From Deception to Inception: Social Media and the Changing Function of Fake News (Lessons from Egypt 2013)

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Abstract
The continued political influence of fake news despite the unprecedented accessibility of corrective information raises a pressing question: How can fake news impact publics which recognize its inveracity? Building on and developing Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky's theory of "cognitive endowments," this article unpacks the mechanisms by which news endows hypotheses, models, references, and relations that impact public assumptions of what might possibly be true, even when the news itself is perceived as false. Following from that, the article argues that the unmediated information exchange social media gave rise to might empower fake news; for although it facilitates the news' repudiation, it also amplifies the reproduction of its endowments. This theorization is exemplified by reflecting on fake news reports, falsely referenced to CNN and BBC, about the headcount of protestors mobilized against the democratic regime in Egypt. Despite the extensive refutation of the authenticity of this news, it facilitated the political conditions for a military coup against this regime; not by positing the headcount as factual, but by setting up a politically productive controversy around it.

Keywords
Fake news, social media, post-deception, cognitive endowments, Egypt

Introduction

The uprisings in Egypt 2011 prompted scholarly reflections on the effectiveness of social media in disrupting authoritarian control over information. in an authoritarian media context flooded with regime propaganda, social media was instrumental in various ways. It created alternative venues for direct communication (Hamanaka 2020; Castells 2012), enabled real time coverage of state-censored events (El-Shahed and Tayie 2019; Abdullah 2011), brought together alternative epistemic communities (Kuebler 2011), opened up critical public spaces (Gerbaudo 2016), and pressured traditional media platforms to uplift their professional standards (Harb 2011). Overall, this new media space enabled informational resistance to authoritarian deceit, giving rise to a significant, albeit short-lived, optimism about the use of social media as an emancipatory space.

Fast-forward two years, social media was effectively repurposed for authoritarian propaganda.[1] Relying on fake news emerging from Facebook and Twitter, a military coup framed itself as a popular revolution and forcefully shut down the nascent democratization project. The most significant of this news was an alleged headcount, falsely attributed to CNN and BBC, which claimed that 33 million civilians demonstrated against the democratically elected regime on June 30, 2013. Notwithstanding the extensive refutation of the authenticity of this news, the alleged headcount was widely referred to by politicians, journalists, analysts, and military leaders as unverified yet suggestive evidence challenging the electoral legitimacy of the democratic regime. The centrality of the news created a paradoxical situation in which its persistent flagging as fake did not shut down the repertoire of coup apologism it instigated.

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[1] While this article focuses on the context of Egypt, the trend of utilizing social media as a space for authoritarian propaganda extends far beyond this case-study. a report by the *University of Oxford's Computational Propaganda Research Project* found evidence of social media manipulation campaigns in 48 countries, where at least one political party or government agency used social media to manipulate public opinion (Bradshaw and Howard 2018).

Reflecting on that paradox, this article examines the political influence of fake news on publics that recognize its inveracity. This examination speaks to two emerging bodies of literature: One that highlights the continued political influence of fake news after and despite of its public renunciation (Guo and Vargo 2020; Saffieddine and Ibrahim 2020; Baron 2018; Fuchs 2018a; 2018b), and another that emphasises the possibility of maneuvering unmediated communication to empower political manipulation (Seneviratne 2019; Gunitsky 2015; Vishwanath 2015; Morozov 2012). Combined, these works challenge the tempting presumption that access to corrective information, something that social media made exceptionally attainable by easing unmediated communication, essentially disempowers fake news.

What remains lacking is a theory of the mechanisms by which fake news that is recognized as untrue still impacts the social discourse on what is regarded as possibly true and what is not. This theory stems from the conception of news not as a mere piece of information but as a speech act: an epistemic endowment which enables new debates and hence new knowledge possibilities. Drawing on cognitive psychology, this article unpacks the mechanisms by which the utterance of fake news, even if eventually renounced, endows hypotheses, models, references, and relations that impact the social recognition of things. It then highlights the ways in which the unmediated information exchange social media facilitates empowers such endowments. Finally, the article exemplifies this theorization by reflecting on the mechanisms by which the aforementioned fake news enacted the epistemic conditions that facilitated the military coup in Egypt 2013.

Bullshit: Fakery beyond Deception

The academic works that came most closely to this article's inquiry are the literature that built on Harry Frankfurt's (2005) famous essay *on Bullshit* (Mackenzie and Bhatt 2020; Hopkin and Rosamond 2018; Davis 2018; Ball 2017). in this essay, Frankfurt theorized a form

of nontruth that is distinct from lies, referred to in colloquial English as *bullshitting*. "Someone who lies and someone who tells the truth are playing on opposite sides, so to speak, in the same game" of truth-claiming (Frankfurt 2005, 60–61). Bullshitting does not. It abandons the game altogether and rather operates in a field of post-truth or postfact in which the issue of factuality is entirely irrelevant. What matters in "bullshitting" is rather what the nontruth tells, what it reflects, about the political subjectivity of its propagator (McIntyre 2018; Waisbord 2018; Cooke 2018).

Viewing fake news from that perspective reveals the alternative functions it might play beyond deception. Those include the fostering of generic disbelief (Andrejevic 2020), the signaling of abidance to particular virtues or allegiance to particular groups (Ball 2017; Beyerstein 2016), the gesturing of specific ideological commitments (Wakeham 2017), or simply the displaying of power manifested in being able to bullshit and get away with it (Wedeen 2015). in all such cases, fake news is conceived as operating in the political, rather than the epistemic, field; its main enterprise being hegemony-construction not truth-confiscation.

This political enterprise, however, is not entirely independent from the condition of epistemic resonance with what is socially conceived as possible. as Čavojová et al. (2019) note, statistical analyses of the variance in the reception of fake news show that audiences do not take up and reproduce all fake news that reflects their political inclinations. Rather, they selectively reproduce some and reject others, in which "the more profound a statement is, the more it is likely to be shared." This variance is indicative that some limits to what could be conceived as possible are never entirely abandoned. Between the conventionally factual and the conventionally implausible lies a spectrum of possibles that are essentially limited (Zizek 1999, 162–164). It is within these limits that variant news propositions—true and fake—contest in the inherently political yet epistemically restricted field of truth deliberation.

Consideration of this epistemic element suggests looking beyond the subjective politics of fake news to also examine its implications on the epistemic limits of conceivable possibilities. Indeed, epistemic limits are themselves political, products of intersubjective articulations embedded in power relations. Nonetheless, the cumulative social reproduction of their presumption promotes these limits to a degree of sociological objectivity; that is, a degree of social convention that their existence shall be presumed independent from the perspective of their observer. The lack of attention to such an objective—objectified epistemic element in the existing literature reproduces the limited conception of "bullshit" news—that is, *fake news that is widely recognized to be false*—as mere appeals to political subjectivity, external and contradictory to the genuine quest for knowledge. The ways in which bullshit news also influences the latter remains unexamined. The next section builds on the works of cognitive psychologists Daniel Kahnmen and Amos Tversky to theorize the possibility of this examination.

Thought Endowments: The Cognitive and the Epistemic

Cognitive psychology is not concerned with the epistemic influences on thought as much as it is concerned with the thought process itself. The relevance of cognitive psychology to this article lies in its approach to thought as a cumulative process in which the truth-claims conceived as plausible at one point in time enact a cognitive precedence that impacts those conceived as plausible later on (Kahneman 2012; Nickerson 1998). Drawing on experimental research, cognitive psychologists Kahneman and Tversky (1982) theorized such cognitive path dependency as a function of the reliance of cognitive agents on cognitive shortcuts, or heuristics, to process new information through previous experiences. in this section, I build on three of the cognitive heuristics they theorized to examine the impact of fake news, even when renounced, on future evaluations of truth-claims.

The three heuristics most pertinent to this study are the availability heuristic, the representation heuristic, and the anchoring heuristic. Below is a brief explanation of each:

Availability heuristic refers to the cognitive tendency to pay attention to signals about which we have available *hypotheses*. It is why, for instance, we tend to immediately react to a fire alarm—even before the reason for the alarm is confirmed to be serious.

Representation heuristic refers to the cognitive tendency to *model* new experiences in terms of older ones. It is why, for instance, we are likely to presume that this article was typewritten, and not handwritten, based on the typical conduct pursued in familiar cases.

Anchoring heuristic refers to the cognitive tendency to resist drifting far away from one's initial cognitive positions. It is why, for instance, we are likely to pay a higher price for an asset whose initial price was higher than that whose initial price was lower, as the initial price serves as a *reference* for later evaluations.

These three heuristics facilitate the *re-cognition* of new cognitive encounters, that is, their realization in terms of accumulated cognitive propositions. Under the condition of information abundance, in which it is impossible to comprehensively screen all available information for every cognitive inquiry, it is necessary to set limits to each inquiry within practical and efficient contours. to that end, cognitive agents build on inherited cognitive endowments as points of inception from which thought begins; filtering, processing, and navigating new information based on the hypotheses, models, and references endowed from cumulative experiences.

Following from inherited endowments, however, does not necessitate their utter confirmation or mere reproduction. Cognitive agents often critique, amend, and even entirely challenge such endowments but are nonetheless anchored in them as originary orientations around which thought revolves (Nickerson 1998). The information may be entirely rejected; however, as the thought centralizes on the hypotheses, models, and references it initially suggested, this thought remains bounded by such information.

Resorting to cognitive reserves is further encouraged under conditions of urgency and uncertainty in which the deliberate screening of all available information becomes inefficient and ineffective (Kahneman 2012). These two conditions are characteristics of the contemporary media structure. on one hand, the open market of information social media brought about makes prompt navigation and evaluation of informational resources necessary to cope with and intervene into the plethora of information produced every minute. on the other, the abundance of diverse and contradictory information available makes the arrival at evaluations that are affirmatively reliable hardly possible. in such a situation, the decisive evaluation of new information on a case-by-case basis becomes impractical, the practical alternative being their recognition in terms of accumulated hypotheses, models, and reference points.

Essentially, however, our recognition of things does not rely solely on the endowments of our own experiences. Even the most solitary thinker draws upon the thoughts and experiences of others as references for her own thought. We also cannot build on the aggregate endowments of the experiences of all society's individuals combined; for the abundance and conflict of such endowments would defeat their purpose as heuristics that shortlist information to make it practically approachable. For these heuristics to remain productive, society must inter-relationally pursue another layer of shortlisting. Focusing on the individual cognizant, Kahneman and Tversky's model overlooks this inter-relational dimension.

Bringing "relationality" into the equation does not only imply adding it as a fourth heuristic to Kahneman and Tversky's model of thought endowments. Relationality also implies the reconception of the notion of thought endowments itself. The endowments that are taken for granted on the inter-relational level are those that resonate socially, not those that are necessarily believed to be true on the level of the individual. What matters is that society acts as if it were true or possible; that the social deliberation of truth is performed on the basis of its presumption.

The relational element, thus, transforms the thought endowments' domain of operation from individual cognition to the social episteme, the latter being the threshold of social convention "which makes possible the separation not of the true from the false, but of what may from what may not" (Foucault 1994, 168). in such a domain, social thought begins from and revolves around socially powerful, rather than individually convincing, endowments—hypotheses, models, references, and, I add, epistemic relations that resonate with the socially dominant common sense, not the beliefs of the individual cognizant.

Conceived from this perspective, the political functionality of fake news becomes a function of its capability to set itself as a dominant inception point from which the social discourse follows. The news might be critiqued on the factual level, even entirely refuted; however, it still delimits the discourse by fixing it on the question of the news' possibility. This fixation is not conditioned by the censorship of corrective narratives; for the credence of the news in such case is secondary to its function as a commonly relatable proposition. The abundance of counter-narratives might even increase the demand for such a common reference around which the discourse could be centered.

Social Media: Catalyst of Epistemic Endowments

Revisiting social media from this perspective sheds light on how it might exacerbate the power of fake news. While social media enables resistance to fake news' deception by providing an open space for counter-narratives, the radical openness of this space could also augment the influence of fake news' epistemic endowments, for several reasons discussed in this section.[2]

To begin with, the abundance of narratives and counter-narratives diffuse both the attention and the credence required to empower any of them

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[2] This section is not concerned with the factors that limit informational emancipation on social media, which have been effectively studied elsewhere (Moffitt 2018, Dencik and Leistert 2015, Deibert 2012). Rather, it examines how the emancipation itself, the radical openness to counter-narratives, could also augment the influence of fake news.

over an overwhelming variety of alternatives. The nature of social media as a space where virtually everyone is a potential producer of news content facilitates not only the massive production of information but also the coexistence of contradictory narratives. The result is a situation of balanced weakness, in which no narrative is powerful enough to overrule its counter-narratives (Andrejevic 2013, 4–14). The free flow of information is often conceived as productive of a democratic public sphere in which truth is rationally negotiated between the diverse truth-claims available (Habermas 1989). But as it seems, the overabundance of contradictory information is rather causing "the demise of symbolic efficiency": the paralysis of the possibility of mobilizing a decisive narrative of reality altogether (Zizek 1999, 322). as such, the abundance of critical narratives on social media seems to weaken, rather than empower, critical epistemic praxes.

Moreover, given the almost unlimited information available on social media, platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are obliged to filter this information for their users; that is, to customize it to make its navigation practically possible. This customization is managed by algorithms that rely on the biases signaled in the user's previous interactions to speculate the information she would like to access in the future. in that sense, these algorithms presume what the user biases *are* based on what they *were,* and then "creates that which it presumes" by selectively exposing her to information that confirms these biases while hiding others (Fisher and Mehozay 2019). By systematically linking the information to which a user has access in the present to the choices she made in the past, these algorithms position the user in a "filter bubble" that reinforces her inherited hypotheses, models, references, and relations.

This "filter bubble," however, is not merely an echo of the user's previous choices. Since interactions on social media are, by definition, social, the algorithmic profile of a user is based not only on her personal choices but on the collective choices of the totality of the interactions on the online clusters of which she is a part. The user joins groups, pages, hashtags, and various other clusters that are

already endowed with hypotheses, models, references, and relations established by the interventions of others in the cluster. The filters endowed by these clusters are algorithmically structured based on the aggregate interventions of all their cumulative participants, a wide web of epistemic endowments that can hardly be representative of the individual choices of each user. The endowments of exogenous actors blend with those of the user's personal choices; immersing her in an "echo chamber" of self-reinforcing information in which it is difficult to determine what in her algorithmically reproduced biases originated from her own previous epistemic decisions and what were echoes of dominant discourses endowed on her "filters" from without.

Furthermore, the totality of the online clusters followed by the user remains to determine what will henceforth appear on her news feed unless she actively "unfollows" all such clusters on a "one by one" basis, a process that is practically hectic and is therefore rarely pursued in the absence of an immediate trigger (Finn 2017). This algorithmic path-dependency ultimately means that once a user accepts a particular piece of information she becomes consistently exposed to its likes. Even if she eventually rejects such information altogether, this rejection would not revoke her extended exposure to similar propositions that reinforce the epistemic biases the initial information signified.

Finally, the relative absence of legal mediation on social media facilitates the artificial manipulation of the said filter bubbles and echo chambers. Unlike formal media, propagating fake news on social media, usually through anonymous accounts, has trifling, if any, legal repercussions, making it a fertile ground for unchecked organized propaganda (Lipschultz 2017, 237–242). These "fake" accounts are often organized in troops of "bot armies": automated online agents that mimic human behavior to systematically propagate false messages on a wide scale (Dubois and McKelvey 2019). Bot armies do not only introduce fake information; they also manipulate the algorithms by sending fake signals that there is a wide base of interest in the information they propagate. as such, they trick the algorithms into more

frequent iterations of the news on social media news feeds, artificially enhancing the interactions with that news. These interactions include the reproduction of the fake news by parties with a vested interest in propagating it, who are made capable by such mechanism to distance themselves from the responsibility for the news forgery.

As such, social media augments the epistemic endowments of fake news on three main levels. First, the virtual openness of social media to all types of narratives and counter-narratives creates the state of epistemic wonder that reproduces the need for these endowments. Second, social media systematically prolongs inherited endowments through its extended algorithmic filtering of information in congruence with the cumulative biases not only of the individual user but also of the clusters to which she belongs. Third, social media complicates the possibility of resisting dominant endowments by making it virtually impossible to single out the original biases of the individual user from that of the dominant discourse or even that of the artificially manipulated information space. These three levels coalesce into a complex situation in which subjects are in a continuous state of epistemic doubt but also a continuous reproduction of inherited epistemic biases, all while being unable to deconstruct or locate the original sources of these biases.

Egypt's Numbers Game: Counting Heads, Discounting Votes

One case that evinces the inception of an epistemic repertoire with significant political implications through widely renounced fake news is the framing of the recent coup against Egypt's first-ever democratic regime as democratic. This framing relied on fake news about the headcount of demonstrators who protested against the democratically elected president, Mohamed Morsi, on June 30, 2013. Falsely referencing CNN and BBC, widely reproduced Twitter and Facebook posts claimed that "33 million" demonstrators protested on that day, allegedly comprising "the biggest [protests] in [world] history" (e.g., Akbar Masr 2013; Mansour 2013; Sawiris 2013). Preceded by and

anchored in an unverified claim that a civic campaign called "Tamarod [Rebellion][3]" gathered more than 22 million petitions to overthrow the democratic regime, this fake news facilitated the projection of the ensuing coup as an "obligatory response" to the alleged "calls of the Egyptian citizenry"—as indicated by the defense minister, Abdelfattah ElSisi (2013), in his coup mandate.

There are at least three palpable reasons to doubt the factuality of the said news. The first is its utter absence from the archives of CNN and BBC, the two media platforms with which it was allegedly associated. Second, the number of protestors it indicates is demographically implausible as it suggests that almost all Egyptian adults were on the streets protesting at the same time, with little exceptions other than children—teens below the age of 18 and elderly adults above the age of 60. The figure becomes even more implausible once we consider the equally massive demonstrations endorsing Morsi that concurrently took place.

Third, the implausibility of the announced protestors' headcount was also confirmed by systematic estimations of the crowds. Studies of crowd density suggested that the largest crowds in the June 30 protests must "have been of less, and possibly a lot less, [volume] than half a million people" (Brown 2013). Systematic analyses of event data, as reported in the news reports of the pro-coup newspapers themselves, suggested an "upper threshold" of "one million" (Ketchley 2017, 104). Geometric calculations of the maximum number of people who could fit in the total area of major public spaces that witnessed protests set the limit on a maximum of "2.8 million" (Blumenthal 2013). These estimates suggest that massive protests might have occurred but that their actual participants did not exceed a tiny fraction of the figure

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[3] *Tamarod* is a grassroots campaign to register public opposition to the democratically-elected President, demanding him to step down. While it is often portrayed as dupe to the military, I concur with Julia Elyachar's (2014) assertion that "this [conception] is too simple. [Rather] the social infrastructure mobilized and extended by Tamarod to express political will was, like any infrastructure, available for utilization by other users with greater agency over composition of ends: here, most notably, the Egyptian military, and wealthy Egyptian businessmen [and media tycoons]." on top of the latter was Naguib Sawiris, the wealthiest person in Egypt and the owner of the highly-viewed on TV channel, who "gleefully told of having anonymously funded Tamarod to help overthrow Morsi" and used his channel to lead the broadcast of news (including fake news) about Tamarod petitions and protests.

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propagated and are hardly significant compared to the 13.2 million voters who elected Morsi.

Equally doubtful was the claimed count of Tamarod signatures, often used as an anchoring reference to suggest the plausibility of the exaggerated protestors' headcount. The signed documents indicated were all gathered and counted by the openly partisan Tamarod campaign administrators who were the sole agents that had access to them. No documented proof of the claimed results was presented, and no verifiable efforts were made to validate the signatures, control for multiple or forged entries, or ensure the robustness of the counts in any significant way. Moreover, the campaign administrators proclaimed three weeks before the announced count that most of the signed documents had already been burned (allegedly by Morsi's proponents—Ahram Online 2013), thereby leaving no possibility of confirming the count at all.

These tensions brought about an intensive critique of the credibility of those figures (Holmes and Baoumi 2016; El-Masry 2014; Alexander 2013; Asad and Çubukçu 2013). However, as they became the main reference point in the debate on the matter of the coup's legitimacy, those figures were widely shared by both proponents and skeptics of the coup, usually in combination with reservations on their accuracy. Hence, while widely rejected, the anchoring of the social discourse on these figures reproduced a controversy about the electoral legitimacy of the democratic regime. Thus, the recurrently rejected headcount could still challenge the political legitimacy of a systematically validated democratic process. to explain how this situation was reached, this section examines the political and epistemic articulations the postulation of the false figures, as controversial yet referable news, instigated.

Approaching "Inception": a Note on Method

Methodologically, this analysis is an examination of the inter-relationship between the disruptive epistemic propositions put forth

by fake news and regime rearticulations. Fake news is approached in that context as "speech acts: discursive practices that enact or produce that which it names" (Butler 2011, 13). By naming a proposition, fake news endows that proposition as a controversial claim based on which epistemic and political articulations are revisited.

This analysis, thus, lies at the conceptual nexus of Michel Foucault's (1994) episteme and Antonio Gramsci's (1971) hegemonic articulation. The episteme is conceived here as the crystallization of the balance of knowledge conventions which, by being embedded in power relations, sets limits on knowledge acceptable henceforth. The hegemonic articulation is the process by which political regimes dominate through the enactment of knowledge conventions that postulate their dominance as consensual common sense. in Gramsci's original work, the articulation of hegemony seems to be directly administered by a fundamental dominant class. Nonetheless, the reading of Gramscian hegemony as a "discursive phenomenon" (*à la* Laclau and Mouffe 2014) suggests that it could also be produced "bottom-up," through knowledge propositions emerging from micro-political social interactions but then amassing sufficient power to influence higher politics. in such a case, macro-political rearticulations of power, such as regime change, could be traced back to mundane discursive acts, like fake news posted on social media.

Bringing Kahneman and Tversky's endowment model into this (Foucault–Gramsci) conversation, this analysis bears on how the utterance of fake news endows epistemic propositions that open the door for the revision of power-knowledge articulations and the regime arrangements they imply. to trace the implications of the fake news' utterance, this analysis begins from the moment the news was inaugurated to the public sphere; then it traces the social exchange of that news and the epistemic and political implications of that exchange. This exchange includes not only its mere reproduction, but also its reframing, adjustment, critique, and entire rebuttal.

The research examines this exchange on four main sites: (1) Facebook and Twitter posts by real and fake accounts, (2) online articles from formal media outlets, (3) Tamarod public announcement of the "count" of its signatures' campaign on June 29, 2013, and (4) the coup communiqué declared by the Egyptian defence minister on July 3, 2013. Aspiring to capture the political and epistemic processes created by the utterance of the fake news and leading to the declaration of a new regime articulation on its basis, the research timeframe is limited to the period between these two moments. That is, between the announcement of the alleged signatures' count and the declaration of the coup four days later.

The research is intended to trace the trajectory of the news as it unfolded and how such trajectory, when embedded in algorithmic filters, influenced and limited the social discourse. To achieve that, the researcher utilizes Baltar and Brunet's (2012) "virtual snowballing" approach, in which the research departs from an originary reference—in this case, the first post that announced the "news" of 33 million protestors—then follows the "related posts" the social media platforms suggest when this reference is accessed (then the "related posts" that appear when the latter posts are accessed; and so on). As such, the research sampling imitates the traditional snowballing approach—where initial subjects recruit future subjects from among their acquaintances, but with algorithmic rather than social relations as the driving force of the sampling process.

By being embedded in algorithmic filters, the virtual snowballing approach subjects the researcher to the same epistemic boundaries that framed the experience of the subjects of her analysis. As such, it serves this research core purpose: to capture not the "full picture" of the news space but rather the ways in which the utterance and reproduction of the fake news framed the studied subjects' interaction with such space.

The examination starts from the post from which the fake news of the 33 million protestors and its forged reference to the CNN appeared for the first time, posted by the Facebook page with more than one million

followers, Akbar Masr (sic). It then follows the various posts that reproduced the exact text this page postulated or its two main keywords: "CNN" and "33 million." The empirical interrogation begins with the posts that reproduced these keywords on the four main (most followed) hashtags that covered the events of June 30 protests, namely: (1) #Tamarod, (2) its Arabic version [تمرد#], (3) #Thawrt_30_Yonio [June 30 Revolution: ثورة_30_يونيو#], and (4) *Yasqot 'Hokm El Ikhwan* [Down with the Brotherhood rule: يسقط_حكم_الإخوان#].[4] It also follows the references made to those posts elsewhere. These include other versions of the news that came to sight during the process of research by snowballing; most prominent of which were versions that referenced the alleged news to the BBC instead, or in combination with, CNN, and ones that added the term: "the biggest in history," usually referencing the same two media outlets.

Besides social media posts, the researcher examines media reports, analyses, and interviews related to the June 30 protests on formal media platforms that were commonly referenced by the said posts. These include the two outlets falsely referenced as the sources of the alleged news (CNN and BBC), in addition to four nonpartisan outlets (Reuters, the *Guardian*, *Deutsche Welle*, and *AlJazeera*) and four that were openly supportive of the coup (*AlShorouk*, *Alfajr*, *Copts-United*, and the *Atlantic*). The analysis focuses on these outlets' online rather than print or broadcast platforms as these were the ones cross-referenced on social media.

This examination seeks neither a comprehensive nor a representative analysis of the reproduction of these figures but merely the provision of a glimpse of the ways in which the fake news was replicated, contested, and rearticulated during the buildup to the coup. Neither the media outlets nor the social media accounts examined in this analysis entirely represent the media discourse. They only offer an entry point to the interactions around

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[4] Arabic words are transliterated in this article as per the primary sources examined (sic). It copies the studied subjects' vernacular language which does not necessarily abide to any standardized codes of transliteration. The few references that do not provide an English transliteration of their texts are transliterated by the researcher based on the guidelines of the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies (IJMES)* transliteration chart.

the studied fake news on social and formal online media and the intersection of such interactions with the political discourse signified in the speeches of the military leadership and Tamarod campaign.

"Popular Legitimacy": Figures Contested; Proposition Incepted

When Tamarod's official speaker triumphantly announced the campaign's gathering of an exact count of 22,134,460 signatures withdrawing confidence from President Morsi, his partisan audience rushed to celebrate their victory: "The people already overthrew the regime," they chanted (Badr 2013). The chant was not merely an affirmation of their subjective positions on the matter. It was also an attempt to postulate (socially) "objective" evidence for their case. in particular, the chant communicated to the public and other stakeholders that, according to the numbers just announced, which exceeded Morsi's voters by far, the popular verdict to overthrow the democratically elected president became objectively recognizable.

For the chanting audience, the fact that this numerical figure had no factual proof whatsoever did not matter, as what was politically productive was its formative, rather than factual, value. That is, its creation of a space of possibility that was unprecedented: the possibility of challenging Morsi's electoral legitimacy on the grounds of an unofficial headcount. It is the creation of this space that the audience celebrated as a victory that was "already" achieved once the count was announced, as the prompt chant suggests, before any steps were taken to confirm the validity of such count. as far as they were concerned, politically, it did not matter whether the numbers were true or false or whether the informal counts legitimately qualified as an alternative to formal elections. What mattered was its projection as such, the instigation of a repertoire of political performance based on these presumptions. This celebration was thus the first step in the repertoire of performing the coup as a response to the popular will. The announced figure was the reference based on which the performance was enacted.

The exaggerated numbers of petition signatures set the benchmark from which the exaggerated headcount of protestors could follow. The claim of "33 million protestors" was first projected by an anonymous page on Facebook, *Akbar Masr* (sic) [Egypt News], administered by an anonymous account, *Mo7by Masr* (sic) [Egypt Admirers], as a piece of news from CNN. This alleged news was mobilized in congruence with more plausible estimations provided by independent media outlets, such as the BBC's "tens of thousands" (Maqbool 2013) and Deutsche Welle's (2013) "hundreds of thousands."

Partisan outlets reproduced the exaggeration, often in combination with other more preposterous exaggerations. For instance, Alfajr (2013) newspaper and the online magazine Copts-United (2013) added that CNN also indicated that the protests were mentioned in the renowned *Guinness Book of World Records* as the biggest in world history. The Atlantic reproduced this "biggest in history" claim but referenced it to an interviewed Tamarod protestor (Reeve 2013). The title of the article, however, presented the claim as an undisputed given, without making an indication to its partisan source (except in the article itself). Meanwhile, Egyptian media figures, such as Egypt's richest businessman and the owner of the media conglomerate, *on TV,* Naguib Sawiris (2013), and the renowned *on TV* and state-television presenter Jihan Mansour (2013), used their social media accounts to reproduce those claims, adding the BBC as another source that affirmed the alleged news. as such, the coup-aligned media managed to push forward the claim that the protests were unprecedented, despite the availability of more nuanced narratives.

The majority of prominent media outlets, however, were critical to this claimed figure (e.g., Blumenthal 2013 in AlJazeera; Alexander 2013 in BBC; and Smith-Spark 2013 in CNN). But the very fact that these outlets dedicated full articles to addressing the factuality of the figure is on one hand indicative of its power and on the other reproductive of it. Cross-referenced, back and forth, between the articles that critiqued the claim and the few that assented to it, the figure became established in the

political sphere as a doubtful yet pervasive proposition; so established that it was taken for granted by most of the concerned political leaders, including Egypt's defence minister and coup leader, Abdelfattah ElSisi (2013), the main coalition of anti-Morsi opposition parties, the *National Salvation Front* (2013), the US State Department Spokesperson, Jen Psaki (as cited in Blumenthal 2013), and the Special Convoy for the Middle East Quartet and former UK Prime Minister, Tony Blair (2013). Neither of these leaders echoed the precise figure; yet they all presumed its reflection of some element of truth about the massiveness of the anti-Morsi protests.

Eventually, the figure made a full circle back to CNN itself. It was used as evidence by one CNN guest, an Egyptian former military general, and strikingly never corrected by the program's hosts (CNN Transcripts 2013). The arbitrary figure became so customary that its iteration engendered little, if any, concern that it might otherwise have raised, interestingly not even on the platform to which it had been phonily attributed.

It is important to distinguish the normalisation of the figure from the acceptance of its factual accuracy. The latter was far from true. Beyond personal Twitter and Facebook accounts, and very few online media platforms that were openly biased and barely credible (e.g. Alfajr, Copts-United), these numbers were rarely referenced without critical reservations regarding their factuality—even on platforms that were openly supportive of the coup (e.g. the Atlantic). Nonetheless, the conceptual proposition the numbers suggested, that the protests were massive enough to challenge Morsi's electoral legitimacy, remained powerful. Renowned media outlets, including CNN and BBC themselves (Smith-Spark 2013; BBC 2013), as well as Reuters, the Guardian, and AlJazeera (Fayed and Saleh 2013; Blair 2013; Iskander 2013), all combined their open rejection of the announced figures with an assent to the alleged precedence of the scale of these protests, paradoxically basing the latter presumption on the very same figures they rejected.

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One particularly telling example is Adel Iskander's (2013) suggestion on AlJazeera Online that "even if the total numbers of petitions' signatures were half of the declared number, they would still amount to […] a dizzyingly large number." No actual evidence suggested that half or any significant fraction of the claimed figures signed the petitions or protested or that these figures were based on any actual count or plausible rationale whatsoever. Nonetheless, in trying to make sense of the figures propagated, many observers anchored in the presumption that at least a significant fraction of this figure must be true (see also, Al Aswany 2013; El-Saadawi 2013). as such, doubts about the figures' accuracy did not impede the relative acceptance of their suggestive proposition that the scale of dissent against Morsi might have outweighed his electoral legitimacy.

It was this proposition that was at stake in deciding the legitimacy of the coup regime. The fact that it was taken for granted as the basis of the multisided debate that contested the quantity of protestors and signatures and whether such quantity qualifies to legitimize the coup meant the projection of the coup as legitimate in concept and, hence, the opening of a space for political rearticulations that began from that presumption.

This is not to deny the persistence of critique to the narrative put forth by the coup propaganda. However, within the situation of ambivalence created by the persistence of these figures, those critiques were readily framed as part of a technical debate on a hardly decidable headcount rather than refutations of the alleged evidence upon which the coup was justified in the first place. One example of this maneuver is evident in Alshorouk newspaper's (2013) coverage of the BBC article (Alexander 2013) that criticized the claim that the June 30 protests were "the biggest ever," projected by the coup propaganda as news from the BBC. While covering the BBC article's arguments in sufficient detail, Alshorouk neutralized its critical undertone by a strategic shift in the title. Reframing it as an inquiry on quantity, Alshorouk replaced the original title "Was Egypt's uprisings the biggest ever?" with a technical one: "BBC investigates the true number of demonstrators

on June 30 protests;" shifting the debate to be on the precise number of protestors rather than the coup legitimacy and its false evidence.

Moving forward, the proposition of popular legitimacy outlived the fake narrative that initially mobilized its inception: that 22 million people signed petitions and 33 million protestors demonstrated to overthrow the democratically elected regime. The latter remained to be reproduced only in congruence with critical contentions. But at the heart of these contentions was the politically transformative proposition that democratic procedures could be outlawed by informal headcounts and that the actual headcount, although difficult to precisely determine, must have been close enough to the propagated numbers and hence massive enough to raise doubts about the legitimacy of the democratic regime.

It could be argued therefore that the fake news inception leveraged the coup— Tamarod camp on all aspects of epistemic endowment. First, it leveraged this camp as the side with a precise and hence transferable—albeit unwarranted— claimed hypothesis; as opposed to mere estimates referenced by others, including nonpartisan media outlets. Second, the exaggerated figures the fake news posited anchored the debate over the headcounts on an already inflated reference point. Third, the fake news instigated a debate modelled on the conceptual comparability of informal headcounts and electoral votes, a comparability that was, in and of itself, politically transformative. Finally, the fake news set forth a communicable proposition, an epistemic ground, around which various elements of the alternative political hegemony could come together; including, Tamarod activists, the military leadership, the loyalist media, and key political leaders. Making the claim, thus, in itself, leveraged the claim-makers in terms of evidence availability, benchmark anchoring, conceptual modelling, and relational articulation.

Social media: a Double Agent

In this context, social media was a double agent. at the superficial level, it facilitated an open and immense critique of the propagated figures.

However, at a deeper level, the broad base of controversy over the figures also meant broad participation in the reproduction of the notion the controversy took for granted as its common denominator: that a particular threshold of protestors puts away with the democratic procedures and renders the coup legitimate. Moreover, the wide participation in this controversy, and its implied reproduction of a wide variety of narratives, exacerbated the sense of uncertainty that minimized the symbolic power of every critical narrative. This controversy also facilitated the wide reproduction of the news, as a controversial possibility, by dispersing it along a broad range of different and even contentious sources. as such, social media facilitated the immense dissemination of coup propaganda, mostly in the form of critical debates on and around such propaganda.

In addition, the unmediated nature of social media made it a safe zone from which fake news could be perpetuated. The fake reference to CNN began not from a formal media entity, prone to legal prosecution, but by an anonymous Facebook page administered by an anonymous account. The legally unhazardous inception of such controversial news was followed by wider propagation by Facebook and Twitter users, including public figures with vested interests in facilitating the coup. Influential people, such as Sawiris and Mansour, as well as formal media outlets, such as Alfajr, added to both the reach and credibility of the news by reproducing it under their names. However, they could only do so because the news had already been originated elsewhere, exonerating them from the direct responsibility for forging it.

As such, social media was pivotal in making the news "common," albeit controversial. on one hand, it significantly facilitated the reach of the news and eased both its reproduction and the intervention in the debate around it. on the other, it facilitated the artificial promotion of the news by tricking the algorithms through bot armies, exponentially expanding its reach by causing more users to encounter and hence interact with the news. Through these two means, the news became eventually normalized that even formal media outlets, including those critical of it, felt obliged to reference it, albeit often critically.

Moving forward, the algorithmic filter bubbles ensured the continuity of the exposure of users who once accepted the coup propaganda, and hence "followed" its sources, to information from these same sources. For example, the number of followers of Akbar Masr, the page from which the fake news initially emerged, is today almost the same as it was in July 2013 (in fact, with a slight increase); despite the seven years of renunciation of the fabricated news through which the page became known. The increased realization that the news was fabricated did not, therefore, significantly affect the continued exposure of those followers to narratives that posit the same proposition. Prolonged by the path-dependent algorithmic filter bubbles, the endowments brought about by the fake news, being instituted in online clusters, outlived the news itself.

Conclusion

The fake news falsely attributed to CNN and BBC might have deceived a few into believing it to be real news. So is the unverified and hardly verifiable claim that more than 22 million citizens signed petitions to overthrow the democratically elected regime. However, the political function of these claims exceeded deception by far. Rather, their core functionality resided in their instigation of a debate anchored in the conceptual possibility that the military coup might have been expressive of the popular will more than electoral procedures. This proposition overwhelmed and outlived the narrative from which it was instigated. The headcounts were promptly contested and eventually renounced. Yet, the proposition to which they gave rise remained politically productive.

This case of fake news influence is particularly revealing for its historical–regional context: arising in the immediate aftermath of revolutionary uprisings in which social media proved capable of restraining authoritarian deception. This makes the case particularly useful to the exposition of the discrepancy between the function of fake

news as an instrument of deception, which was evidently constrained in this case, and its function as an instrument of epistemic inception.

On a more conceptual level, this case study touches upon one of the most pressing debates on the contemporary media condition: Why could not the significant alleviation of restrictions on communication social media give rise to limit the influence of fake news? The article contends that the unmediated space of communication induced by social media, although complicates the possibility of blocking public access to corrective information, also floods the public sphere with overwhelmingly abundant conflicting narratives. The latter complicates the processes of filtering, processing, navigating, and socially deliberating corrective information to construct effective alternatives to critiqued narratives, reinforcing the reliance on the hypotheses, models, references, and epistemic relations endowed by the same rejected narratives as the inception points from which social thought follows.

In such a situation, the centrality of narratives becomes a function of the social utility of their endowments, not their perceived factuality or credence. Fake news could thus function as a source not of deceitful information but of controversial propositions based on which power-knowledge articulations could be renegotiated. If we conceive of social hegemony as "predominance by consent" (Gramsci 1971, 506), the propositions endowed by fake news could be conceived of as spaces for the inverse "appropriation" of subaltern voices into the hegemonic discourse. Rather than incorporating these voices into a hegemonic articulation enacted *a posteriori*, these propositions rule over the process of political articulation from its origins by framing the epistemic basis of such articulation.

The mechanism described above makes the "inception" function of fake news more resilient than its traditional "deception" function. The deception repertoire is a straightforward zero-sum game in which the power of the dominant class is precisely situated in its ability to block

the dominated classes' access to resources that debunk their deceits, something that is becoming, thanks to social media, increasingly difficult. The inception repertoire, on the other hand, merges the production of the ideologues of the dominated with that of the dominant by binding them to the same epistemic endowments and hence alleviates the organic binary that makes the two-sided contention possible in the first place.

In that case, critique could augment, rather than resist, the sociopolitical hegemony. on one hand, critique contributes to the spread of the central propositions that form the basis of the controversy from which the critique emerges. on the other hand, critique adds to the already overwhelming bank of epistemic possibilities, reinforcing the need for taken for granted propositions to make an inter-relational discourse possible. The inception function of fake news, thus, might be even more powerful in a system of open communication, as the abundance and conflict of communicated narratives enhance both the spread of and the demand for the taken for granted propositions this news endows.

Hence, the acknowledgment of "inception" as an integral function of fake news opens venues for unpacking several complexities pertinent to our times. First, this acknowledgement makes possible the unpacking of the persisting influence of fake news on publics that are not deceived into believing its veracity. Second, this acknowledgement allows for a balanced evaluation of the role of social media in the dialectics of domination and resistance, one that equally takes into consideration its role in expanding the influence of fake news as much as it considers its role in debunking it. Third, this acknowledgement encourages us to think with more liberty about the unfolding changes in the modes of hegemony production and the interclass political dialectics it involves, given the ongoing global transition from centralized mass communication to a horizontal model in which communication is virtually open to all.

That being said, this acknowledgment leaves us with more questions than answers. What, in such a context, should legally and ethically count

as public deception? What regulations should be enacted to control against informational manipulation that is beyond traditional deception? And how could fake news which utter refutation does not significantly limit its power be resisted? These are some of the many questions that arise once we acknowledge that the modes of epistemic domination are going through fundamental shifts and thus demand new modes of analysis, policy-making, and resistance.

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