific boards for such monitoring except Al-Nahar Lebanese newspaper (see Table 2). The company launched a fake news investigation service in 2018, which was an important step, although still limited (Homsy 2020).

In practice, local, national and foreign media outlets dominate the media monitoring process in Arab countries, which is largely in relation to state policy. This delicate task is supervised by a traditional authority known as the Ministry of Information or the Ministry of Information and Culture. Within this structure, there is a special department for monitoring media and presenting the findings to the relevant authorities. It is a kind of daily exhibition of the local and international press.

The monopoly of the Ministries of Information over media output, with their own political interests, precludes any possibility of establishing independent specialized networks. It is as if monitoring media eliminates the need to search for other monitoring processes such the false portrayals of women, immigrants and security men. The priority of politicians for formal and selective media monitoring minimizes the importance of media monitoring in these other, much-needed areas. This explains why most of the monitoring centres and projects are led by civil society and supported by international governmental or non-governmental bodies.

The reality of monitoring fake news on social media is not much different from the conventional media monitoring in the Arab world. It is equally disregarded, and this stems from public news media. This does not negate some daring initiatives in some Arab countries, such as Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia and Palestine (see Table 1). These initiatives include *Mada* centre, the Egyptian *Falso* initiative with an academic background, the Jordanian *Akeed* Centre, *Misbar* or *Fatabayyano* (Chaabni 2019).

Centre	Country	Editing line
Mada Centre	Palestine	Finding facts to fight coronavirus fake news spread on Palestinian social networks, see https://www.madacenter.org/article/1611/https://cutt.ly/ and Okuw9X.
Falso Al-Nahda University Beni Souif,	Egypt	Falso 'Fake' is a research and methodological platform affiliated with Al-Nahda University, monitored by a team of professional journalists supported by academics and specialized media professors. Falso is regulated by a coherent practice code that considers the regulations and complexities of media practice and observes the technical principles of news content production according to scientific and methodological standards. The purpose of Falso is to provide a critical research backing to uncover rumour and fake news, reduce their negative effects on the political, economic and social environment, and help media professionals control performance and avoid technical gaps. On the long term, it aims to support recipients to efficiently receive and evaluate media messages, to be able to sort out content and discover gaps, and to create immunity against tainted and non-professional-purpose-oriented messages. See https://cutt.ly/kksmron .
Falso	Tunisia	There is also a Tunisian Facebook page in the name of falso (@falso.tn) whose role is also to verify the authenticity of the information circulating in the web, see https://cutt.ly/NksoTu1 .
Falso	Libya	A Libyan platform for monitoring hate speech and fake news, monitoring professional breaches in the field of journalism and advertising, and scrutinizing the circulating news, see https://falso.ly/ .
Misbar	Arab platform	'Misbar Index' is the monthly report issued by Misbar news inquiry and fact-finding website. It is an Arab platform investigating news, finding out facts, and uncovering lies in the public sphere. It examines the facts concerned with news verification and classification according to the standards adopted on the platform by experts, see https://misbar.com/ .
Akeed	Jordan	This observatory was established in 2014 by the Jordan Media Institute as an academic and research institution granting master's degree in modern media, with the support of King Abdullah Fund for Development (KAJD). The Jordanian Media Credibility Monitor Akeed tracked rumours and recorded 67 in March, of which 43 rumours concern health, namely, the spread of coronavirus, see https://akeed.jo/ar/ and https://ar-ar.facebook.com/Akeed.Jordan/ .
Fatabyyano	Jordan	Fatabyyano (Go Check) is a Jordanian youth awareness project with the aim of filtering Arabic content on the internet from myths, rumour and fake news. The project founders declared: 'We could correct thousands of myths and rumours through youth efforts working day and night. The project was invited by Harvard University as one of the best Arab youth projects for 2016', along with invitations from many international institutions, see https://www.facebook.com/Fatabyyano/ .

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Centre	Country	Editing line
Taakkad	Syria	Taakkad 'verify' platform has two lofty goals, namely: to ensure the citizen's right to obtain accurate information and to contribute as much as possible to the improvement and upgrading of the Syrian media performance by identifying the imbalances. Dirar Khattab, the website managing editor says that 'the platform's slogan is "because news are a trust"' and that 'since its establishment, more than 800 fake news stories have been corrected'; including 125 from the Syrian state-run media outlets, 129 from the Syrian opposition media, 107 from the Arab media, 94 from foreign media, 252 from social media feeds, and 103 news from the 'self-management' media in Syria, see https://www.verify-sy.com/ and https://www.facebook.com/Verify.syr/ .
Dabegad	Egypt	Da Bgadd (Is that true?) is a platform designed to display the rumours and their corrections (true version of the story), attaching sources and references in the comments on the publications, see https://dabegad.com/ https://www.facebook.com/DaBegad/ and https://twitter.com/dabegad .
Matsaddaach	Egypt	Matsaddaach (don't believe), operates in the same way as taakkad platform. It focuses largely on Egyptian media outlets. In addition, it publishes educational articles and reports, introduces digital verification tools to public, and adopts the latest innovative tools for news, photos, and videos digital and informational falsehoods tracking, see https://www.facebook.com/matsda2sh/ and https://cutt.ly/fksSQXV .
'I Check'	Tunisia	The 'I Check' platform verifies internet sources and their validity, hence reducing fake news and helping journalists to investigate the circulating information, especially on the new media. Any journalist or user can verify the authenticity of the information published on the internet by accessing the www.ichack.tn website or the platform's Facebook page, where he/she can find the latest fake news, misleading headlines, together with the news that, after investigation, turn out to be true. The platform also provides statistics on the media outlets that publish fake news the most and the least, see https://tunisiachecknews.com/about .
Akhbarmeter	Egypt	Akhbarmeter (news metre) is the first digital media observatory in Egypt and the Arab world to arrange media channels according to their credibility and commitment to media professionalism. It was established in 2014 through the initiative of a group of Egyptian youth, in response to the attempts to manipulate the public by some media outlets that are deeply damaging to society. The observatory team monitors and evaluates the credibility and professionalism of the news published by the top ten reading newspapers in Egypt on Alexa. They daily evaluate about 20 of the most read news stories on the websites monitored by the observatory. The news is evaluated based on a scientific methodology developed with the help of international and local experts in the field of media and data verification, which is summarized in a set of questions that determine the extent of the news's commitment to media professionalism and its abstaining from misinformation, propaganda and violation of human rights, see https://akhbarmeter.org/ and https://www.facebook.com/akhbarmeter/ .

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Tawathaq	Egypt	Tawathaq (Document) is an initiative emanating from the participation in the Digital Media Diploma offered by the Kamal Adham Centre of the American University in Cairo. The initiative seeks to simplify some basic media sciences to broaden the perceptions of non-specialists about the different journalistic templates and their determinants, see https://cutt.ly/ikaCufZ .
Moroccan laboratory for monitoring fake news	Morocco	The 'Children of the Path' movement announced the establishment of the Moroccan Laboratory for Monitoring Fake News, a digital initiative aimed at monitoring and combating false news. The movement considers fake news a key factor in the spread of the hopelessness wave that has swept the Moroccan society, especially in digital circles. Therefore, it initiated this project to monitor and analyse fake news, reveal its sources, and disclose its truth. It aims to create an interactive digital platform, with the goal of exchanging information about the spreading news, and then monitoring the extent to which it is amplified or exaggerated on social media. The laboratory includes a wide network of Moroccan and international experts and researchers specialized in IT and fake news monitoring, see https://cutt.ly/Ykstngp .
The Anti-Rumours Authority	Saudi Arabia	The Anti-Rumours Authority is an independent project established in 2012 to address rumour and strife and handle them so that they do not harm society. The project exposes rumour publishers and dispels lies aiming to stir public opinion, by raising awareness and clarifying the truth with reference to official sources, see http://norumors.net/ .
Fake News DZ	Algeria	Created on 6 April, the Fake news DZ page on Facebook aims to fight misinformation and manipulation attempts, regardless of the source of information and of the political affiliation of the people concerned, and whether the fake news is in their favour or is meant to damage their image. The purpose of this platform is also to uncover fake news and methods of manipulating public opinion on social media in general, see https://www.facebook.com/FakenewsDZ .
Haggak Taaraf	Jordan	Haggak Taaraf 'It is your right to know' is an official online information verification platform. The purpose of the platform is to provide accurate, rapid and transparent information to official and social media followers, in order to prevent the transmission of rumours, and to create a tradition of information verification before spreading and sharing it. The platform will later form part of a comprehensive media campaign combatting the 'tsunami' of misinformation on social media. See link, https://haggak.jo/website/Default.aspx .

Table 1: The most important Arab centres interested in monitoring fake news on social media.

Lebanon	Al-Nahar Newspaper	Fact-Checking #	See examples on the following links, https://cutt.ly/3kaMK2l and https://cutt.ly/jka0v4p .
France	Le Monde Newspaper	https://www.lemonde.fr/verification/	Decodex is a tool to help you verify the information circulating on the internet and find rumours, exaggerations or distortions. Find out why we created this tool and find our detailed methodology here, see https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/ .
France	LiberationNewspaper	https://www.liberation.fr/auteur/15236-service-desintox	Desintox is a tool used by the French newspaper Liberation to help to verify the information circulating on the internet and find rumours, exaggerations, or distortions.
France	French News Agency	https://factuel.afp.com/ar	The spread of coronavirus killing up to now tens of thousands of people in the world has provoked a wave of fake news on social media. Fake news finding teams at the French Press Agency dealt with many false news stories, in different languages, proving their inaccuracy (AFP 2020).
Britain	BBC	https://www.bbc.com/arabic/topics/c95y3q41dq0t	The BBC's fact-finding team refutes several lies and rumours about coronavirus and the drugs promoted on the African continent
Great Britain	British charity	https://fullfact.org/	Full Fact is a British charity, based in London, which checks and corrects facts reported in the news as well as claims, which circulate on social media. Businessperson Michael Samuel, the charity's chair, and Will Moy, who serves as director, founded it in 2009. It has eighteen staff as of 2019 (Wikipedia 2021).
United States	fact-checking website	https://www.snopes.com/	Created by David and Barbara Mikkelson in 1994, 'Snopes formerly known as the Urban Legends Reference Pages is a fact-checking website. It has been described as a "well-regarded reference for sorting out myths and rumours" on the internet. It has also been seen as a source for validating and debunking urban legends and similar stories in American popular culture' (Wikipedia 2021).

Table 2: Contributions from Arab and foreign media organizations to monitoring fake news on social media.

What these observatories and monitoring projects share is that they emerged from local environments, embraced by civil society, independent from official bodies and are supported by foreign countries or NGOs. They also share the classic role of discerning accurate news from fake news, in absence of any research, documentation, education or support cross-cutting functions. The monitoring process is reduced to a mere technical activity rather than a

multi-approach and multi-outcome process. What they do highlight are inadequacies of current news systems and especially the marginalization of Arabs within the media. They also show how the media coverage of public issues suffers from several defects and overwhelmingly far from professional ethics.

In addition to these academic and civil society projects, numerous world-wide media organizations have implemented a fake news monitoring service under rumour combatting and public protection policy. Few newspapers, news agencies and television networks, especially in Western countries, have established centres for this purpose. They have provided journalists with training courses in the monitoring of fake news, conscious of its harm not only to society, but also to the journalism industry, since it is in charge of verifying fact and avoiding disinformation. Audiences tend to believe that media and journalists are to blame, forgetting that, with the immediate and free transmission of information through social media, publishing is no longer exclusive to journalism professionals.

The spread of coronavirus has killed more than 2.3 million people globally by February 2021, sparking a worldwide wave of fake news on social media. Agence France Press (AFP) tracked coronavirus news in various languages and found incidences of inaccurate and misleading information. Similarly, the BBC, the French newspaper, *Le Monde*, and the Lebanese newspaper *An-Nahar* have established fake news monitoring teams to combat this misinformation (see Table 2).

The year 2015 witnessed the launch of the First Draft News project, which gathered media institutions, social websites and technological groups. This included Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, BuzzFeed News, CNN, the Australian ABC News, ProPublica, the French News Agency, *The Telegraph*, France Info and Al Jazeera, as well as Amnesty International, the European Press Centre and the American Press Institute. This network was developed with the support of the Google News Lab and works in cooperation with YouTube to verify the videos posted on its platform.

Diagnosis of fake news monitoring and social media in the Arabian Peninsula

To have a critical approach to fake news monitoring, we should first diagnose the reality of news and social media. This allows us to identify the obstacles to monitoring, and to understand why it is standard, seasonal, slogan-focused and even ideological sometimes. Such an analysis may also help us to spotlight how monitoring is subject to the compulsions of financiers and donors, which makes it turn into an on-demand-process. Therefore, we start hereafter by addressing the obstacles hindering monitoring, namely, the lack of professionalism and specialization.

Routine media monitoring: This appears in the critical and superficial remarks about fake news. The statement of the monitoring results seems to precede the monitoring process itself, in a hurry to market consumable statements such as: 'electronic warfare and fake news', 'fake news is a destructive tool for the society and the state' [...], etc.

Occasional monitoring: It is a seasonal and circumstantial process with no far-sight vision nor long-term plans. It is a specifically formal process flourishing occasionally. Occasions may include a municipal or legislative election, a response to the desire of a non-governmental institution

to carry out a public relations campaign, or a crisis like the coronavirus pandemic, which has resulted in growing efforts to uncover fake news.

Formal monitoring: This monitoring is concerned with social media issues and is limited by the internet masses phenomena. It does not address fundamental and crucial issues such as media environment concepts, the relationship with state institutions regarding access to news, citizens' right to communicate, and especially the existing social relations and structures that affect the news system fundamentally.

Fake news monitoring as scientific research: Poor scientific theoretical and empirical research into fake news monitoring hinders knowledge and therefore progress in the field. Research into intellectual and societal monitoring problems should be based on academic knowledge. Courses of media monitoring and social media outputs should be taught in media departments or social science disciplines. It is true that there are several strategic research centres in the Arab region. However, excluding the *Falso* Observatory established by *Al-Nahda* University Media Department in Egypt, and *Akeed* observatory established by the Media Institute in Jordan, there is little importance given to designing specialized courses in media and fake news monitoring. It is worth noting that unless reached through scientific research processes and mechanisms, monitoring findings are likely to be unreliable, subjective and ideologically biased.

Monitoring depends on objective, subjective and technical conditions that can be summarized as follows:

Simplicity and clarity of monitoring objectives: i.e. to have a clear monitoring purpose, whether it is to conduct a public relations campaign, to prepare a media-organizing law, or to verify doubted information or fake news.

Observability of the subject matter: that is to say, we monitor what we can observe. Monitoring projects are often intrusive on the cultural environment of the community. The margin of freedoms in some countries may not be conducive to freedom of expression and the right to access information.

Inter-approach and inter-complementary monitoring process: In admitting the complexity of the fake news monitoring process, we should adopt different research approaches in accordance with the problems that arise. Questionnaires, for instance, are more suitable for monitoring the reception phenomenon, while content analysis is suitable for investigating fake news media messages, and interviews are more effective for studying the opinions of officials and decision-makers, such as those in charge of the Corona pandemic response, for example.

Objectivity and independence of monitoring: The approach used in the monitoring projects should be independent of the project funder. The monitoring should not be an on-demand job and should satisfy the conditions for scientific objectivity. Often, the project funder interferes with the methodology and adapts it to a particular agenda or to a non-scientific approach.

The multiplicity of contents and the diversity of media: monitoring should be vertical and horizontal. It should deal with the various contents and messages of media outputs, including advertisements, dramas, news and talk shows. It should also ensure diversity in terms of media types, such

as specialized and partisan paper press, digital press, radio, television and social media networks. Diversifying the contents and categories is essential to provide a comprehensive approach to fake news monitoring in media.

Funding transparency and declaration of the beneficiary of the monitoring: The monitoring team should be informed of, not only the funder, but also the beneficiary of the monitoring project. The funder may not necessarily be the beneficiary, who is responsible for translating the final report into future programmes and decisions. The funder may be a non-governmental organization while the beneficiary may be a governmental body, a different non-governmental organization, a media elite group, or public opinion.

The experience and competence of the monitoring team: The monitoring project should be conducted by a multi-disciplinary team of experts in media and communication, as well as in sociology, journalism, psychology and computer science. The curriculum vitae and the monitoring results of the team members, from the general supervisor to the administrative assistant, should also be displayed. Often, monitoring results are presented without mentioning the funder and the monitor, which may cause officials and the public to doubt results. In the case of fake news, the beneficiaries are the media institutions and their audience. Many of those who present themselves as monitors of fake news do not have any journalism background.

Publishing and promoting the monitoring findings in the media: The monitoring outcome and the adopted methodology should be published in the media. They should be shared and evaluated to impart scientific transparency to the job and to gain the feedback of official authorities and public opinion. The monitoring job is not a covert process of which the results are to be shelved. This means that part of the monitoring budget should be allocated to publish the outcome to officials and the public, to broadcast the results on various forms of media, to broadcast press seminars, to issue bulletins, brochures and books, to hold conferences, interviews and so on.

Social responsibility face to fake news on social media

With the increase of fake news in social media, and with citizens taking part in news production and release, new questions should be raised. How can citizens be responsible for news accuracy, just like journalists, after becoming partners in the publishing process due to citizen journalism? How can we live together in this digital space where we spend most of our time? How can the youth generation embrace technological communication while preserving their digital identity? Exclusively gaining access to a source of a news story doesn't mean that you are legally and morally entitled to publish it. What does it mean for the news to be true, and how can its accuracy be proven? What are the features of the editorial line for a private account or for a citizen journalism website? How can we avoid spreading false or misleading news?

In search of an answer for these questions, every news producer must be aware of the principles and due rules of news production, to avoid spreading misleading and fake news. Clarity is required, lest the confusion and overlap affect the journalism profession. Mishaps regarding fake news reduce

journalists' credibility and make the publishing website lose its lustre, since journalists themselves often rely on the internet to publish news. The solution to fake news overwhelming social networks is the principle of social responsibility, an approach to internet and social network ethics. This approach directly relates to civil society. It is based on a code of ethics and conduct for internet users, on various platforms including social media, digital press, blogs and so on. Social responsibility can restrain some journalists and network activists who, in search of a scoop, publish news without verifying its accuracy and objectivity. This may raise doubts as to its credibility among the recipients, who may have the opportunity to check the reliability of the information they receive via Internet, through a comparative approach to media contents about the same scoop on different Internet websites' (Ben Messaoud 2020: 182).

Today, surfing the net, we bump into news stories and articles published on social-media-related newspapers and websites about the private life of some public figures and celebrities. This is a controversial issue. Some people consider it normal to broadcast the private life stories of a public figure in his capacity as such. Some others consider private life as a red line, and that journalists should not broadcast them on the internet. In this context, the question of journalists' integrity, ethics and credibility is raised and discussed. This is not limited to traditional journalists; citizen journalists are, due to social media, new influential actors in the news production process, and may sometimes be a source of information for conventional media.

In gaining a powerful influence matching that of mainstream media in broadcasting information and presenting controversial issues and debates, social media needs a moral code of conduct to investigate news accuracy and transmit correct information. The transformations of social media require them, within the framework of the social responsibility approach, to lay down ethical rules for all users, and approve codes of conduct for all players involved in content production.

If digital media derive their basic rules from the ethics developed in mainstream media, including press, audio, and visual journalism, social media, with their new technological and communicative specifications, need to think about their own ethical system in interaction with the aforementioned transformations. Besides, there is an urgent need to develop mechanisms for self-regulation and monitoring, with the partnership of all social media players.

(Ben Messaoud 2020: 180)

To establish internet publishing ethics, we are required to refer to mainstream media heritage, but must bear in mind social media peculiarities. Thus, research into digital publishing ethics is defined by the professional reality of this new type of media in the Arab world. It should start with a general ethical framework based on the principle of integrity, reaching the legislation that lays down the general legal framework for mainstream Arab media.

The basics of adhering to the ethics of digital publishing can be summarized as follows:

If your material exists online, link to it when you reference it.

Apologize in public for any misinformation.

Do not delete any information previously published to public. If you find out one of your statements to be inaccurate, add to it a more accurate

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report or correct it. Changing or deleting previously published information reduces integrity.

Do not be afraid to criticize your sources.

When the information comes from a questionable or a controversial source, the blogger must clearly note it in the rest of their writing and ideas.

(Blood 2009: 109)

News is published online around the clock, mostly without mentioning an origin or source, which paves the way for fake news to spread, especially during emergency crises such as the coronavirus pandemic. Therefore, we need a set of fundamentals, namely, attention, accuracy and speed in dealing with the news to be checked, and good knowledge of the websites that help to track down and check fake news.

The following rules, steps and tools are among the most important and helpful factors for journalists, media professionals, and social media users to check digital news' authenticity before approving and re-publishing it.

Who is speaking?

Everyone can produce content on a personal website, a blog, or social media. Therefore, we should ask about the publisher, the published information, and the sources. We also need to verify the website link. It is worth noting that there are many sites that publish fake news yet appear at first glance to be credible. We should check the people included in the news, and make sure of their identity, their positions [...], etc., as some fake publications include figures who have passed away long before the event took place, or who generally have nothing to do with the event.

Reference to well-known media:

To get certain news we ought to refer to well-known media. Published mainstream news does not have watertight accuracy, but is reliable in certain circumstances. In cases of crises, such as earthquakes, terrorist operations, hostage-taking, and epidemics, information spreads very quickly on social media and should therefore be verified against mainstream media.

Verify the publication date:

News circulation online is immediate and timely. Once shared, the news quickly comes to the surface and becomes a top story, especially with the pervasiveness of social media and the rapid transmission of information. Many studies regarding the most used social media (Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp) prove that the more frequently the content is shared the more widely it spreads (Ball 2018). Problems emerge when old news or pictures from archives are published as breaking news. This renders past news very hard to bury. Therefore, we must verify the event's location and date to ensure that the published image or video corresponds with reality.

Verify the sources: It is particularly important to verify the name of the publisher or the website to gauge their credibility. Equally important is to search for a comments section for more information about the broadcaster. We can also refer to the Certificate Search website for more information about

the owner of the site, page or account. The rapidity and ease of information exchange means it often spreads more quickly than the source can be verified. Equally, publishing the information across various media platforms results in a greater chance for it to be believed and taken as fact.

Verification of photos and videos: The above verification tools are also applicable to pictures and videos. All components of the news, including photos, videos and graphics, must be verified and scrutinized. Ascertaining the novelty of images, videos or graphics, and the freshness of their source, is achievable via search engines such as TinEye and Google images. These platforms allow the verification of image or video elements by scrutinizing the timing, location, visible elements, sound and language, as well as the general scene of the people conveying the news story. Before embarking on verification, it is important to collect links to sites that are proven to distribute misinformation, so that we can later inform the public about them and refute their falsehoods with facts. If we are unable to do so, for example because the picture, video or file is removed from the site, one could refer to the website archive. If this fails, one should refrain from sharing the news.

What can be concluded is that combatting fake news needs to be done by media professionals. However, given that publishing news has become available to everyone on social platforms, all users should adopt a social responsibility approach to avoid spreading misinformation on social media. As we have already emphasized in the context of the social responsibility approach, social media need to set ethical rules and codes of conduct to be adhered to by all actors involved in content production, and establish an ethical code of integrity to investigate the accuracy of transmitted news.

CONCLUSION

Given that the news production scene is being reshaped by technological innovations, the media industry faces a set of new professional challenges. This is often associated with new devices rapidly developing due to said innovations, which bring into play various repercussions that media professionals and audience may not be able to anticipate. For one, open borders to information have enriched news sources and media types and made public what was once reserved for conventional journalists, news anchors and news agencies.

Today, any citizen has access to information and can take part in news dissemination and broadcasting on various social media and websites. This can lead many astray as much as it can inform them. It has paved the way for fake news or rumour to spread widely yet appear credible, which has prompted some to call for 'observing ethics and general standards on social media, having users assume responsibility and think twice about what they publish on their social media pages, lest they provoke strife, or spread words that may cause harm to others' (Ellabbene 2015).

Towards the end of 2019 and throughout 2020, for example, rumours and fake news about 'COVID-19' plagued social media, causing fear, confusion and erosion of trust in news regarding the pandemic. Some cyber activists go as far as to claim that the coronavirus itself is a political tool devised by politicians to escape liability. Media professionals have found themselves faced with torrents of online news, sometimes republished without verification, which only exacerbates the crisis through fearmongering. In addition, the high media

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coverage of the pandemic has contributed to tremendous psychological pressures, which in itself feeds tension and panic.

The International Journalists' Network (IJnet) claims that the high coverage of COVID-19 and the mockery of protection measures is due to ignorance and disregard for scientific advice. Mainstream media must verify news accuracy, especially given its competition with social media coverage by ordinary citizens who do not have media expertise or journalism skills.

The network also implores that protecting the mental health of the audience is a task entrusted to reliable mainstream media, especially given the context of the pandemic, which has infected more than 13 million people around the world in less than four months.

(IJnet 2020)

Nevertheless, IJnet does not deny the important role of social media in raising awareness of coronavirus symptoms and prevention measures. It helps strengthen communication between health departments and public, contributing to the dissemination of accurate information and facilitating the tasks' completion. However, this does not mean that they endorse blind faith in social media or official media coverage either, due to the rapid flow of potentially false information and constantly changing circumstances.

Likewise, the media have a lack of specialists in the field of public health, given that budget deficit-reducing policies have resulted in the dismissal of many journalists. This has limited some media outlets to mere superficial coverage of 'COVID-19' news, rather than providing deep, insightful research into the pandemic and methods of protection against it. It is not a mere question of closing and reopening cities or presenting infection figures. What is required is to strengthen the relationship between media and the research laboratories well reputed for accurate information, and to establish long-term communication channels between media and health authorities and civil society so that they can deal with similar situations better.

In this context, it is worthwhile considering the relationship between official media and social media as a complimentary one, with the citizen taking part in the news-making process. This makes research into ethics for digital news release a necessity in today's world, as news industries in the Arab world and elsewhere across the globe have to realize.

To understand the ethics of digital publishing, we should refer to the literature of conventional media while considering the peculiarities of social media as an institutional and societal need. This requires multiplying efforts to monitor fake news and rumour, far more extensively than selective and formal monitoring studies. We need multidimensional monitoring based on a multi-approach-and-output process, highlighting with greater accuracy and knowledge the relationship of fake news with media and the journalism industry.

For a holistic approach to tracking fake news on social media, it does not suffice to monitor social media content. The approach should consider the impact of fake news itself. The monitoring process should expand to include the right of access to information, the right-to-reply procedure, and consider the public's reaction. Quite simply, we must find out whether fake news has contributed to the erosion of citizens' trust in the news industry authorities and mechanisms, or to the shaping of the prevailing image of the media. On the other hand, the diverse array of news reception studies through questionnaires and sociological investigation provide insight into the various media

programmes that citizens engage with. The monitoring department can be expanded to include the journalist, the press organization, the citizen and professionals, which makes the assessment of fake news on social media accurate, comprehensive and thorough.

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