IN PARTNERSHIP WITH
FRIEDRICH NAUMANN STIFTUNG Für die Freiheit.
Middle East and North Africa

Combating Disinformation in the **Arab World**



Case Study:

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ)
In partnership with the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom

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Introduction

In 2016, the United States Presidential election put "fake news" in the global lexicon. U.S. President Donald Trump shouted the phrase at CNN correspondent Jim Acosta during his first press conference after winning the Presidency, accusing the channel of covering unimportant events and claiming they neglected to highlight his successes. [1]

According to Google statistics, Internet users began searching for the term and its derivatives from the second half of 2016[2] onwards. In the same year, according to the Oxford English Dictionary and the German Language Institute, the term became the most popular word in the English and German languages.

COVID-19's outbreak in the Arab region — already fraught with political conflict and socio-economic crises — created conditions for misleading media coverage regarding the virus, its impact and its potential treatment. The pandemic highlighted the issue of information credibility, while most media professionals aimed to avoid publishing false materials.

Lack of information, conflicting information and multiplicity of sources made it difficult for some media professionals to maintain credibility. Several factors contributed to this multiplicity, including political divisions; the journalist's endeavor to find new perspectives; the temptation to sensationalize the event at the expense of accuracy; or concerns about the journalist's own safety which may have prevented him from being at specific — perhaps risky — locations. The one factor that journalists from across the Arab region agreed upon was a need for professional training in news auditing, particularly in using technology and understanding artificial intelligence.

The pandemic shone a light on the media, emphasizing an immediate need to review its situation, and pinpoint the shortcomings and strengths of the professionals operating within it. Improving the performance of these professionals and reducing the spread of misleading news is paramount. Consequently, Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ), in partnership with the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom (FNF), initiated the drafting of this paper, which arrives at recommendations on how to reduce the circulation of disinformation in the Arab region.

This paper uses COVID-19 as a model to arrive at the causes and effects of misleading content, also offering alternative solutions that would allow for the improvement of media performance. ARIJ prepared this

1 A Citizen's Guide to Fake News | Center for Information Technology and Society - UC Santa Barbara https://www.cits.ucsb.edu/fake-news. Accessed May 20, 2020

2 Google Trends. shorturl.at/qsIV8. Accessed May 20, 2020

paper during the pandemic and, in drafting it, relied on interaction with Arab journalists who were working during the consecutive lockdowns imposed in most of their countries. This interaction between ARIJ and the media continued for over three months in order to extract information — be it through publications and investigative questionnaires on Facebook — or by polls which involved 229 Arab journalists. ARIJ also conducted dialogues with 17 experts from the press, representatives of local and international institutions concerned with training and supporting journalists, and representatives of Facebook, Twitter and Google, via personal and group interviews or regular correspondence.

ARIJ ascertains that when studying the causes of the emergence and spread of misleading news, it should not solely examine the performance of media professionals. This is because, in the current era, anyone can own a host of content production tools which spread content across various social media platforms. Therefore, addressing the issue of disinformation must be informed by the social and cultural context that generates it, and measures to combat this news should aim to modify the climate in which it appears.

In this paper, we focus on journalism as a whole, whether practiced by professionals who publish their work within media institutions, or independents — specifically those who choose to evaluate the performance of media institutions and scrutinize what they publish.

The paper comprises three chapters. First, it discusses what disinformation is, distinguishing it from other variations of misinformation and refuting common assumptions surrounding it; second, it unpacks the state of disinformation in the Arab world during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically until August 2020; third, it names the most important methods used in the region to confront this news, discussing their effectiveness and shortcomings. Finally, the paper puts forward recommendations to prevent and combat the regional spread of misleading news.

CHAPTER 1

Disinformation

> Falsehood flies and the truth comes limping after."
>
> ***JONATHAN SWIFT***

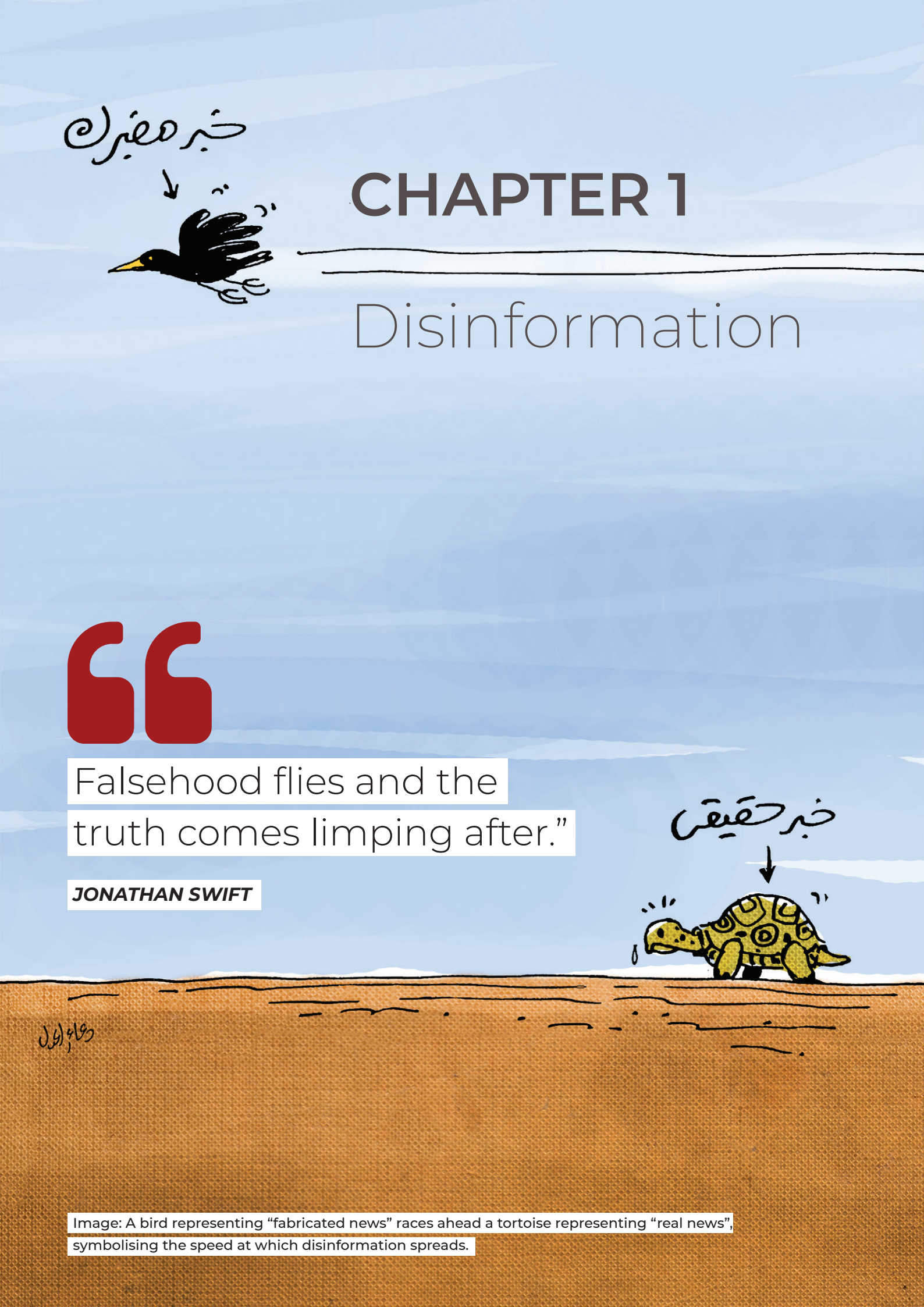

Image: A bird representing "fabricated news" races ahead a tortoise representing "real news", symbolising the speed at which disinformation spreads.

The technical terminology for inaccurate or fake news is still under discussion in press and political circles. The United Nations Education, Science and Culture Organization (UNESCO) distinguished between the three terms "disinformation", "misinformation" and "malinformation".

The distinction between these terms — which all point to inaccurate information — lies in the intention of the publisher. If the purpose behind the information's transmission is to harm people, institutions or groups, it is "malinformation"; if the inaccuracy is due to the improper handling of real information through error, it is "misinformation"; and if the published material has no bearing to reality and is deliberately fabricated, it is "disinformation". The distinction between the three types is generally seen as useful, although determining a publisher's intent can be difficult with a lack of news scrutiny.

The Information Safety and Civil Political Discourse Report issued by the National Democratic Institute[3] (NDI) distinguishes between "disinformation", which is fabricated and untrue information in whole or in part, and "misinformation", which is a mixture of real events, facts and untruths. There is also "misuse of information", which involves publishing undue details, or disseminating information in a specific region in order to harm certain people or entities.

The Ethical Journalism Network defines fake news as fabricated news published with the intention of deceiving another party and prompting them to believe lies.[4]

This terminology, regarding inaccurate or entirely untrue news items, is, in a way, connected with the histories of political forgery and technological development — but rarely recognizes human error.

For example, "disinformation" is the same term used by the Russian intelligence services in the early 1950s during the Cold War. A unit called Disinformation was established with the sole purpose of spreading black propaganda[5] against the United States and enemies of the Russian regime.

"Malinformation", as implied by the word itself, is related to technology and computers. It recalls the word "malware", a tiny programmed instruction, often hidden inside a larger program, to access information about the user. Often, malware is used for marketing and advertising, to disrupt the work of software or even to function as spyware. Digital viruses fall under the category of malware.

"Misinformation" is the term closest to acknowledging human error in news coverage. The error could be due to a media professional's underdeveloped skillset, or his stress or distraction while editing the news. It could also be caused by the public, which may share news items without confirming their accuracy.

Several research papers have attempted to

3 Supporting information integrity and civil political discourse, «National Democratic Institute» 2018.

4 Ireton, C. and Posetti, J., 2018. Journalism, fake news & disinformation: handbook for journalism education and training. UNESCO Publishing.

5 An expression in propaganda science that refers to information that develops into rumors that are difficult to trace back to.

disentangle the implications of the term "fake news".[6] In an article coinciding with the spread of COVID-19 in 2020, Egelhofer and others found that research on fake news limits the term to the following three contexts: a kind of disinformation on the Internet, a political term used by the powerful to delegitimize the media, or "an empty word used to describe something false".[7]

Through a survey of 34 research articles published between 2003 and 2017, researchers found that the term's connotations included satire, parody, fabrication, manipulation and propaganda.[8] Meanwhile, in his book "Media Education ... How do we deal with the media?" Fahd Al-Shammari counts 28 forms of disinformation used in visual and written media, including: the use of partial truths, single-sided reporting of the whole truth, disregard of entire topics and information that overwhelms the recipient.[9]

Taking it beyond the term and to the concept, we find that disinformation can be taken as a modern version of rumors. A fake news item is, essentially, a rumor transmitted over the ether instead of through standard verbal circulation. Rumors, often in line with the beliefs of the group spreading them, were shared using uncomplicated language that made them easy to repeat.[10] On the contrary, rumors that appear in the media — or fake news — are usually presented in eloquent language that sometimes includes scientific terminology, and may even reference fabricated scientific periodicals or experts to give the content an element of conviction.

One common tactic used to lend credibility to fake news is to attribute it to major media organizations and newspapers. For example, with the start of the revolutionary protests in Lebanon in October 2019, the news auditing service at the local An-Nahar newspaper revealed news attributed to Reuters, CNN and Der Spiegel, mostly about Western agreements against Hezbollah. Even large international organizations were not spared the disruptive effects of disinformation, prompting the World Health Organization (WHO) in Iraq to issue a clarification addressed to the media, cautioning them not to use WhatsApp or text messaging to inform journalists of the latest developments.[11]

Validation of the "rumors" broadcasted by the media happens in three stages.

First, there is an initial credulence on the part of the recipient — meaning, a willingness to accept whatever comes from the source. This willingness to believe is usually attributed to the recipient's previous personal experience in believing a particular source or discrediting other sources. This is more likely to happen on social networks as opposed to traditional media.

The second stage concerns the authenticity of information, the circumstance of its communication and the climate in which it is being transmitted. For example, a source may use technical terms that suggest he has a medical background. A source may also imply their presence at an event by publishing old pictures and claiming that they are recent. Or, it could be that the source

6 Tandoc, E., Lim, Z., Ling, R., 2017, "Defining 'Fake News': A typology of scholarly definitions", Digital Journalism 1-17. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2017.1360143.

7 Egelhofer, J.L., Aaldering, L., Eberl, J.-M., Galyga, S., Lecheler, S., 2020, 'From Novelty to Normalization? How Journalists Use the Term "Fake News" in their Reporting,' Journalism Studies, 1-21. https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2020.1745667

8 Tandoc, E., Lim, Z., Ling, R., 2017, 'Defining "Fake News": A typology of scholarly definitions,' Digital Journalism 1-17. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2017.1360143

9 Al-Shumaimari, Abdul Rahman Fahd. 2018, 'Media Education ... How do we deal with the media?', King Fahd Library. Riyadh. Online version: http://www.saudimediaeducation.org/media_book/pdf/media_book.pdf

10 Mukhtar, Mansouri. 1999, 'Rumor... its social, psychological and cultural character', MA thesis. University of Tlemcen, Algeria.

11 "United Nations Iraq - Clarification from (WHO) to media professionals and partners." Accessed June 15, 2020. http://www.uniraq.com/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=12029:توضيح-من-منظمة-الصحة-العالمية-للإعلاميين-والشركاء&Itemid=556&lang=ar

is a doctor, but of a different speciality, and is therefore not qualified to talk about the subject.

Finally, validation of media "rumors" happens through ratification, in which the recipient becomes convinced of the information and is ready to pass it on to others.[12]

Before tackling the existence of disinformation in the Arab region, and exploring solutions to inaccurate journalism and the spread of unscrutinized information via social networks, it is worth discussing several common beliefs about the topic more broadly.

Some may think that the press was more credible before the technological developments that we know today, which have forced professionals to acquire additional skills in news auditing and expanded the responsibilities of the journalist and the newsroom. Technology has, however, better facilitated media work within both daily tasks and special coverage.

For example, the Associated Press employed artificial intelligence to verify sports news stories, which more than doubled their production in 2015. The Washington Post, when covering the 2016 Olympic Games and

12 Khudair Abbas Dhari Al-Mousawi and Hamdan Khader Al-Salem, 2016. Levels of Journalism Credibility within the Constructive Model of Credibility Scientific Researcher Journal. Issue 31 165-196.

1. Technology Corrupts Journalism

the U.S. presidential election, also used AI.[13]

Artificial intelligence (AI) techniques can assist in addressing several deficiencies in media work. We found this during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the Chinese News Agency, Xinhua, employed 3D and 5G hologram technologies to conduct an interview with a deputy in the National Assembly of Representatives and a local official. The technology made it seem as if they were in the same room with the reporter. Although this meeting could not take place due to the pandemic, AI effectively made it seem like an in-person interview.[14]

The use of artificial intelligence may raise concerns about a lack of human voice. Many may believe that AI produces stories including only a series of facts. However, the algorithms — or, the small programs responsible for managing artificial intelligence — are actually quite efficient in expressing human emotion.[15]

Robots have succeeded in reading newscasts and providing simultaneous audio or video translations. Beyond that, AI is able to produce entire newscasts. The Artificial Intelligence Foundation recently announced a study on the role of AI applications in radio and television broadcasting programs. The study reviewed the advantages of AI technologies, and how the media can benefit by equipping studios with them or relying on satellites. Media may also use smartphones as direct channels for content, producing live broadcasts with minimal time and effort.[16]

This evidence points to the fact that AI can be employed to complete entire journalistic tasks without compromising credibility. Even further, it can be used to verify news. Just as disinformation is sometimes created and spread through automated software known as bots, the same technology can be used to combat this news.

The bot is a technology that performs a specific role based on predefined algorithms. It is commonly used in chats and customer support services on websites, as the technology provides users with answers to their queries as a real person would.

In the context of disinformation, bots pose as real users of a website or social network to share predefined content collected from accounts or websites. Artificial intelligence is sometimes used to investigate content suspected to be written by a bot. There are also tools that distinguish whether the published text is machine- or human-written, including "Giant Language Model Test Room (GLMT)", a tool developed by researchers from Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 2019.[17]

Fortunately, the Arabic language was included in efforts to use artificial intelligence for news scrutiny. With the

13 "Robot Journalism ... Professional and Ethical Challenges Facing Future Journalism | SMT Center for Studies." Accessed June 14, 2020. https://smt-center.net/archives/slider/صحافة-الروبوت-تحديات-مهنية-وأخلاقية-ت/

14 (Multimedia) Xinhua is using 3D and 5G hologram technologies to conduct a virtual, one-screen interview ahead of the two annual sessions. Accessed June 14, 2020. http://arabic.news.cn/2020-05/19/c_139069337.htm.

15 CNN Arabic. "Did a robot write this article? Media companies are preparing for a new technological era," Accessed February 15, 2015. https://arabic.cnn.com/scitech/2015/02/15/gallery-mci-robojournalist.

16 "Artificial Intelligence in Radio and TV Broadcasting Programs in a New Study, The Artificial Intelligence Foundation, Accessed June 3, 2020. https://aijournalism.net/ar/الذكاء-الاصطناعي-في-برامج-البث-الإذاع/

17 Lloyd, Peter. "AI Tool Could Spell the End of Fake News." Mail Online, Accessed July 30, 2019. https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-7302219/AI-tool-spot-text-written-machine-spell-end-fake-news.html.

spread of fabricated news in the Arab region, researchers in the United Arab Emirates and Jordan have developed an algorithm — a news auditor — that searches for disinformation published on the Internet in the Arabic language, either by people or by bots. This process relies on data about commonly searched words and excessive use of punctuation: such as a repeated question, or excessive exclamation marks. It also considers the user's time spent on a page, assuming that users spend less time if the content is misleading or if they do not agree with its title.

By the beginning of 2020, the researchers announced that this algorithm had been tested on more than 12,000 sample Internet posts that people described as either fake or real. The results proved that the program was 99.4 percent accurate.[18] Even when detecting images, it is possible to sort their content using artificial intelligence.

In 2018, Facebook developed an artificial intelligence system, Rosetta, that recognizes texts within images — including caricatures and memes. Besides the commercial benefit that this system provides, it enables Facebook to learn what topics of interest to users are by examining the most popular pictures. Facebook also helped discover posts that spread hate and incitement of violence.[19]

This does not mean that artificial intelligence can fully replace the media professional, either in verifying or auditing content. The human element is always required to create and employ this intelligence. Rather, it complements their work by perfecting their limitations and weaknesses.

For example, advanced algorithms created to check content for language remain inferior to humans, who are better capable of understanding context and cultural meanings that are difficult to define and program into the bot. Therefore, the availability of these technologies does not immediately imply that the journalist can be absent from the news auditing process. Rather, it necessitates his acquiring advanced technologies and an ability to adapt them to facilitate the process of content verification.

18 Al-Fanar Media. "Arab researchers are using artificial intelligence to fight fake news," Accessed January 14, 2020. https://www.al-fanarmedia.org/ar/2020/01/باحثون-عرب-يوظفون-الذكاء-الاصطناعي-لم/.

19 Arab portal for technical news. "(Facebook) is developing an artificial intelligence system that can understand text in pictures and videos." https://aitnews.com/2018/09/12 Accessed September 12, 2018.

2. Politics Causes the Emergence of Disinformation

In a country of great political and strategic weight as the United States of America, presidential elections sparked a mental association between political interests and disinformation. Real as it is, this should not detract from our attention to other non-political dimensions. Inaccurate news appears daily among ordinary individuals when they express their hopes, fears and experiences. Disinformation is nothing more than the written or televised image of rumors — an ancient social practice.

Rumors normally spread in intertwined social environments.[20] These environments are what social networks currently represent in their work to connect individuals to their families, neighbors and co-workers, and introduce them to new circles. Users' pages or groups on social media networks like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram provide platforms where they can easily receive and share content.

Politics remains the most fertile ground for disinformation. Political polarization has emerged as a primary instigator of the spread of disinformation. At times when the divergence between two political factions is greatest, fabricated news about either side emerges through the parties loyal to them, or through the masses, whose exaggerated hopes and fears help its spread. Hence, election times seem to be most momentous in the spread of disinformation. Similarly, disinformation is rampant during times of war, due to the presence of two rival poles.

The Arab region, too, was not exempt in employing disinformation to serve political leanings. For example, a study published in the International Journal of Media revealed that bots were used by Gulf countries on Twitter to spread anti-Qatar propaganda — exposing Doha's lack of commitment to the resolutions of the Gulf Cooperation Council during the Gulf crisis in 2017.[21]

The UAE, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar in protest against political positions, including Qatar's position on the political changes in Egypt at the time, and the three countries' loyalty to the ousted Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi at the expense of the current President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi.

The study also revealed that the bot was used to publish hashtags on Twitter and promote tweets of opponents of the Qatari regime.

In a number of countries, the Arab region is witnessing clashes between opposing political groups: fertile ground for the emergence of disinformation. In Iraq in October 2019, for instance, while an outbreak of demonstrations called for the overthrow of the ruling political regime, dozens of pictures were spread on social media — including a false photo of an Iraqi official kissing the hand of an Iranian official. The picture went viral on Facebook in order to denounce Iranian intervention in the

20 Mukhtar, Mansouri. 1999 (Rumor.. its social, psychological and cultural character), MA thesis. University of Tlemcen. Algeria.

21 Jones, Marc Owen. "The Gulf Information War| Propaganda, Fake News, and Fake Trends: The Weaponization of Twitter Bots in the Gulf Crisis." International Journal of Communication 13, no. 0 (March 15, 2019): 27. https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/8994.

country. However, news auditors from the French News Agency found that the Iraqi official in the photograph was kissing the hand of a wounded man in the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces: a faction loyal to Iran, but which has cooperated with Iraqi armed forces against ISIS since its inception in 2014.[22]

Despite the auditing and refuting of disinformation, political opponents continue to spread it, relying on the masses' prior bias and the emotions that the news raises. An example of this was modeled in Britain upon its exit from the European Union in 2016, when the phrase, "We send the European Union 350 million pounds every week" appeared on Boris Johnson's bus. This statement was false, yet it contributed to the result of the vote that left Britain preparing to leave the European Union.

This deliberate circulation of lies, despite their refutation, characterizes what is called a "post-truth era". This means that people tend to be convinced of what corresponds to their whims, and not what they actually find true. Therefore, if one were to tell a lie to the masses that they are willing to believe, the masses would receive it as truth — even if irrefutable evidence was presented to them that it was false. On this basis, Donald Trump's supporters were convinced of what he relayed in his speeches, and the behavior of the supporters of Brexit believed what was written on the Johnson bus.

At other times, the political system is the driver of disinformation — either intentionally to distract public opinion — or because of successive changes that delay political decision-making. Frequent news in Syria about salary increases exemplify this delay in decision-making. Whenever a Syrian official issues a statement about plans for salary increases, he neglects to specify time or percentage. The matter then remains unresolved for months, until the increase occurs or a decision is made to cancel it. During this belabored process, disinformation and rumors circulate.[23]

It is undeniable that political situations are a major driver of disinformation, and that political conflict is a fertile environment for its spread. However, this type of news is not limited to political affairs. Disinformation appears in all sectors, from business, to entertainment, science, technology, terrorism, local and even celebrity news.

22 Asharq Al-Awsat Newspaper. "Iraqi protests ignite fake news communication sites", Published: February 29, 2020, Accessed June 14, 2020. shorturl.at/dkrFP

23 Enab Baladi. "Rumors in Syria ... smoke of the fire of war", date of publication November 4, 2018 https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/260947. Accessed July 7, 2020.

3. Disinformation Was Created by Social Networks

Many may believe that the prevalence of disinformation is associated with the widespread use of social networks. Some may even go as far as avoiding social networks altogether for this reason.

A study by the International Center for Journalists and Georgetown University shows that only about 25 percent of journalists use verification tools for news on social networks, compared to 11 percent in a previous study.[24]

In fact, the emergence of social networks, and even the first generation of the World Wide Web accelerated communication and expanded the audience of sent materials to wider geographical boundaries. Social networks may be a catalyst in increasing the speed of spread, but it is not the only contributor. The solution to curbing the spread of disinformation should not be limited to only addressing social media networks. These networks are a means of circulating news — not, in themselves, the motive for circulating them.

In comparison, and prior to the communications revolution, we can perceive that a lack of means of communication was an important impetus for the spread of rumors. Lack of correct information forces people to seek whatever information, wherever it is being circulated. For example, in 1918, during the Spanish influenza pandemic, the only means of communication in many places was the telegraph. Reliance on verbally transmitted information meant that there was hardly any awareness of the disease. This contributed to the infection of nearly a third of the world's population at the time, ultimately killing between 50 to 100 million people.[25]

Like artificial intelligence, social networks can be used as tools to spread facts and refute misinformation. The World Health Organization has already collaborated with the application TikTok to produce educational clips on public health and science. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the organization announced that it is working with major Internet platforms to ensure that information about the novel coronavirus is at the forefront of Internet search results.[26]

Many journalists in the MENA region rely on social media as a source for their stories. Noha Mellor and Muhammad Ayesh have identified three purposes for which Arab journalists would normally employ social networks. These are: accessing information or sources that are difficult to reach outside of the Internet, checking rumors and publishing news on a large scale.[27]

In an interaction between the ARIJ network and journalists on the "ARIJ with you" Facebook group, 35 percent of the participants said they mainly used social networks to communicate with sources. 34 percent said they drew their inspiration from topics discussed on the platforms, while less than 1 percent used these tools to verify news.

24 International Journalists' Network. "Study on the state of technology in global newsrooms - 2019."
Accessed June 18, 2020. https://ijnet.org/en/node/7561.

25 Arabic Post - ArabicPost.net. "Five reasons prevented Corona from turning into a disaster of the size of the Spanish flu ... But we still have to learn from the past." Accessed June 23, 2020. shorturl.at/bvIQ2

26 United Nations News. "(The World Health Organization) is cooperating with social media to fight rumors and provide correct information about Coronavirus." Accessed February 4, 2020. https://news.un.org/ar/story/2020/02/1048602.

27 Ayish, Mohammad, and Noha Mellor. Reporting in the MENA Region: Cyber Engagement and Pan-Arab Social Media. Rowman & Littlefield, 2015.

4. An Experienced Journalist is Not Fooled by Disinformation

It is a mistake to believe that the circulation of disinformation is limited to fabricators or persons outside of the media profession. Journalists are capable of spreading disinformation intentionally or unintentionally. Journalists may decide to transmit disinformation because of how quickly it is spreading. This act is driven and exacerbated by speed rivalries within the global press, as newspapers and news websites strive to multiply their Internet audiences with the spread of enticing news. Sometimes, this comes at the expense of verification.

This problem is not limited to the Arab region. As asserted by Greg Silverman, the head of the news verification team at the American news site BuzzFeed, "When an untrusted website publishes news, most of the time fabricated, but popular, newspapers would in turn republish it without any investigation, and without attributing it to the original website."[28]

Likewise, journalists may create disinformation by presenting it one-sidedly, or in an exaggerated manner. This is usually the result of professional biases — journalists are motivated by the urge to align reporting with the editorial priorities of the newsroom, so that their stories get priority for publication. Then again, this inaccurate reporting could very well be due to a journalist's personal bias — regardless if he were aware of it — in the case that the news event affected one of his ethnic, religious or sectarian affiliations, or reflected his previous personal experiences.

Another challenge to journalists comes from chronic events. When a reported event continues for a long time, journalists may overreport possible angles and resort to disinformation to entice and attract tired audiences.

Many journalists in the region believe they need to acquire more verification skills. A survey conducted by ARIJ on a number of Arab journalists in July 2020 revealed that about 58 percent of them believed they needed additional training in news verification, while 11 percent said they lacked such skills and had to rely on traditional skills in verifying news and information. In a survey conducted by the Tunis Center for Freedom of the Press in May 2020, 64 percent of journalists who participated said they felt they were "misled".

It is clear that a journalist's background and experience do not fully prevent him from falling into the trap of disinformation. This is mainly because it has become difficult to determine what makes an experienced journalist. Is it their years of experience in the media field, or having more advanced technical skills? In the end, everyone is subject to error. It also does journalists no favors that these are strange times, and that the lines between the real and improbable are further blurred every day.[29]

28 https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-37846860

29 Intervention by Professor Khaled Sobeih, a journalist in the news health investigation service at (AFP), during a group interview organized by (ARIJ) entitled: (Investigating Information and News in Press Rooms) on June 13th.

CHAPTER 2

Disinformation in the Arab Region During the COVID-19 Crisis

TEpidemics are not a novel occurrence. In the past decade, the World Health Organization declared emergencies five times; between 2011 and 2018, nearly 1500 epidemics spread across the globe. The Arab region had its fair share of epidemics, especially in places of armed conflict. In 2013, measles spread in northern Syria and recorded 7,000 cases, according to Doctors Without Borders. This was due to the forced displacement of people fleeing violence and the overcrowding of refugee camps. In 2017, Yemen witnessed the spread of cholera in two waves, between October 2016 and April 2017, which resulted in the death of about 1.5 million people, according to WHO statistics.

According to the World Health Organization, in 2012, the coronavirus appeared as a broad series of viruses infecting both animals and humans. In humans, coronavirus could cause respiratory diseases ranging from common colds to more serious diseases, such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS).

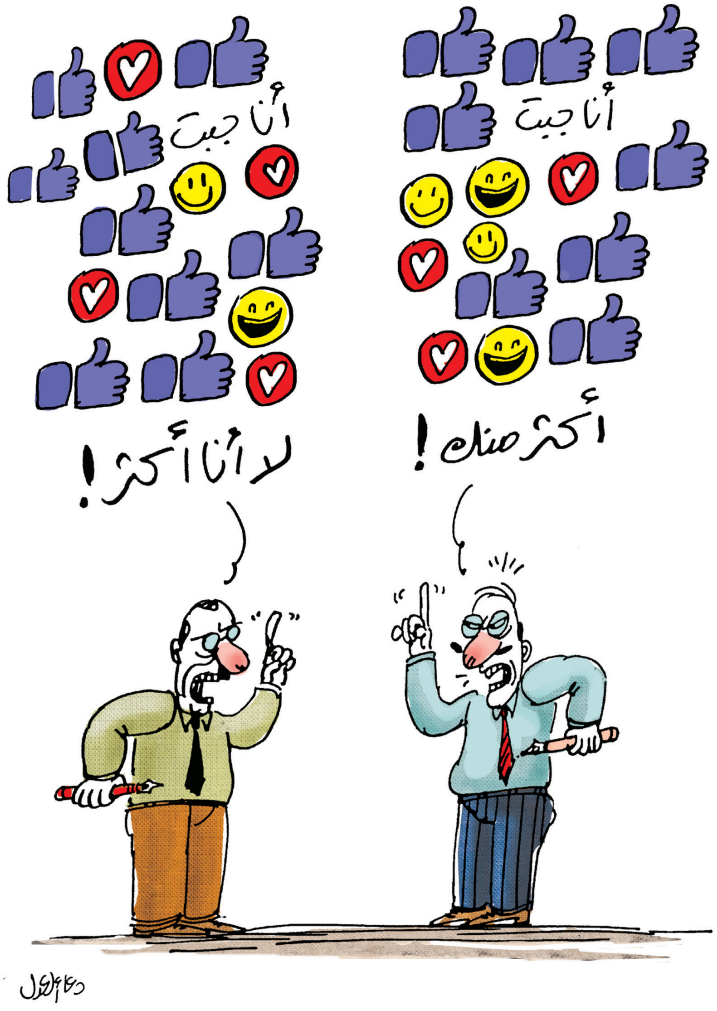

Image: Two individuals fight over who got more likes than the other: “I got more likes than you”, “no, I did”.

Beginning from July 2015, cases of MERS-CoV infection were reported in more than 21 countries. Then, in 2019, the novel coronavirus that caused the COVID-19 pandemic emerged.

In the beginning of 2020, the new virus, which appeared in the Chinese province of Wuhan for the first time, spread to Asian countries and then to all six continents. This prompted the World Health Organization to declare COVID-19 a pandemic in March 2020 — that is, a global epidemic — after more than 110,000 people around the world were infected within two months of its emergence.[30]

Over the months that followed the announcement of the pandemic, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia ranked first in the Arab world as the country most affected by the virus. It was followed by Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Egypt. While Egypt topped the list in terms of the number of deaths due to COVID-19, Algeria followed, then Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The countries with the lowest mortalities were Palestine, Syria and Jordan, respectively. The countries with the least number of cases were Syria, Libya and Yemen.[31]

The emergence of the new virus was accompanied by rumors aggravated by mass panic and rapid increases in cases. This led to a spread of disinformation about the pandemic, not only in the Arab region, but around the world. The WHO became aware of these rumors, and tried to reduce their impact on the spread of the disease by debunking commonly circulated rumors reported by various media.[32] Most topics of media disinformation regarding the pandemic focused on the nature of the emerging virus, future predictions about it, a potential cure, and the metaphysical and religious interpretations of its spread.[33]

This prompted media organizations to scrutinize the most publicized news items and clarify them to the public. The Tunisian Al-Diwan FM radio station, which was established during the pandemic, devoted a segment to this. Some institutions without investigators adapted their human resources policies in order to avoid spreading disinformation. For instance, the independent Syrian newspaper and website, Enab Baladi, developed a language guide for journalists for covering the pandemic which included definitions of words like “pandemic”, “epidemic” and “outbreak” along with information about the name “COVID-19”, so journalists were able to report accurately. Additionally, a series of internationally approved websites were created to provide accurate statistics, while others monitored the effects of the pandemic globally.[34]

30 (World Health Organization) | Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean | About the program | Health promotion in the media. ” Accessed June 2, 2020. http://www.emro.who.int/ar/health-promotion-media/about-the-programme/index.html.

31 An interactive map prepared by (Euro News) channel, citing the (World Health Organization) and the (World Meter) tool. Where did Corona arrive in the Arab countries? And which countries are most affected by the pandemic.

32 Advice for the public about the emerging coronavirus: correcting misconceptions. Accessed June 23, 2020 https://www.who.int/ar/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-busters.

33 Intervention by Professor Asma Al-Ghoul in a group interview organized by (ARIJ) entitled (Independent Initiatives to Investigate False News) on June 20, 2020.

34 Intervention by Professor Jawad Sharbaj, Editor-in-Chief of (Enab Baladi), during a group interview organized by (ARIJ) entitled: (Investigating Information and News in Press Rooms) on June 13, 2020.

The Spread of Lies: Who and Why?

The spread of disinformation around the world prompted the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) to conduct research about the kind of individuals who make up lies and rumors. The BBC classified seven types of people who are often behind the fabrication and spread of rumors. These are as follows:

1- The Comic: A person who does not intend to falsify or create disinformation, but may be joking about the events and the new reality that the pandemic has produced. The anecdotes they produce in these jokes may be circulated as true.

2- The Fraud: A person who uses facts to lie for the purpose of benefit. An example of this may be a release of messages that call for donations to victims of COVID-19, but at the same time allow access to personal accounts. A few months after the pandemic began, Google announced that it was blocking more than 240 million phishing emails a day, in addition to over 18 million hoax email messages about COVID-19 — many of which contain malware — on a daily basis.[35]

3- The Politician: An official whose words are taken seriously, and whose speech may include exaggeration or jest. The most prominent example of this was when, earlier in the pandemic, U.S. President Donald Trump suggested injecting COVID-19-infected people with detergents to treat them for the virus. This incited the World Health Organization, along with major detergent companies, to caution people against ingesting detergents.

4- A Conspiracy Theory Believer: Those who believe in hidden intentions behind events, and assert this belief by repeating the wrong news with confidence. In the case of COVID-19, the most common conspiracy theories were that there was no virus in the first place, that it was created in laboratories for psychological and biological warfare, or that fifth-generation mobile phone networks were somehow the reason behind its emergence.

5- The Expert: This is a person who has credibility with the public due to their position as a professional. However, the area of competence of such individuals may not allow them to provide entirely relevant information. During the pandemic, doctors claiming to be on the front lines and treating people with COVID-19 often published false numbers and information. This occurred in a number of countries in the region.

6- Relatives: Family members who are afraid of getting infected with the virus and who are quick to share any information they receive about it, even if they don't entirely believe it themselves.

7- Celebrities: Celebrities have public credibility because of their fanbases, which make their comments spread quickly. While many celebrities raised awareness about the virus, there were others who underestimated or denied its existence.

35 Tidy, Joe. "Google Blocking 18m Coronavirus Scam Emails a Day." BBC News, April 17, 2020, sec. Technology. https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-52319093.

It is common in disasters, epidemics and conflicts for rumors to spread faster than usual. In the case of COVID-19, rumors about the virus were related to what is called folk medicine: a popular cultural concept in Arab and Western societies that indicates the existence of effective home and herbal remedies for various diseases. Sometimes, believers of folk medicine — sometimes called alternative medicine — trust in the certainty of its effectiveness over clinical treatments. However, many of these alternative treatments are not scientifically proven, placing them in a category of disinformation.

As an example, we find that in Morocco, there is a belief that rubbing sesame oil on the body, consuming cannabis or cocaine, or toothpaste, prevents and treats the virus. There is also a belief that washing one's hands with children's urine prevents infection. We can identify the reasons for the spread of disinformation and the speed of its circulation during the COVID-19 pandemic as follows:

A. Psychological Reasons

In times of crisis, fear is the biggest factor behind the spread of rumors[36]: fear of poverty in times of economic crises, of death in times of health crises, and of safety in times of armed conflicts. Additionally, people tend to believe information that supports their prior convictions and past experiences. This is known as "confirmation bias" — meaning, an approval of whatever confirms our feelings and experiences without factually verifying them. Confirmation bias is largely behind the act of unaudited news circulation, and the matter is made worse by the ability of artificial intelligence to identify and confirm these biases.

Social networks, because they know the search-and-click tendencies of their users, construct algorithms designed to promote content that users are likely to click on based on their search histories. This means that all users see results dependent on personal biases and preferences, called "filter bubbles" that differ from others.

Biases and preconceptions give disinformation the credibility that allows audiences to believe and repeat them. Nearly two weeks after the outbreak of the epidemic, for example, reports spread in the international media, and then in the Arab media, attributing the virus to animals, meat markets and Chinese food. Psychological researcher Shady Lewis stated that these reports were the product of a "mental image — which was entrenched by Orientalist perceptions of the Chinese and Asians in general in Western media, literature and cinema — of crowded and dirty cities, closed authoritarian societies lacking individualism and freedom, with strange habits and revolting foods."[37]

36 Mukhtar, Mansouri. 1999 (Rumor .. its social, psychological and cultural character), MA thesis. University of Tlemcen. Algeria

37 Lewis, Shadi (2020) "Coronavirus: A disease hierarchy.", 7iber, Accessed July 2, 2020.

B. Cultural Reasons

In accuracy, and even concealment of the truth, can be a defense mechanism in the face of widespread conflict and fear. In his timely book, published at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Julian McDougall examined disinformation through the lens of his childhood experiences in Lebanon. He said, "When I was a kid, I was taught by my mother not to tell the truth in certain situations, to be smart about it. So, if someone asks if your father is part of this political group, your answer is, 'I don't know'".[38] In the absence of personal freedoms in most MENA countries, people become used to lying to avoid social punishment. For example, in the month of Ramadan, non-fasting individuals rarely admit to not fasting, even if they have an acceptable excuse.

In the Arab region in particular, mistrust between peoples and governments is reflected in the fabrication of news about current events.[39] This proves the failure of governments and their erroneous policies, and feeds a climate of mistrust that is reinforced by experiences of corruption in most Arab countries. There is, as a result, a tendency to believe unofficial sources over official ones, opening the door for promoters of disinformation to spread elaborate fabrications. If authorities issued an official statement, for example, that the number of COVID-19 infections has decreased and the number of recoveries has increased — many may believe that the authorities are defending their shortcomings in crisis management by spreading news of the pandemic's receding.

C. Technical Reasons

In a survey of 229 journalists from the region conducted by ARIJ in July 2020, 18 percent said they believed that artificial intelligence created disinformation, but that they don't believe the rise of AI is the main reason for its spread. We consider that technology, either in the form of social networks or artificial intelligence, accelerates the spread of disinformation — but ultimately, it is humans who employ these tools to publish their material.

This is evidenced in a 2018 study by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology analyzing millions of tweets between 2006 and 2017. The study showed that 3 million tweets were shared more than 4.5 million times, despite containing false information in the form of text, images or recordings. The study concluded that disinformation will reach an audience of 1,500 six times faster than true news, explaining that fake content carries an element of surprise that stimulates feelings in its readers. These feelings, especially if negative, increase chances of disinformation circulation.[40]

The role of social networks in spreading disinformation is dangerous for two reasons. Firstly, because content lives on social media longer than traditional media platforms; and secondly, because social networks are fertile ground for post-truths. Many western studies, for example, are examining content by influential YouTube users concerning weight loss and body coordination. These studies revealed that video bloggers are publishing disinformation on health — many presenting anorexia nervosa as a

38 McDougall, Julian. (2019). Fake News vs Media Studies: Travels in a False Binary. 10.1007/978-3-030-27220-. P 97

39 Rabie, Muhammad Abdel Aziz. "Arab culture and the scourge of lying - trends - statement." Accessed June 25, 2020. https://www.albayan.ae/opinions/2007-08-14-1.196237.

40 Vosoughi, S., Roy, D. and Aral, S., 2018. The spread of true and false news online. Science, 359(6380), pp.1146-1151.

facilitator of wellbeing, while in reality, it is an eating disorder.[41] Up until the publication of this paper, not a single study was found that examined the efforts of social media influencers to refute disinformation about COVID-19.

When the term "fake news" became popular during the U.S. election, Internet service providers, and companies that own social networks, were pressured to confront this news. The European Union faced this especially, as the year 2019 witnessed elections in Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Poland, Portugal and Ukraine, and concerns were raised about the recurrence of an American scenario. The European Union threatened to take strict regulatory measures against these companies if they did not combat disinformation. In response, Facebook, having been the platform used by Russia to interfere in the 2016 U.S. election, developed "complex systems that combined technology and the human element to prevent influencing elections in the United States and elsewhere".

In 2018, the company, in partnership with experts and trainers in visual auditing techniques, launched new technology that verified the authenticity of texts, images and recording clips in 17 countries. Meanwhile, Facebook and Twitter amended their policies to curb advertisements by suspicious websites. Google, in its part, trained its employees on how to verify news through a combination of human skills and artificial intelligence.[42]

Normally, companies that own social networks like Facebook and YouTube would assign members of their staff to review materials that AI technologies consider to be disinformation. However, with the imposition of blanket bans in many countries around the world — especially in the West — the number of employees was reduced, including those typically responsible for this task. The likelihood of disinformation circulating on these networks consequently increased. It is notable, however, that artificial intelligence is used to combat disinformation, and also to create it. Artificial intelligence can be used to falsify video clips or images, making them appear entirely authentic. This is known as "deep fake".

41 Syed-Abdul, S., Fernandez-Luque, L., Jian, W.S., Li, Y.C., Crain, S., Hsu, M.H., Wang, Y.C., Khandregzen, D., Chuluunbaatar, E., Nguyen, P.A. and Liou, D.M., 2013. Misleading health-related information promoted through video-based social media: anorexia on YouTube. Journal of medical Internet research, 15 (2), p.e30.

42 Interview with Samya Ayish, from the Google News initiative in the Middle East and North Africa, on July 2, 2020.

Challenges Facing Arab Journalism During the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic illuminated a number of challenges facing Arab media, especially challenges facing the medical press in the region. Most pressing is the lack of qualification in medical journalists[43] — the discussion about the need to qualify medical journalists is not a recent one. Months before the start of the COVID-19 crisis, a book entitled "Health Media and its Applications in Medical Fields" was published. The author devoted an entire chapter to discuss the challenges facing Arab medical journalism, and the seriousness of the lack of journalistic cadres with sufficient knowledge in the health field. The author, Raouf Hussein, stated that the scientific press has lost its credibility for two main reasons: firstly, they are unable to provide integrated, comprehensive insight, and instead present incomplete and distorted visions. Secondly, this coverage cannot meet the needs of a qualitative, elitist and critical audience — leading, of course, to the loss of this highly coveted audience.[44]

The head of the science and technology department in the Egyptian newspaper Al-Ahram, Ashraf Amin, questioned the attitudes of scientific and medical journalists: "Do science journalists praise the performance of workers in scientific research in general? Or should they monitor errors in the laboratory? Or only within the scope of science and technology policies?"[45] Another point that Amin questioned was the moral impact of the journalists' coverage of the pandemic, since reporting possible cures for the virus can spark false hope in affected or vulnerable sectors of society.

The pandemic has also raised some ethical issues regarding media practices, including the performance and work of journalists in handling the event.[46] The most significant of these is the appearance of COVID-19-infected patients in media coverage. A 2020 report by the Tunis Center for Freedom of the Press indicates that several media outlets did not respect the personal privacy of patients. Journalists raced to visit the mandatory quarantine facilities for coverage, filming COVID-19-infected people and revealing their identities. By interviewing them, the patients' privacy was breached, and potential psychological impacts disregarded.[47]

The Lebanese channel, Al-Mayadeen, monitored the global media's emphasis on the disproportionate likelihood of the elderly being infected with COVID-19.[48] Other media outlets were affected by political rivalries, undermining the ethics of their pandemic news coverage.

Perhaps the most prominent example of this was in Lebanon, where the virus arrived

43 International Journalists Network. "Health journalism in the time of 'Corona' ... and major challenges in the Arab world." Accessed June 2, 2020. shorturl.at/bvzJ8

44 Hussein, Raouf Salem Ahmed (2019). Health media and its applications in the medical fields. Cairo. Science and Faith Publishing House

45 Lecture by Professor Ashraf Amin via the Internet, and Pinar "Professional Standards when Writing Scientific Journalistic Reports in Light of the Covid-19 Pandemic" Organization of the International Center for Journalists, broadcast date July 2, 2020.

46 Ibid.

47 Report of the Tunis Center for Freedom of the Press 2020 (Coronavirus pandemic reproduces shortcomings and challenges)

48 Shihab, Ali. The racism that exposed our brutality: Bullying of the elderly due to "Covid-19". Al-Mayadeen Network

in conjunction with a political crisis. A new government was being introduced after the toppling of Saad Hariri's government in October 2019, thus combining a political crisis with a health crisis. Meanwhile, the media busied themselves by fueling sectarian rivalries through their coverage of the pandemic. Television stations such as Al-Jadid, LBC and MTV highlighted the fact that the first person infected with COVID-19 in the country was a Shiite woman who had just returned from Iran, and that the "Shiite" Minister of Health was accused of importing the virus. This immediately sparked discourse on sectarianism, coinciding with calls to stop all flights to and from Iran. Simultaneously, two priests became infected with the virus, creating new discourse targeting Christian sects.[49]

In interaction with members of the "ARIJ with you" group on Facebook, some mentioned that they took issue with the way journalists were describing people infected with the virus. Usually, the term "suspects" is used to express those suspected of having COVID-19. The members of the group found it inappropriate, but did not have an alternative. Similarly, they found it problematic that reporting emphasized the virus' first appearance in Wuhan, since it could imply that the virus originated in China. This could provoke sensitivity or racism, they said. Further, journalists may sometimes doubt the credibility of information from official authorities about the pandemic. At a loss for another reliable source, they end up publishing the official news despite their skepticism.

The dilemma of reconciling personal views with professionalism was one of the ethical questions mentioned by journalists. Having a sense of sympathy with affected persons, along with their own experiences of the pandemic, has proved challenging in their journalistic work as they strive to maintain objectivity.[50]

In light of the elevated numbers of people infected with the virus, some media professionals — especially in television — have been critical of a public that is not committed to precautionary measures. The 2020 report, "Confronting the Information Epidemic" issued by the Lebanese American University stated that many journalists have used sharp and sometimes vulgar language toward members of the public who have not observed self-isolation or social distancing measures. This happened in Egypt, when broadcast journalist Tamer Amin criticized the working class on his talk show, deeming them unaware of the concept of "social distancing", and claiming they probably thought it a "furniture company" or "real estate finance company". Faced with criticism for his harsh words, Amin backed down and apologized publicly.[51]

The COVID-19 crisis also exposed obstructions to people's right to information in many MENA countries.[52] At a time when certain humanitarian organizations were cooperating with media professionals,

49 Melki, and Hitti, E . Mitigating Infodemics, 2020. Lebanese American University. Beirut.

50 Interact with members of the (ARIJ with you) group on Facebook. On 27 June 2020.

51 Tamer Amin to the Egyptian people: I do not dare to insult you. "Masrawy.com Posted on June 7, 2020.
Accessed: July 9, 2020 shorturl.at/orvwx

52 International Journalists' Network "Health Journalism in the Time of Coronavirus ... and major challenges in the Arab world... Accessed June 2, 2020 shorturl.at/apvR5

such as Doctors Without Borders and the International Red Cross, a number of journalists — members of the "ARIJ With You" Facebook group — complained about the response of the regional offices of the World Health Organization, which sometimes neglected to respond to correspondence, and at other times, made journalists wait several days.

There were similar complaints when it came to local authorities, such as the Food and Drug Administration in Jordan, the Egyptian Ministry of Health and the Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs.[53] At other times, however, journalists would receive large amounts of conflicting information from different sources. This took place in Iraq, where the data published by the Iraqi Crisis Management Team for Combating Corona — involving several ministries including Health, Interior and Education — contradicted information published by the Parliamentary Crisis Team. Both parties were in conflict against a preexisting background of political conflict, prompting the Prime Minister to grant the Minister of Health sole authority over statements regarding COVID-19.[54]

COVID-19 also raised the issue of personal safety of journalists, considering they could face expulsion from society, physical assault or even assassination due to suspicions about the validity of the topics they cover. This was mentioned by Under-Secretary-General for International Media, Alison Smale, in a forum on the importance of freedom of the press and the right to expression on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day. Smale stressed the need to ensure safety of journalists, since "today's press faces grave challenges and threats, including censorship, intimidation and direct attacks against journalists and media workers."[55]

The pandemic prompted strict measures to prevent the spread of the virus. Countries all over the globe imposed curfews — sometimes partial and sometimes full. Protecting their own health became a major challenge for journalists, especially in densely populated cities. The safety of journalists was also linked to their fear of contracting the virus and then transmitting the infection to their families, which presented them with two options: to expose themselves and their families to the virus, or to stay at home and lose their jobs.[56] The preferred solution is to try and work from home, of course — but the media, by nature, is not always able to avoid the scene of an event.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also highlighted personal safety crises that were pre-existing.[57] Women journalists were harassed in the region before the pandemic, but now, curfews and empty streets have created an even more dangerous climate for working women. Harassment rates against women have generally increased, even in countries that have adopted deterrent measures against sexual harassment. The number of harassment incidents occurring in broad daylight in France, for example, has increased since assailants know victims are

53 Correspondence with journalists and interaction on the (ARIJ with you) group on Facebook. The ARIJ Network maintains the names of the journalists.

54 Personal interview with Professor Diaa Sobhi, from the UNESCO International Program for Media Development - Iraq, on April 6, 2020.

55 "Challenges and threats facing the press, and female journalists face a double threat." United Nations News. Posted on May 3, 2018. https://news.un.org/ar/story/2018/05/1007552 Accessed July 9, 2020

56 Interview with Professor Nibal Thawabta, Director of the Media Development Center at Birzeit University - Palestine, on June 15, 2020.

57 A poll conducted by the "Women in News" program of the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (ONE-IFRA) in 2017 in 9 countries in the Middle East and North Africa showed that the rate of "verbal harassment" in the Middle East and North Africa region reached 59 percent, and physical harassment reached 59 percent. Its rate is 17 percent.

unable to seek help on the street.[58] With regard to Arab female journalists, mobility at the time of curfews became a matter of concern. Even in times when the streets are empty except for policemen, female journalists may be subjected to harassment. The Iraqi Journalists Association to Confront Disinformation took action on this matter and recommended courses, specifically for women journalists, on managing their professional performance and personal safety during times of crisis.[59]

Preserving the personal safety of journalists while they covered pandemic news has proved challenging. This has much to do with the working conditions of media professionals, especially those that are early-career and working for foreign agencies, or with online media outlets, and do not meet the conditions for joining unions. This excludes them from accessing health and hospitalization insurance for virus-related complications. Working during a time of pandemic without any access to health care both affects quality of work and exposes journalists to the virus.

The News Organizations Safety Protocols – Working with Freelancers manual[60] mentions that health insurance is one of the most important issues that a freelance journalist should consider before starting assignments. This is in addition to adequately sterilizing work tools and purchasing supplies that keep them safe, such as medical masks, disinfectants and a full protective suit if necessary. Unfortunately, compensation for these expenses was not common in the region at the time of COVID-19. Most of the time, it fell on the journalists to bear the costs of protecting themselves on the job. This is not easy when resources for this kind of protection shrink, and the price of the required items increases. In Syria, for example, the price of medical masks increased from 50 to 500 lira. Likewise, in Libya, as the supplies of medical masks dwindled, their prices rose. In southern Libya, where the virus was starting to spread, the price of a single medical mask reached 5 dinars although it had previously been available for only a quarter of a dinar. In Egypt, with increasing demand, fake masks entered the market, and prices rose from 2 Egyptian Pounds to as much as 7 Egyptian Pounds. In Yemen, masks were not available at all — and in cases that they were — prices were greatly exaggerated.[61]

58 A news report published on France Press entitled: Because of Corona, women in France face harassment and sexual assaults.

59 Personal interview with Diaa Subhi, UNESCO International Media Program - Iraq. April 6, 2020.

60 A guide prepared by a group of organizations, available (in English) here shorturl.at/frBST

61 An online interaction with the members of the (ARIJ with you) group on (Facebook) entitled: Do you find masks easily in your country? Are their prices appropriate? Or are workplaces provided for you? Posted on: June 2, 2020.

Has Any Good Come Out of the Pandemic?

Despite the number of deaths, the disruption of business, and the material losses that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused, it has ultimately had a positive impact on media performance. Most notably, the pandemic has drawn attention to disinformation again — but this time, outside of a political context and beyond regional boundaries. In 2016, the U.S. election highlighted the issue of disinformation. In 2020, the matter has concerned everyone, and media personnel witnessed the effect of disinformation on the Arab region as they feared unintentionally spreading or circulating it themselves.

Consequently, media professionals have become more open to acquiring digital skills to verify news, and to establish entities that would provide the necessary training for this purpose. In early June 2020, the Iraqi Journalists Association to Confront Disinformation was established with the support of the International Program for the Development of Media Programs of UNESCO in Iraq. This effort drew a group of 63 journalism trainees who attended an online course, entitled "Journalists' Safety and Combating Media Disinformation in the Time of Coronavirus". The training, with support from the UNESCO International Program for the Development of Media Programs in Iraq, offered methods of verifying and tracking online news, so that journalists could follow their own reports and the manner in which they were shared, used and spread. The goal was to ensure that the spread did not distort the meaning or context of the content. The trainees' acquisition of this knowledge motivated them to establish the association, so that this training could be expanded to different Iraqi regions.[62]

Besides news auditing, efforts have emerged from technologists aimed at promoting accurate data related to the pandemic to limit disinformation. The website "Coronavirus Updates in Morocco"[63] was set up to transmit official data from the Ministries of Health and Interior, and the Moroccan Press Agency, and to visualize it in graphs and maps. Local initiatives also appeared in some cities to spread correct news about COVID-19. For example, a popular campaign to combat COVID-19 in Beni Suef, an Egyptian city, has published pictures and videos with reliable news about contracting the disease, disinfection measures and doctors within the governorate. This has illuminated a revival of hyperlocal and citizen media in areas that could be further invested in to create a culture of news auditing.

Social network-owning companies have started to investigate the reliability of news published on their platforms about the pandemic. In February 2020, the BBC praised Facebook's efforts to combat misleading news found on its users' pages, saying that Facebook has raised their standards in countering disinformation. If users search for "Coronavirus" on Facebook, the first results yielded will present reliable information from sites such as the World Health Organization.[64]

Facebook uses both artificial intelligence and humans, who review publications to determine credibility, to verify content. It does this with the help of reports from users about disinformation. News that is proven to be inaccurate will have its visibility reduced and inform its publishers of its inaccuracy,

62 Personal interview with Diaa Sobhi, Focal Point for International Media Programs at UNESCO, Iraq, via the Zoom app. June 4, 2020.

63 https://marocovid.com/

64 Jones, Rory Kellan. Coronavirus: Fake News Spreads Fast BBC News Arabic, February 27, 2020, sec. science and technology. https://www.bbc.com/arabic/science-and-tech-51654354

while pages that consistently fabricate news will be prohibited from advertising on Facebook.[65]

In the MENA region, news investigators from the French News Agency (AFP) and the Fatabyyano platform cooperated with Facebook in verifying news.[66] Twitter also does not ignore that it is fertile ground for disinformation.[67] With the spread of COVID-19, the company decided to update its policies on dealing with content, specifically regarding pandemic news. Twitter's owning company conducted an opinion poll, in which around 6,500 users from around the world participated, and identified three types of incorrect content about the virus .[68] content that carries threat or direct harm to individuals or groups, content of doubtful authenticity and content that is difficult to verify. Twitter's actions in response to these three types of content vary. The first type is removed, the second comes with a warning and the third is left alone.[69]

Twitter began implementing these policies in March 2020, relying on artificial intelligence and humans alike. At the same time, however, the company indicated that it would not permanently suspend accounts solely based on automated execution systems — only when this is confirmed through human review.[70]

With the spread of disinformation about the COVID-19, some governments in the region have turned to social networks to raise awareness and to correct erroneous perceptions. For example, in April 2020, the Saudi Ministry of Health launched a campaign using the hashtag "one and a half meters" to emphasize the need for social distancing one and a half meters apart. Likewise, the Egyptian Ministry of Health, which launched the hashtag "COVID-19 Questions" used Facebook and Twitter to conduct a questionnaire to learn the extent of citizens' correct knowledge about the virus. Some governments, like those of Egypt, Iraq and Palestine have used WhatsApp as a channel of communication with media professionals.

65 How Is Facebook Addressing False News through Third-Party Fact-Checkers? | Facebook Help Center." Accessed June 17, 2020. https://www.facebook.com/help/1952307158131536.

66 Fact-Checking on Facebook: What Publishers Should Know | Facebook Help Center." Accessed June 17, 2020. https://www.facebook.com/business/help/182222309230722

67 Bovet, A. and Makse, H.A., 2019. Influence of fake news on Twitter during the 2016 US presidential election. Nature communications, 10(1), pp.1-14.

68 "Building Rules in Public: Our Approach to Synthetic & Manipulated Media." Accessed June 17, 2020. https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/new-approach-to-synthetic-and-manipulated-media.htm

69 "Updating Our Approach to Misleading Information." Accessed June 17, 2020. https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/product/2020/updating-our-approach-to-misleading-information.html

70 " An update on the continuity strategy regarding the Coronavirus" Accessed June 17, 2020. https://blog.twitter.com/ar/topics/company/2020/An-update-on-our-continuity-strategy-during-COVID-19.html.

CHAPTER 3
Combating Disinformation in the Arab Region

Before the emergence of the novel coronavirus in the Arab region, some countries had already begun to combat disinformation targeting media professionals or members of the public. These efforts were initiated by establishments like associations, press unions, governments or organizations concerned with the media.

In this chapter, we review the most important solutions employed before and during the COVID-19 pandemic to combat disinformation and reduce its dissemination. Still, we emphasize that there are disparities between countries in the region when it comes to their interests in combating disinformation.



Image: A man inspects “fake news”, “misleading news”, “rumours” and “false news”, through a magnifying glass.

Media Education

Since the 1980s, UNESCO has been concerned with enhancing media education in schools, beginning with the Grünwald Conference in Germany in 1982 held under the slogan: "We live in a single world, in which the media is present in every place and time."

This conference resulted in the Granweld Declaration, which called for supporting media education in pre-schools and adult education institutions alike. UNESCO uses the term "media and information literacy", more precisely than "media education", in its inclusion of information along with media. The development of this terminology to include "information" was intentional, as the organization acknowledged a media landscape bound to expand since the Granweld Declaration. Consequently, a need existed to expand the concept of "media" to include "all the knowledge, skills and perspectives that are necessary in the various areas of life today".[71] The term also includes "all types of media and informational content resources, such as libraries, archives, museums and the Internet".

Defining the concept of informational and digital literacy is important, because many Arabic studies on media education have found that the same term has been used to express several connotations. Some might understand it to indicate the various media disseminating news, while others might interpret it as the digital media used in schools for educational purposes, along with student media training projects such as school newspapers and radio.[72]

It is notable that during the 1990s, "media education" was the term used by researchers for any issue that combined educational institutions and the media. During that period, there was concern in media education research circles that students were affected by Western visual media — mainly due to the spread of satellite channels and increasing discourse about the dangers of globalization.[73]

Remarkably, in a survey conducted by ARIJ during the pandemic on approximately 229 Arab journalists, only 17 percent of them cited media literacy as a way to combat the emergence and circulation of disinformation. Perhaps the reason for this small percentage is the lack of familiarity with the term among journalists, or the absence of media education in their countries. A journalistic tendency to exclude the public in matters of disinformation could also be to blame.

In the Arab region, the term "media education" was introduced in 2007 when the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia hosted the first International Conference on Media Education in cooperation with UNESCO and the International Organization for Media Education. The concluding declaration of the conference pushed for the adoption of a media education course, intending that it be taught in higher education. In 2008, the following year, an Arab was chosen to head the International Media Education Organization, Dr. Sami Tayeh. Dr. Tayeh, a professor of media at Cairo University, helped raise the level of Arab interest in

71 Media and Informatics Know-How | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization." Accessed June 6, 2020. http://www.unesco.org/new/ar/communication-and-information/media-development/media-literacy/mil-as-composite-concept/

72 Ali, Asmaa Kamal Hassan, 2016. The role of media education at the secondary stage in facing the challenges of intellectual conquest: a proposed perception. Journal of Faculty of Education-Benha University, 352(4072), pp.1-42.

73 For example: Jawhar, Salah (1994). "Education and Information... A Call to Work Together Under the umbrella of Education", Egyptian Society for Educational Technology, Volume Four, Book Three, Cairo.
Abdul-Ghafoor, Muhammad (1996) "An Analytical Study of Educators 'and Media Professionals' Views on the Nature of the Relationship between Media and Education and Ways to Support It," The Education Journal, Vol. 11, No. 41, Kuwait University. Kuwait.

media education.[74] The media education conference continued, with the second session held in the United Arab Emirates in 2008, and the third in Egypt in 2009.

In 2019, a Lebanese professor at the American University of Beirut, Jad Melki, won the UNESCO Year Award for working to eradicate media and information illiteracy. In a speech he gave upon receiving the award, Melki said: "A decade ago, no Arab university provided programs for the eradication of media illiteracy, so the term was unfamiliar to most professors in the field of media, according to the study I conducted in 2005."[75] He then went on to establish the Academy for Media and Digital Education in Beirut in 2013 — the first of its kind — which offered culturally aligned media education curricula in the Arabic language. This program brought together dozens of participants from the Arab region in several practical courses, workshops and lectures on media and digital specializations. At the same time, the college sought to persuade the participants' universities and institutions to establish courses in these specializations. This was a successful endeavor, prompting media education to be taught in a number of countries in the region.[76] Only two years later, almost 20 universities in the area had integrated media education into their curricula.

Jordan was the first Arab country to include media education curricula in schools. In 2016, the Jordan Media Institute entered a partnership with UNESCO to launch a project integrating media and information education into existing curricula. This meant the integration of information literacy concepts into other subjects, although it was also offered as a separate course. In the seventh and eighth grades, for example, a chapter in the national education curriculum was devoted to reporting skills and hate speech. In the tenth grade, the IT curriculum included a chapter on digital privacy.[77] Jordan continued to introduce concepts and spread media education throughout local communities, universities and schools through partnership with the Ministry of Education and Higher Education and the Ministry of Youth in the Kingdom.

In 2019, media and digital education became strongly featured in special events for media professionals and journalists. An example is the Alexandria Media Forum — an annual regional event gathering journalists, media professors and professionals from around the Arab world — which dedicated its seventh session to education, media literacy and sustainable development. The Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Abdelhamid Ibn Badis in Algeria is another example of this media education wave, launching its first conference on public policies for media education in 2019.

74 "Masri was chosen as President of the International Media Education Organization." Accessed June 6, 2020. https://www.sis.gov.eg/Newvr/son/html/news178.html.

75 Al-Fanar Media. "Media education offers opportunities for the advancement of the Arab world," Accessed July 13, 2015. https://www.al-fanarmedia.org/ar/2015/07/التربية-الإعلاميّة-تقدّم-فرصًا-لتقدم/.

76 International Journalists Network. The College of Media and Digital Education in Beirut: To develop curricula that simulate the media reality in the Arab world. Accessed June 6, 2020. shorturl.at/mMSUV

77 Interview with Ms. Bayan Al-Tal, Jordan Media Institute, on July 1, 2020.

News Auditing Exercises for Journalists

With the widespread use of social networks as publishing platforms, the average citizen — previously the audience — is now able to assess media content and publish it on various social networks as comments or posts. This led to mounting criticism of professional journalistic material, especially political material or material that deals with the marginalized.

A study by the International Center for Journalists in 2017 showed that professionals seek to keep pace with the digital revolution and integrate it into their work.[78] A more recent version of this study, conducted in 2019, revealed that more than half of the journalists surveyed regularly used digital tools to verify information and find facts.[79] The survey, global in scope, included the Middle East and North Africa. It revealed that in the year preceding the study, 37 percent of journalists were actively investigating news and information with digital tools.

Abeer Saady, vice president of the International Federation of Women Journalists and a global trainer of journalists, stated that the new climate created by social networks required journalists to learn news auditing in order to maintain their credibility. She explained that in the beginning, news verification was only practiced in sensitive conflicts, or in peacemaking journalism. Later, she said, it was included in digital security and safety training for journalists, and then added to professional training for investigative journalists.[80]

Due to the relative scarcity of investigative journalism trainers, almost all training is conducted by major press institutions or organizations. Several news auditing exercises were organized through establishments such as the Thomson Reuters Foundation, Deutsche Welle, the International Network of Journalists and the ARIJ Network.

During the pandemic, many press and press-related organizations took initiative to provide this training on the Internet by providing training material in Arabic and holding virtual lectures and webinars to explain the basics. This proved a golden opportunity for the region's media workers, especially those belonging to groups that have difficulties commuting — like women, or those in countries of armed conflict — to participate in otherwise inaccessible training.[81]

The interest in providing this type of training is no longer limited to media institutions and organizations. After COVID-19 emerged, the companies that own major social networks and search engines have become more interested in news verification. Google offered special funding to organizations for this purpose. The MENA region's share of this funding was minimal due to lack of

78 Ibid.

79 "The state of Technology in Global Newsrooms" International Centre for Journalists (ICFJ). https://www.icfj.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/2019%20Final%20Report.pdf Accessed July 13, 2020.

80 Interview with Professor Abeer Saady, Vice President of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and a global press coach, on June 11, 2020.

81 Interview with Abeer Saady, Vice President of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and a global press coach, on June 11, 2020.

initiatives and the relative novelty of this work; however, some financial support was offered to certain Arab institutions that fought against disinformation.

Between September 2019 and July 2020, as part of the Google News Initiative, about 2,500 journalists from the region were trained on news verification.[82] As for Facebook, Mohamed Omar, director of news partnerships in the Middle East and North Africa, confirmed that after COVID-19, Facebook's work is primarily focused on "ensuring everyone gets accurate information, supporting health experts around the world, and ending misinformation and harmful content on Facebook". In this context, the Facebook Journalism Project announced a $750,000 fund dedicated to supporting and training publishers in the Middle East and North Africa. The fund aims to support journalists, reduce the damage caused by COVID-19, and enhance efforts of true and credible journalism in the region.[83]

82 Interview with Samia Ayesh, from the Google News Initiative in the Middle East and North Africa, on July 2, 2020.

83 Correspondence with Professor Mohamed Omar, Director of News Partnerships, Middle East and North Africa (Facebook), July 10, 2020.

News Auditing Services Within the Newsroom

In the West, political polarization and the fear of media disinformation — which the United States fell victim to during the 2016 election — motivated newsrooms to establish or develop existing news auditing services using human effort and/or artificial intelligence. The famous French newspaper, Liberation, was one of the oldest press institutions dedicated to investigating news. It began in 2008 with its "Désintox" ("Detoxification") service, which monitored political speech in France and verified its content. Continuing with the metaphor of disinformation as toxin, the newspaper launched a special news verification service, Check News[84], to anticipate the French presidential election in 2017.

The website shows the following message: "while social networks are always carrying more intoxication and that the political debate, more polarized than ever, requires sometimes neutral arbitration to find one's way."

With this service, Liberation relied on issues close to readers' hearts. A search engine on the newspaper's website where visitors could enter questions about topics that they wanted clarified, Check News enlisted journalists to research the topic and arrive at a verified answer. The response might take several days or even weeks, but the answer would be accurate and would depend on human effort instead of artificial intelligence.

The French newspaper Le Monde used a different tactic to alert readers about fabricated news. It created an extension called Le Décodex — able to be added to Internet browsers Chrome and Firefox — which revealed the credibility of the website being browsed. This extension appeared as a button at the top of the page that turned green if the site was reliable, orange if it was less reliable, and red if its authenticity was doubtful. The newspaper also added a search engine on its website where users could type in a web address to verify it for accuracy.[85] The newspaper also used artificial intelligence to respond to readers through Facebook conversations, so users were able to receive automated responses to their enquiries.

The BBC followed suit with regard to news verification activities. In January 2017, it launched the Reality Check service[86]: a comprehensive news verification service through which users could ask questions of BBC journalists, who would then verify the news and respond to them.

Later that year, the American Cable News Network (CNN) introduced their Facts First campaign, which offered a search engine for users to credibly research the names and statements of politicians. The campaign site continued to function during the COVID-19 pandemic.[87]

There were certainly other attempts to provide news verification and fact-checking services, but the Arab region had little significant input in this realm. The Lebanese newspaper, An-Nahar, emerged as one of the Arab newspapers most concerned with investigating internal news, especially with the late 2019 uprising calling for political and economic reforms. This movement provoked many rumors and instances of disinformation. At the beginning of 2020, the newspaper published a report entitled "2019 Harvest of Fake News", in which it stated that over the previous year, it had verified 338 news stories, posts or photos. An-Nahar continues to check rumors under the hashtag #An-NaharVerifies.[88]

84 https://liberation.checknews.fr/

85 https://www.lemonde.fr/verification/

86 https://www.bbc.com/news/reality_check

87 https://edition.cnn.com/specials/politics/fact-check-politics

88 shorturl.at/kqRT8

Independent Media and News Verification Initiatives

Even before 2016, when the term "fake news" became globally popular, the issue of disinformation had received attention from independent journalists and activists. In 2014, the platform Fatabyyano was established in Egypt as a Facebook page, and began to develop practices aimed at filtering Arabic content on the Internet. Fatabyyano aimed to distinguish rumors, disinformation and myths from facts, as stated in the platform's website introduction page.

Also in 2016, following U.S. President Donald Trump's statements about disinformation, a technology specialist named Haitham Atef used his expertise to launch an initiative called News Meter to monitor the credibility of Egyptian media. News Meter operated by checking aspects of media honor charters, which were divided into: professionalism, credibility, and respect for human rights, accuracy, respect for privacy, objectivity, incitement, hate speech and respect for intellectual property rights. These aspects are relied upon as criteria for evaluating the performance of media outlets. After checking them, a percentage is calculated to indicate the reliability of the news. This percentage is then presented to the owner of the media outlet, and to the public for comment, allowing the owner of the media outlet to respond, clarify and improve.[89]

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, a number of journalists have joined forces with technicians and social activists to breed initiatives using the French newspaper, Liberation's method of truth seeking based on engaging the public. The Misbar platform, for instance, was established at the outset of the pandemic in January 2020. Misbar worked on fact-finding for news published in the MENA region through its headquarters in Amman and Doha, and worked in cooperation with a network of collaborators in Jordan, Qatar, Tunisia and France.

The Tunisian platform Falso, established in April 2020, was developed to fact-check news published in Tunisia either through the media or Facebook — the most popular website in the country. Through its volunteers, Falso planned to monitor and audit 300 Facebook pages of Tunisian media outlets. Since its inception, followers of the platform have sent requests for news verification. These requests are then looked into, and answers sent back. Results of the research are either sent back to the requesting party or published online. Falso also publishes a daily section called The Certain Abstract, in which it discusses disinformation items directly.

Also in Tunisia, the Arab Network for Combating Fake News — fruit of efforts by Arab academics and journalists — was established during the pandemic to monitor and correct disinformation.[90]

Likewise, the Tayqqan initiative was established in Palestine by a group of young media professionals during the pandemic. It aims to "monitor rumors and disinformation, and refute them in various political, social, economic and other arenas, and educate the Palestinian public about the need to verify the news before publishing it," according to the initiative's website.[91]

89 Intervention by Professor Dina Ibrahim during a group interview entitled (Initiatives for Investigating News in the Arab Region). On June 20, 2020.

90 Intervention by Zina Al Majri and Ali Muhanna, the founders of (Falso), a group interview conducted by ARIJ entitled (Independent Initiatives to Investigate False News). On June 20, 2020.

91 The introductory page of the (Taqeen) initiative on its website: http://tayqan.net/about

Codes of Ethics

All global, regional and local media codes of honor have listed principles of correcting inaccurate published news as a basic ethic in practicing journalism. The International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) code of conduct cautions journalists to only publish information from known sources and not to conceal important information or falsify documents. It further states that they should make every effort to correct and amend published information found to be inaccurately and poorly reported. The FIDH code of conduct also stresses the need for media institutions to correct previously published materials for errors.

The UAE Code of Journalism Ethics and Professional Ethics states that journalists should do their best to correct erroneous news or information.

The Egyptian Journalism Honor Charter also ensures the commitment of the news publisher to amend any errors as soon as they are discovered. This also guarantees the right to feedback and correction for all whom the journalist deals with.

Sometimes, however, an incorrect news item is attributed to global media outlets, giving the former some credibility. This may occur intentionally or due to a journalist's misinterpretation of the news already published by one of these outlets. Otherwise, the news may have been transmitted by an unreliable source claiming that the information was published on a global channel or radio.[92] This instance allows journalists to claim that they were only the transmitters of the inaccurate news, rather than its creators.

The Iraqi Rules of Professional Ethics is distinguished in its use of the terms "rumors" and "unconfirmed information" to ensure the banning of all disinformation, including news that is only partially incorrect or is popular but has not been investigated for accuracy.

In addition to underlining the accountability of journalists for professional errors, articles nine and 10 of the Jordanian Journalism Honor Charter issued by the Syndicate of Journalists details the practices that ensure an acceptable level of accuracy in reported news. These practices discourage journalists from publishing unconfirmed, misleading, distorted or targeted information for propaganda purposes, and recommend that journalists clearly distinguish between what is factual and what is opinion or commentary. It also prohibits the use of manipulated or doctored images of people and ensures that journalists do not distort data or exaggerate when covering news and writing reports.

The charter of the Independent National Authority for Journalism Ethics and Freedom of Expression requires journalists to make "necessary reservations" regarding news, documents, photos and other data of doubtful accuracy which they cannot verify. However, these charters rely on moral character, so those who violate them cannot be punished with criminal penalties of imprisonment or fines. Instead, the penalties are in the context of referring journalists who violate the charter to a disciplinary council in their respective unions. Those councils may temporarily suspend or cancel these journalists' memberships in the union.

92 Intervention by Professor Caroline Farraj, Deputy Editor-in-Chief of CNN, during a group interview organized by (ARIJ) entitled: (Investigating Information and News in Press Rooms) on June 13th.

Laws Deterring the Spread of Rumors

With the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Arab world, a number of human rights organizations and journalism societies advised against enacting new laws or amending articles in the penal code. Updates that would criminalize spreading misinformation about the pandemic could give Arab regimes an excuse to eliminate the already limited media freedom.[93] Arab governments threatened to use their countries' cybercrime laws to counter the flood of rumors based on misleading, fabricated information about the treatment and spread of COVID-19. However, new laws and legal provisions were passed, and laws which had previously been discounted due to their lack of clarity were reactivated.

In Tunisia, the highest-ranking Arab country in the World Press Freedom rankings for the year 2020[94], there was fierce societal debate following the parliamentary presentation of a draft law proposal called, "draft law against fake news on media and social media websites".[95] Last March, amid the closure of the country due to the COVID-19 and fears of a decline in freedoms, most of the Tunisian unions and human rights organizations signed a petition calling for the withdrawal of the draft. Headed by the National Syndicate of Journalists and the General Labor Union, they successfully prevented the law's enactment.[96]

Meanwhile, the Moroccan parliament passed Bill No. 22.20, which criminalized the publishing of disinformation and any other criminal behaviors that affect honor, persons and minors on social networks.[97] The law specifically targeted individuals who promoted disinformation related to COVID-19. According to articles in the Moroccan criminal law, perpetrators would be sentenced to up to three years in prison and a fine of up to 20,000 Dirhams, equivalent to approximately $2K.[98]

At the beginning of 2020, the Qatari government imposed criminal penalties for the publication of disinformation on the Internet.[99] A new article was introduced in the "Crimes Against Internal State Security" section in the Penal Code along with other amendments. The article and amendments stipulated that a prison sentence of approximately five years would be imposed on anyone who published false rumors or news with harmful or underlying intentions (malinformation).

Likewise, people "shall be punished with imprisonment for a period not exceeding five years, and a fine not exceeding one hundred thousand riyals, or either of these two penalties, whosoever broadcasts, publishes or re-publishes rumors, statements, false or disruptive news, or exciting propaganda, at home or abroad with the intention of harming national interests, stirring up public opinion, or harming the social or public order of the state". In turn, the Human Rights Watch criticized this text, because it did not define who defines rumors or

93 Amnesty International, Laws criminalizing "fake news", a new blow to freedom of expression in both Algeria and Morocco / Western Sahara? Accessed June 15, 2020. https://www.amnesty.org/ar/latest/news/2020/05/in-a-post-covid19-world-fake-news-laws-a-new-blow-to-freedom-of-expression-in-algeria-and-morocco-western-sahara/.

94 RSF. ` World Press Freedom Index 2020 | Reporters Without Borders`. Accessed July 3, 2020. https://rsf.org/ar/ranking.

95 The bill, dated March 12, 2020, was submitted to Parliament on March 29, and on March 5, Kurshid announced the preparation of the draft law. Congratulations Kurshid: Preparing for a bill to counter Fake News. Accessed June 5, 2020. https://bit.ly/2By81Jw

96 Access Now. 'Tunisia: Human rights associations and organizations call for the withdrawal of a proposed new law dangerous to freedom of expression and the press, March 30, 2020. https://www.accessnow.org/تونس-جمعيات-ومنظمات-حقوقية-تدعو-إلى-سح/.

97 'Morocco hastily passes a law criminalizing fake news (Al-Araby Al-Jadeed) website. . http://www.alaraby.co.uk/. Accessed July 2, 2020. https://bit.ly/2ABZtAQ.

98 IImprisonment awaits promoters of "Facebook rumors" about Covid. Hespress.
URL https://www.hespress.com/societe/464122.html (accessed June 19, 2020).

99 Published by the Qatar Official Gazette on January 19, 2020, you can view the following link: https://bit.ly/31ELLIo

disinformation, how such a decision would be made, or which criteria would be used in these decisions. It also neglected to specify that the published information would have tocauserealdamagetoalegitimateinterest.[100]

On the other hand, Algeria added an article to the penal code against anyone who published disinformation aimed at undermining public security. This brought the punishment up to three years in prison, and fines up to 300,000 Algerian Dinars — equivalent to about $2,322.[101]

Saudi Arabia has branded anti-cybercrime laws against rumors and disinformation regarding the pandemic. These laws carried a penalty of 5 years imprisonment and a fine of 3 million riyals, equivalent to approximately $800K.[102] The Public Prosecution Office in the Kingdom also warned against producing and publishing photos or videos of curfew violations, or the incitement to violate it.

In Palestine, cybercrime law No. 16, from 2017[103], remained in effect as the government declared a state of emergency for the West Bank in March 2020. In accordance with this law, Palestinian authorities arrested dozens of journalists and social media activists, and took down about 30 websites between 2017 and 2018. The law used broad and unspecified terms such as "national security", "public order" and "public morals", enabling the authorities to block websites within 24 hours without resorting to fair litigation procedures.[104]

The penal code and cybercrime law have been activated in Jordan as well, by which several individuals were arrested for posting information regarding the spread of COVID-19 in the Kingdom on their social media pages. The authorities considered this information exaggerated. According to these laws, penalties include imprisonment for a period of no less than six months and a fine of 50 Jordanian Dinars, equivalent to approximately $70 for anyone who published information that would harm the prestige and status of the state.

In Egypt, which ranks poorly, regionally and internationally, in terms of freedom of the press[105], the Supreme Council for Media Regulation blocked two news websites for a period of six months under the pretext that they published false information about the spread of COVID-19.[106] The matter did not stop at official media websites; social networking websites were also pursued for pandemic related reports. The Council issued a notice to shut down six personal pages on Facebook and Twitter for information published about the pandemic. The Egyptian Public Prosecution also announced that it will punish those who spread rumors, statements and disinformation about COVID-19 with

100 Human Rights Watch. ' Qatar: The penalty for "fake news" is five years imprisonment.', 22 January 2020. https://www.hrw.org/ar/news/2020/01/22/338109.

101 'A draft law on "fake news" in Algeria, thus silencing the press! | RSF'. Accessed 3 July 2020. https://rsf.org/ar/news/-245.

102 Saad Al-Qaboosi-. The Prosecution: 5 years imprisonment and the fine as a penalty for (Al-Madina newspaper) rumors 2 May 2020.https://bit.ly/38wrg1P .

103 'Decree-Law No. (10) of 2018 regarding electronic crimes'. Accessed 3 July 2020. http://muqtafi.birzeit.edu/pg/getleg.asp?id=17018.

104 IFEX. ' How does the Corona pandemic threaten Palestinian digital rights', 7 May 2020. https://ifex.org/ar/how-the-covid-19-pandemic-is-threatening-palestinian-digital-rights/.

105 Welle (www.dw.com), D., n.d. Freedom of the press in 2019 ... Arab countries at the bottom of the list | DW | 18.04.2019. DW.COM. URL https://bit.ly/2Z1T2jV (accessed June 19, 2020).

106 Musa, D.B.H., 2020. "Supreme Media "blocks two websites for publishing false news from Akhbar Al-Youm portal." URL https://akhbarelyom.com/news/newdetails/3015743/1/--الأعلى-للإعلام-يحجب-موقعين-لنشرهما-أخبار-كاذبة-عن--- (accessed June 8, 2020).

a one-year prison sentence and a fine of 20,000 Egyptian Pounds, according to three articles in the Egyptian Penal Code.[107]

United Nations human rights experts recommended that government regulation of online content should not "impose disproportionate penalties, whether in the form of large fines or serving time in prison, given the significant disincentive effect of these penalties on freedom of expression".[108] At the same time, a survey conducted by ARIJ found that about 18 percent of journalists believed that legal deterrence of newspapers and websites that publish disinformation was an effective way to reduce the spread of disinformation.

Foreign press in the region were not immune to the strict measures imposed on media outlets which contradicted information provided by the regimes. In Egypt, for instance, punitive measures were taken against international media outlets that reported anything on the spread of COVID-19 that contradicted the official version announced by the state.[109] These included The Guardian, whose offices in Cairo were closed by the Information Authority in Egypt on March 17, 2020. The same authority issued a notice in the same context to The New York Times, the American newspaper. The Egyptian Information Authority justified their actions by claiming that the newspapers did not adhere to professional rules when reporting on COVID-19 in Egypt; that their news were based on unreliable sources; and that they failed to communicate with official sources.

The matter was repeated in Iraq, where the Reuters news agency published a report claiming that the Iraqi authorities were hiding the true number of COVID-19 cases. The Media and Communications Commission suspended the agency's license for a period of three months and imposed a fine of 25 million Iraqi Dinars, equivalent to over $20K.[110]

107 Imprisonment and a fine ... the Public Prosecution office clarifies the penalties for spreading rumors and lies about COVID-19 (Masrawy) URL https://bit.ly/2VO5Vw1 (accessed June 19, 2020).

108 'Human Rights Council - United Nations General Assembly. 2018 Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression. Accessed July 3, 2020. https://undocs.org/pdf?symbol=ar/A/HRC/38/35.

109 Deutsche Welle (www.dw.com), "Because of COVID-19, Egypt closes The Guardian office in Cairo", DW | 17.03.2020, https://bit.ly/3f3uSuK (Accessed June 8, 2020).

110 Deutsche Welle. Published April 6, 2020 April 6, 2020 when the media becomes a new victim of the Corona crisis
Accessed July 9, 2020. shorturl.at/hjCLR



RECOMMENDATIONS

Reducing the emergence and spread of disinformation in the Arab region and the media work environment depends on improving work conditions for journalists. Providing professional support, health services and social security to reduce fear of job loss and to assuage personal safety concerns is also crucial to a healthy news environment during the pandemic. Likewise, it would be helpful if source agencies provided correct information — this would, in turn, discourage guesswork, rumors and biased interpretations on the part of the journalist.

In an ideal situation, a climate of trust would exist between official media and the public, whereby the media could support the public's ability to produce and publish their own materials, allowing them autonomy over the coverage of their own communities. This practice would drastically reduce the probability of disinformation production.

In this paper, ARIJ proposes the following recommendations which target the greater media community. This includes media institutions concerned with the press, unions, press unions and donors who support this venture. We maintain that disinformation is a product of a social and political environment, as well as a professional one. Our recommendations are as follows:

First: Build a regional network for news and information fact-checkers, in both the written and visual press

ARIJ calls for the establishment of a network of journalists specialized in auditing news and information, and an expansion of this network to ensure an increase in the number of news investigators in the Arab region. The fact-checkers referred to in this context should not be limited to news stories and enquiries, but should cover all kinds of information and content, written and visual.

Second: Designate the year 2021 to combat disinformation in the Arab region

ARIJ believes in fighting disinformation through encouraging its verification and designating 2021 for this purpose. To this end, we call upon the media and media support organizations in the region and abroad to dedicate one of their 2021 activities to discussions on disinformation and the necessity of news verification. Whether by devoting an entire event to one of these topics, or only one of an event's discussions or sessions, this would create momentum behind the issue and generate new ideas.

Third: Support scientific specializations for scientific journalism cadres

The world is in need of specialized medical journalism that explains public health updates accessibly and accurately. COVID-19 has exposed the urgency for this type of journalism.

In his book "Health Media and its Applications in the Medical Fields", Raouf Hussein presented a comprehensive vision for qualifying medical journalists based on existing models. Hussein suggested it could be done in either of two ways: a two-year college course on medical comprehension training for journalism graduates, or journalism training for science graduates. In both cases, the process would yield qualified journalists with a comprehensive understanding of medical matters and terminology.

Therefore, ARIJ recommends strengthening ties between journalism training schools and trusted health institutions, so that training is made available at local levels across the region.

One starting point may be the creation of a basic curriculum for training medical/health journalists, which would teach basic medical information along with common practices and errors among science journalists. Ideally, the curriculum would also address the ethics of covering health issues.

There have been a few attempts at materializing this idea, such as the "Mainstreaming Health Promotion in the Media" program, an innovative training program launched by the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean in 2014. This program aims to enhance journalism skills of media professionals in the region and raise their awareness of public health issues. The program comprises a training course that requires attendance and remote follow-up of the trainees' work. In order to benefit from this experience, ARIJ calls for the creation of a science journalism training curriculum to help journalists improve their performance in this field.

Fourth: Expand and develop methods of teaching media education

In the Arab region, there is a need to expand media education so that it is not limited to undergraduates or students of mass communications.

ARIJ asserts that methods of teaching media education are just as important as the number of media courses being taught. Ineffective presentation of this subject may lead to adverse results. Media expert Ahmed Esmat warns of "the transformation of the media education course into a mere theoretical subject that students memorize abstractly just to pass their exams, which actually happened with important subjects, such as human rights and religious education in some countries".[111]

In this regard, we maintain that teaching should be conducted in an appropriate manner that suits different age groups.

ARIJ recommends the inclusion of media education in basic education as an optional subject called "Media Activity", based on several games and assignments that students perform inside and outside of school.

At the university level, media education learning should be linked to the various specializations of students, so that students are motivated to invest time and effort in studying this subject. As well, it should be presented in a manner that avoids elaborations and theoretical explanations in favor of focusing on practical matters like news verification. This is the practice in some countries of the region, like Jordan.

ARIJ proposes that a forum be organized for media education teachers in the Arab region that would serve as a platform for the exchange of expertise and experiences. The forum would invite dialogue about effective and ineffective methods of teaching about media and adapting its curriculum. The forum would be a platform for exchanging experiences and for devising mechanisms to overcome the challenges of disseminating and developing media education.

Additionally, media literacy should not be limited to formal education. Rather, it should be made available to all, given that everyone is able to manufacture and circulate media content. Supporting the public's capability to create content would limit the possibility of disinformation production. Therefore, ARIJ proposes that a short documentary series be produced, entitled "How to understand the media?" for circulation on social networks. The documentary series should include topics like, "How to understand talk shows?"; "How to know if a video is fabricated?"; and "How to understand a Facebook post?"

These recordings should make the media education curriculum accessible to the public, emphasizing the everyday verification of news. It is paramount that the content of these recordings is scientifically accurate, and that their format is suitable for social media publication.

111 Online interview with Ahmed Esmat on June 28th.

Fifth: Launch an audiovisual media campaign to support news verification

ARIJ proposes the involvement of celebrities in a campaign to caution the public on sharing news, orally or via social networks, before verifying it. The campaign should focus on the consequences on the lives of others in spreading unverified news — particularly regarding health. We propose that this be done through audio-visual media because of its popularity and accessibility to users and non-users of social media alike.

Sixth: Produce simplified training materials in Arabic on how journalists can use artificial intelligence in media work

In a survey of 229 journalists conducted by ARIJ during the pandemic, 17 percent cited artificial intelligence techniques as one of the reasons for the spread of misleading news. At the same time, 77 percent of them said they needed training to enhance their technological skills in order not to be misled by disinformation.

A 2019 international study conducted by the International Journalists Network (IJNet) and Georgetown University revealed a great demand for using and understanding artificial intelligence. 42 percent of journalists expressed an interest in training in artificial intelligence, while only 5 percent of newsrooms trained their journalists on AI. [112]

112 International Journalists' Network. "Study on the state of technology in global newsrooms - 2019." Accessed June 18, 2020. https://ijnet.org/en/node/7561.

Seventh: Encourage independent news auditing initiatives

Several regional initiatives were undertaken by independent journalists, activists, and technologists that have proven effectiveness in verifying news and alerting social media users to disinformation. The pandemic was one situation that demonstrated this efficiency, and, as mentioned in the previous chapter, also encouraged the emergence of more news-checking initiatives.

In this regard, ARIJ recommends that such initiatives receive support in, for example, inviting the founders of these initiatives to attend the same training courses on news verification that are attended by journalists. This would allow for knowledge exchange, especially given the technology specialists that exist among these founders. It would also be beneficial to enroll volunteers from these independent initiatives in the necessary courses to help them develop their work.

In addition, ARIJ calls for the allocation of an award for an independent news auditing initiative that contributed significantly to the culture of news auditing.

Eighth: Encourage the Arabization of more existing digital news verification tools

There are quite a few simple digital tools that residents of the Arab region, journalists or otherwise, can use to verify news. Some are available in the Arabic language and some in plain English. However, rapid technological developments create a need for more of these tools and programs. These tools should be accessible to everyone, even those who are not proficient in a foreign language. Similarly, training manuals on the use of these specialized programs in news auditing should be translated into Arabic.

It is not the news verification training curricula for journalists that is of concern — most institutions enrolling media professionals offer these courses in several languages. The intention, rather, is for the Arabization of explanatory videos and manuals on how to use the news verification tools. While journalists or citizen journalists may be apt at using technological tools in a foreign language — given the prevalence of this in technology — their language skills might be a barrier to their full understanding.

The solution that ARIJ proposes, in order to reap the most benefit for the greatest number of people, is for the production companies of these applications to provide introductory Arabic translation. It is also recommended that Arab technological companies contact these production companies for permission to do the translation themselves.

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