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# “Everything has changed, and nothing has changed in journalism”: Revisiting journalistic sourcing practices and verification techniques during the 2011 Egyptian Revolution and beyond

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## Abstract

Using the Egyptian Revolution as a case study, this paper studies journalistic sourcing and verification through in-depth interviews with journalists in the United Kingdom. While the coverage of the event in the British media was dominated by civic, unofficial sources, interviews conducted in 2014 revealed that journalists only included these if no other sources were available. In fact, journalists voiced concern with regards to verification of online sources, and rarely included these as direct, first-hand accounts. Follow-up interviews conducted in 2020 point to developments journalism practice has undergone since, particularly in relation to open-source content verification. Overall, the picture we paint of British journalists' handling of content sourced from social media is one wedged between expressed enthusiasm and cautious scepticism.

**Keywords** journalism, online sources, verification, social media, sourcing

## Introduction

On July 7, 2005, 52 people were killed in four coordinated terrorist suicide bomb attacks on the London Underground. Within minutes of the attack, the BBC had received an unprecedented amount of audience material from citizens at the scene, amounting to more than 22,000 emails, text messages and videos shot on mobile phones. It wasn't until much later that former BBC Producer Kevin Anderson spoke of a “watershed moment” (Luft, 2006) in journalism: TV coverage of the event turned out to be particularly reliant on footage received from the public. Thanks to its human, raw and unedited nature, the newsworthiness of such audience material was rated as extremely high. Jay Rosen referred to “the people formerly known as the audience” (Pressthink, 2006), and the term ‘citizen journalists’ – signalling a shift from previously passive consumers to active producers of media content – had become firmly embedded in public debate. Likewise, Stuart Allan noted a “tipping point” (Allan, 2006) for online news, forcing a rethink of *who* counts as ‘a journalist’ in the aftermath of the incident.

Fast forward to the Arab uprisings of 2011, and once again, media commentators spoke of a “turning point” in journalism: indeed, never before have journalists been so reliant on content sourced from social media to supplement their coverage. Given the essential role social media played for protesters in terms of organising and coordinating the civic movement, commentators began to refer to the event as a “Facebook revolution” or – analogous to the 2009 Iranian Green Movement – a “Twitter revolution”. Because the uprising was initially merely considered to be “incidental” (AlMaskati, 2012), news organisations had not sent out their correspondents until the fourth or fifth day of the event taking place, making journalists particularly reliant on social media content provided by citizens on the ground – and there was no shortage of such material. Given the extraordinary frequency of audience contributions used as sources during the London bombings, back in 2005, *The Guardian* asserted that “the long-predicted democratisation of the media had become a reality”.

But did that really hold water in 2011? And if so – and perhaps most crucially – how did journalists verify information sourced from social media? This study responds to calls for revisions of the study of traditional journalistic sourcing practices with the advent of social media (van Leuven et

al., 2015) at a time when journalism embodies the intersection between traditional and evolving values. As such, it is a timely research endeavour during times of low levels of trust in the media overall (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2020), only further compounded the recent rise of sophisticated, doctored audio-visual material known as ‘deepfakes’ (Vaccari and Chadwick, 2020).

Although a content analysis published in 2016 confirmed that the narrative of the event in the British media was indeed dominated by a civic, unofficial perspective (Anonymized, 2016; Anonymized, 2019), however ten in-depth interviews with senior British journalists later revealed that these journalists would only include civic, unofficial sources for opinionated and non-factual statements, citing significant concern on the verification of these sources. This directly aligns with earlier research which found social media to be supplementary material which “are only used when nothing ‘better’ is available, such as when access to foreign journalists is limited, as was the case in the Arab Spring” (Lecheler & Kruikemeier, 2016, p. 163). **Six additional in-depth interviews conducted in 2020 confirm that while little has changed in the way journalists source their stories, the issue of verification has become both more routinized and systematic. As such, this paper advances knowledge on journalistic sourcing and verification. Its set-up as a longitudinal study encapsulates a decade of insights into how the two components have changed since the Arab uprisings took hold, and what such change might signal for future reporting from often inaccessible places.** We conclude this article with an extended discussion and agenda for future research. Ten years after the uprising, the initial euphoria felt in Egypt in the immediate aftermath of the uprising proved to be short-lived; in fact, the state of journalism in particular has moved from a temporary sense of hope to one of prolonged despair (Harb, 2019a). Furthermore, the extent to which digital verification tools have since been introduced into national newsrooms, and the level of supposed confidence journalists now have in operating with these, provide fertile ground for future studies. We touch on both issues in our discussion.

## **Sourcing and verification**

**Research into sourcing and the epistemic foundation upon which journalists base their knowledge has a rich history dating back several centuries. In their formative piece ‘On the Epistemology of Investigative Journalism’ (1985), Ettema & Glasser referred to journalists’ network of sources, suggesting that journalists turn to authoritative and elite sources as trustworthy purveyors of information.** Similarly, in their seminal work ‘Manufacturing Consent’ (1988), Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky describe how US mass media serve the ends of a dominant elite in power, placing them in a symbiotic relationship with powerful sources of information thanks to economic necessity and reciprocity of mutual interests. Two years later, in his influential article ‘Toward a Theory of Press-State Relations in the United States’ (1990), Washington University Professor W. Lance Bennett similarly observed that US mass media primarily looked to government officials as a major source of daily news reporting. However, exclusively granting public officials ‘the right to speak’ restricted diversity in the marketplace of ideas, thus risking that the media abdicate its mandate to represent all people in society.

**However, the gradual incorporation of user-generated content in the mainstream news flow has since led to persistent calls for reconceptualising the relationship between journalists and their sources.** Various scholars (Lotan et al., 2011; Strömbäck et al., 2013) describe this interdependent relationship as a symbiosis in which formerly ‘passive’ consumers of news transform into ‘active’ producers by influencing and co-constructing the news agenda. Social media platforms such as Twitter play, it is claimed, an amplifying role in the dissemination of information (Lotan et al., 2011), which has a significant effect on the amount and availability of journalistic sources as informants. As a result, a growing number of studies addresses the question of online sourcing (Lecheler & Kruikemeier, 2016).

So far, however, research portrays a contradictory image of the extent to which journalists embrace audience content. **One section of the available research highlights how online sources have**

genuinely shifted the journalist-audience relationship. For example, in their analysis of #Jan25 tweets during the Egyptian uprising, Lotan et al. (2011) detected information flows across a wide range of actors from divergent social backgrounds, giving rise to the notion of ‘networked journalism’ and the claim that the journalists’ gatekeeping role would decrease as a result of higher levels of self-expression by individual actors on Twitter. Equally, Hermida et al. (2012) found that NPR’s Andy Carvin acted as a central node across these divergent actors during his coverage of the event on Twitter. Despite him being merely a distant witness to the events on the ground, his work in curating, gathering and filtering significant streams of information from citizens on the ground led to a higher representation of unofficial sources at the time. As such, the case of Andy Carvin is unique not just for his particular reporting technique, but for his *curational* role in making sense of the events on the ground – a practice also observed in the popular ‘live blog’ format (Thurman & Walters, 2012; Thurman & Schapals, 2017; Thorsen & Jackson, 2018), whose nature of an unfinished product diverges from the central characteristics of classic news texts (Matheson & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020).

In contrast to this stand several studies which confirm journalists’ heavy reliance on established, elite sources: in her study on the British media coverage of the 2009 Iranian elections, Knight (2012) found traditional journalistic sourcing practices to prevail even in the digital age. Journalists favoured traditional voices, despite the internet’s potential of providing raw, unedited audience material. However, journalists heavily quoted government officials or other institutionally affiliated spokespeople, meaning that “the practices of journalists and the traditions of the coverage continue to ensure that traditional voices and sources are heard above the crowd” (p. 71). Similarly, newspaper coverage of the 2011 Egyptian uprising was found to be heavily reliant on conventional sources (AlMaskati, 2012). In addition, although Belgian journalists covering the Arab revolts did include ordinary citizens and non-mainstream groups as sources in their reports, they did prefer traditional source channels over user-generated content or social media (van Leuven et al., 2015). Authoritative sources were frequently quoted first in their reports to introduce an issue, while civic quotes were mainly used to express experiences and emotions of those caught up in the uprising. Further studies of Belgian journalists’ use of social media in their reporting of the Arab uprisings did confirm their struggles with verifying such content; indeed, “most journalists relied on international news media to verify the reliability of user-generated content before they incorporated it into the news output” (De Dobbelaer et al. [2013] cited in van Leuven et al. [2015: p. 560]).

In sum, while the incorporation of social media into contemporary newsrooms has since become a normalised component despite its associated, and often challenging, verification (Zeng et al., 2019), the study of online sources remains a moving target. A study by Wardle and Williams (2010) on the integration of user-generated content at the BBC Hub asserts that journalists see audience material as “little more than another news source” (p. 790) and “just another journalistic source” (p. 791); this is also confirmed in a more recent study with Irish journalists, for whom social media provides “an additional or alternative platform for accessing sources, rather than providing new root sources of information” (Heravi & Harrower, 2016, p. 1202). This underscores the importance of *familiarity* as a determining factor, which critically may be due to questions of verification, seen by some as “the essence of journalism” (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001, p. 71). Not only does previous work indicate that audience material is predominantly used for non-factual, opinionated statements (Miller-Carpenter, 2019), but crucially, journalists seemingly prefer quoting established correspondents (Lecheler & Kruikemeier, 2016), thus affirming the viability of traditional journalistic newsgathering practices in the digital age. Given the inextricable link between source credibility and civic trustworthiness in the media (Reich, 2011) – a link which is particularly pronounced during times of political upheaval – a closer look at journalistic sourcing during the Arab uprisings is needed.

## The role of social media

To examine journalistic sourcing practices during the Egyptian uprising, it is first necessary to situate and contextualise the role social media has played during the event more broadly. Sparked by initial protests in Tunisia, where street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire following the confiscation of his wares by local police, the movement soon spread to Egypt. As so aptly described by Cottle (2011), and with reference to the initial uprisings in Tunisia having sparked the subsequent events in Egypt, Bouazizi had “lit a flame that soon burned in capitals and cities across much of the Arab World” (p. 648). Commentators soon picked up on the initial euphoria, with many citing the powers of social media to mobilise their constituents. However, such widespread optimism appears to be misplaced: social media, though powerful, cannot in itself act as a catalyst to stimulate successful collective action; rather, used effectively by a technology-savvy youth, it can act as a facilitating factor to help pave the way for coordinated civic action (Harb, 2011). As such, social media had indeed been taken up by protestors as a mobilising tool, which effectively resulted in “the seizure of power by the people as part of a collective will to overthrow dictators and autocratic regimes and to effect democratic change from within” (ibid: np). Social media networks did not of themselves generate revolutions, but they were able to facilitate them, helping to generate a sense of connectedness. They created a space where people shared grievances against those in positions of authority: groups of young people, in particular, used that newly shared virtual space to demand that a corrupt political elite be held responsible for their misuse and abuse of power (Harb, 2019b).

In effect, social media had thus successfully transformed from tools that were initially merely social in nature to political tools with a power not seen elsewhere before. Both the interactivity and instantaneity of social media, but also its characteristics in alerting and diffusing information at a critical time, helped citizens counter narratives by the Mubarak regime (Barrons, 2012). Thanks to the widespread diffusion of their grievances in the media, Egyptians sensed that their struggles had gained an international platform, thereby granting them a sense of legitimacy that helped further their cause. As a result of such external validation, social media managed to *globalise local struggle* (Yli-Kaitala, 2014). Egyptians were believed to have transformed into ‘citizen journalists’ who, despite government attempts to circumvent access to the Internet, conveyed critical information at a crucial moment in time (Tufkeci & Wilson, 2012). Elsewhere, they have been referred to as para-citizen journalists, who “form temporary communities bound together by streams of information centred around a particular event” (Miller-Carpenter, 2019, p. 12). With an initial feeling that the protests were merely incidental and would not extend any further, journalists elsewhere soon found social media to be the *only* channel of information, making them particularly reliant on content produced by citizens to be processed in their reporting. *As such – at least in its initial stages – such eyewitness content became a genuine substitute for on-the-ground reporting produced by international correspondents (Zelizer, 2017). On a higher level of abstraction, the coexistence of witness accounts alongside professional journalists has been referred to as “hybrid news spaces” (Chadwick, 2013), in which “the non-journalist witness gains authority from the authenticity associated with being in close proximity to a newsworthy event and in the rawness of their accounts” (Carlson, 2020).*

*On a more tangible level*, this has raised serious issues for journalism practice, particularly in relation to sourcing and verification. First, has the event indeed been dominated by a civic perspective, or did societal elites continue to play a prominent role in journalistic sourcing, as suggested in other studies elsewhere (see, for example, Knight, 2012)? Second, if civic sources did indeed dominate the journalists’ reporting, what techniques did journalists use to verify such material, particularly when these journalists were based in their London newsrooms rather than at the scene? To answer the first question, we draw on the findings of a quantitative content analysis in parts published elsewhere before (Anonymized, 2016; Anonymized, 2019), while the second part is based on several interviews with senior British journalists and editors involved in the reporting of the event. Overall, our findings contribute original data on journalists’ sourcing practices and verification techniques at a time when



the integration of social media content into journalistic work finds itself wedged in a “transitional phase” (Heravi & Harrower, 2016) between expressed enthusiasm and cautious scepticism.

## Method

The findings presented here form part of a 2016 study in which we investigated sourcing practices and verification techniques deployed by British journalists during the 2011 Egyptian Revolution. To do so, we followed a hybrid methodological approach, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative techniques: in a first step, we conducted a large-scale content analysis of the frequency and types of sources journalists working across six UK national news publishers (*The Daily Telegraph*, *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *BBC News*, *Channel 4 News*, *Reuters News*) consulted during their reporting of the event. Informed by this analysis, in a second step we conducted an additional in-depth interviews with senior British journalists having reported on the uprising during the 18-day time period (25 January to 11 February 2011). To allow for comparisons, this included ten journalists interviewed in 2014 and six additional journalists interviewed in 2020.

Despite their value in their own right, the interview data presented herein suffer from three interrelated limitations: first, the asynchronous nature of the six additional interviews which were conducted via email suggests that they were void of social interaction, thus making it impossible for the researcher to ask any immediate, follow-up questions, even though on two occasions, follow-up questions were posed via email. Second, the retrospective nature of all 16 interviews suggests a reliance on journalists’ very own accounts of their newsgathering patterns at the time, making it – paradoxically – impossible to verify whether or not the interviewed journalists actually remember their individual practices on such a granular level. Third, all our interviews rely on self-reported data, which might incentivise socially desirable answers and, therefore, skew on-the-ground realities. In future research, the two latter limitations could be mitigated through newsroom observations, closely monitoring journalists’ sourcing patterns and verification techniques as a breaking news scenario unfolds and journalists scramble for verifiable information. Overall, our data provides valuable, longitudinal insights into journalists’ processes of verification when sourcing material from social media.

These semi-structured interviews consisted of two sections: the first was centred on specific techniques journalists employed in terms of sourcing; the second questioned the respective strategies they followed in terms of verification to uncover the ‘black box’ of journalistic decision-making processes in a breaking news scenario. According to Lotan et al. (2011), journalists face several challenges when verifying content during fast-moving events: the differentiation between ‘true’ information and rumours; and the origin of news and the continuous evolvement of selected events, making it difficult to establish the veracity of claims made. Broadly speaking, guided questions included:

- What role has social media played in your newsroom during the Egyptian uprising?
- What strategy did you follow in sourcing information during the Egyptian uprising?
- What challenges do you face when verifying content sourced from social media?
- Do you feel that your role as a journalist has changed as a result of social media?
- How do you verify content sourced from social media?

During the data collection process, in a separate spreadsheet, the by-lines of the authors of these articles were collected. A total of  $n = 50$  journalists appeared particularly often across the sample. These were first contacted by e-mail and, if necessary, by telephone after an initial written reminder was sent out. Overall, ten journalists responded to the initial interview request, which includes four each from *Channel 4 News* and *BBC News*, and one each from *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph*. Except for two interviews, which were conducted via Skype due to the correspondents’ ongoing stay in the Middle East, the interviews were carried out in the journalists’ respective offices in central

London in 2014. Six follow-up interviews with journalists involved in the reporting of the event were conducted via email in 2020. This included three from *Channel 4 News* and three from *BBC News* (one of whom specifically works for *BBC Arabic*). All interviews were transcribed verbatim and clustered based on emerging themes using the *NVivo* software package. This facilitated the process of weaving in “a narrative which is interpolated with illustrative quotes” (Gillham, 2000, p. 74) and allowed for a cohesive analysis and presentation of results.

## Results

Overall, the results paint a picture wedged between expressed enthusiasm and cautious scepticism when it comes to online sourcing and the connected practice of verification. While we only present some anecdotal evidence that the latter has become both more routinized and systematic, we hope that, in remembering the Arab revolts, these results serve as a useful starting point for a better understanding how and if the movement facilitated changes in the relationship between digital journalism and digital activism.

### *Supplementary role of social media*

Despite early predictions of a ‘Facebook revolution’, in 2014, those British journalists covering the uprising regarded the use of social media merely as another source of information that would help them make sense of the events on the ground. Social media were equated with a wire service that may well provide journalists with a broader source choice, but that would not change the rules of the game altogether. One journalist at *Channel 4 News* said that “it [social media] is just another source of information, another branch to the tree if you like. I don’t think it fundamentally changes the rules of journalism or the way journalism works, which is to gather information and to corroborate it – you check it, you interrogate it, and you tell people what your take on it is” (personal communication, 21 September 2014). By this token, social media seemed to have worked as an ‘extra newsfeed’, a constant stream of information that would provide journalists with useful tip-offs as to what was happening at any given moment in time. Similarly, one of his colleagues at *Channel 4 News* was wary not to overstate the use of social media at the time. To his mind, social media had not changed much other than providing both producers as well as users of news with a broader source choice. In fact, “they [users] now have a broad choice between so-called established channels or going for social media and getting it in a kind of more raw, unfinished version” (personal communication, 12 September 2014). Another *Channel 4 News* journalist, also based in Egypt during the uprising, concurred. In her opinion, the use of social media offered an additional source of information, especially at times when journalists were not present at the scene, and when there would otherwise be no reporting from the area whatsoever. When talking about the transformations brought about by the inclusion of social media platforms on the international news agenda, she said: “What social media has done is that it has opened up places, and parts of stories which would otherwise be 100% dark. There would simply be no information. So, that’s why social media is useful” (personal communication, 15 September 2014).

The exclusivity of social media when faced with news vacuums was also a recurring theme during the follow-up interviews conducted in 2020. Social media gave power to ‘the people’ when documenting the events on the ground and shone light on otherwise inaccessible places. A *Channel 4 News* journalist said that such material helps “lifting the lid on what’s happening in far-flung places” (email interview, 26 April 2020), and a *BBC News* journalist concurred with that assessment when she said that it “let[s] us know about otherwise hidden stories of our time” (email interview, 26 May 2020). While such material sourced from social media was praised for its characteristics of adding diversity, richness, excitement, and intimacy to a journalists’ output, interviewees were eager to stress that it would only work “hand-in-glove” with further methods for source corroboration and verification. In the words of another *Channel 4 News* journalist: “Social media is another source and another tool. It



helps. But it hasn't changed my primary job, which is, far as possible, to be an eyewitness reporter" (email interview, 18 April 2020).

Overall, while there was expressed enthusiasm about the affordances of social media in documenting otherwise in accessible places, there was agreement that social media would alter little other than providing additional source material, and that it cannot act as a replacement to the very essence of traditional forms of journalism. This aligns with previous research characterizing audience material as "little more than another news source" and "just another journalistic source" (Wardle & Williams, 2010, p. 791).

### *Value of eyewitnesses*

However, this is not to say that British journalists covering the Egyptian uprising dismissed the value social media offered to their reporting. They did recognize their ability to provide raw and unfiltered accounts out of Egypt but used them mainly to cover the general 'feel' of certain situations as they unfolded across the country – however very rarely for factual civic statements. This is evident from a statement made by a *BBC News* reporter interviewed for this project, who at the time was responsible for producing its live blog. To cover the general 'feel' of the situation on the ground, his reporting was strongly tied to civic accounts from the scene, while the final resignation by Mubarak was more strongly tied to official sources due to the importance of the reaction of the international community to this truly compelling event (personal communication, 16 September 2014). This is congruent with a journalist's opinion who at the time was responsible for producing *The Daily Telegraph's* live blog. She believed that the use of social media was primarily centred upon gathering diverse opinions rather than pure facts and attributed the popularity of social media as a newsgathering tool to the ability to cover the general atmosphere, or 'feel', of a situation. In her words: "The whole period was a turning point in terms of how we looked at using social media and we were quite nervous to start off with, but as the momentum gathered, it became more about demonstrating a mood rather than hard facts" (personal communication, 2 October 2014).

For factual statements, reporters were reliant on "usual suspects" (Thurman & Walters, 2012); that is, a reliance on individuals who have been attributed with dependability and trustworthiness in the past. These findings mirror the fact that, in the quest for finding verifiable content on social media, journalists demonstrate a reliance on individuals who had been proven to be trustworthy in the past and who are verifiably 'real' people being in one way or another involved in the event at the time (as evidenced, for example, by the journalists' frequent sourcing of material posted by online activist and Google executive Wael Ghonim at the time). One *BBC News* journalist, for example, referenced journalists' "restrictive" types of sources in their output, thus instead defaulting towards those "that could be verified by other means" (personal communication, 16 September 2014). This is also congruent with the account provided by one *Channel 4 News* interviewee: even when sourcing from social media, she would still try to trace the source to its origins, contact a person she deemed as 'trustworthy' ("usual suspects"), meet up with them and try to investigate the matter further. For her, the journalistic profession still constitutes itself in being active at the scene:

On the whole, you're [still] out and about; I'm not sitting in a hotel room following the Internet. I'm on the *street* doing my own reporting, and so if there's extra stuff on Twitter, that's very useful. [But] my basic method is the same: I go somewhere. I talk to people. I find out what's going on. ... That is what I call journalism. I went there and saw this. I saw this for myself with my own eyes, and my camera operator filmed it ... that is journalism; that is what I did.

(Personal communication, 15 September 2014)

The same pattern was also evident in the follow-up interviews. Indeed, journalists continued to stress the crucial role of eyewitnesses present at the scene and continued to rely on sources they

deemed to be both honest and dependable. One journalist mentioned the importance of local experts he would seek corroboration from – preferably those whom he met in person in the past – a practice he justified by saying that “confirmation has never been more important” (email interview, 26 April 2020). Unless journalists were thrown into a news vacuum – during which the role of social media would change from supplementary to exclusive – journalists’ traditional sourcing practices still applied. In the words of one *BBC News* journalist: “Nothing substitutes for on-the-ground reporting” (email interview, 10 June 2020).

As such, journalists voiced a preference towards the remnants of traditional journalism. The value of local activists was rooted in the emotional component they added to a story (Miller-Carpenter, 2019); in turn, so-called “usual suspects” (Thurman & Walters, 2012) whom journalists had relied on in the past or whose accounts were easily verifiable by other means were particularly likely to be included in the journalists’ news output.

### *Accelerated publication cycles*

By a similar token, a further significant finding was the journalists’ use of secondary, ‘recycled’ material which had already been published elsewhere. Given the commercial rivalries between competing news outlets, this is surprising, and Tereszkievicz (2014) concurs that “this approach stands against the natural and widespread competitiveness among news outlets” (p. 308). Four journalists openly admitted using this strategy in their reporting. A *Channel 4 News* journalist, for example, admitted to “look at live blogs on newspaper websites, *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* especially, but I will pick things and say, ‘oh look, they’ve got an interesting video, can we see if we can find that ourselves?’, but I won’t take all of it” (personal communication, 12 September 2014). The *New York Times* as a useful resource was also mentioned by the *BBC News* reporter, who had, for example, drawn inspiration from their compelling infographics. Besides, he kept an eye on broadcaster *Al Jazeera*, which is where in fact he had first caught wind of the uprisings. He regarded this process of observing each other’s news output as a useful tip-off service, and in instances where verification was impossible to achieve, even demonstrated a sole reliance on this particular news channel (personal communication, 16 September 2014). A journalist for *The Times*, for example, praised *Al Jazeera* for their reporting and for being very “agile” in getting information rapidly (personal communication, 30 September 2014). Being responsible for the production of the live blog of *The Daily Telegraph* at the time, their journalist was openly following journalists from *Al Jazeera* as well as *CNN*, an act she considered to be acceptable when dealing with challenging situations covering wide-reaching geographical areas. In fact, she echoed Tereszkievicz’s (2014) viewpoint when she said that “to be honest, it was almost like everybody was looking at each other to see where things are coming from. ... It’s really the only sensible way in which you can operate, because otherwise, everybody gets a tiny bit of the story as opposed to getting the whole story” (personal communication, 2 October 2014).

Corroboration with other media outlets was a theme also prominent in the follow-up interviews. Apart from the value of local eyewitnesses, journalists stressed the role of “other, formal, trusted, and traditional media sources” (email interview, 29 April 2020), “news agencies” (email interview, 26 May 2020) as well as cross-referencing by other means, such as observing the respective in-house two-source rules. While they conceded that this was a “gold standard” (email interview, 18 April 2020) worth adhering to, real-life constraints – such as working towards tight deadlines in evolving scenarios – would place a burden on this standard. Indeed, they sensed that fast-paced situations would encourage journalists to take a risk, leading one *Channel 4 News* journalist to recall a near-error which had led him to “become very cautious. ... Once nearly bitten, twice shy” (email interview, 26 April 2020). While there was a sense that sourcing from social media during evolving situations would require output to be “corrected, adjusted, and sometimes discarded” (*BBC News* journalist, email interview, 26 May 2020), potential errors and audience trust was a factor journalists were acutely aware of. In the words of one *BBC Arabic* journalist: “I am always afraid of this issue, and

I have made some mistakes that I already regret as a result of rushing to rely on news broadcast on social media" (email interview, 1 June 2020).

Overall, such testimonies underscore the tension between maintaining speed and yet delivering on the journalistic mantra of ensuring accuracy in journalists' reporting – a tension especially evident during the Arab uprisings and one far from resolved nowadays.

#### *Remnants of 'traditional' journalism*

Strikingly, however, journalists were keen not to overstate the role social media had played in the event, thereby stressing the continuing prevalence of traditional journalistic reporting patterns. One *Channel 4 News* journalist was convinced that revolutions such as the Egyptian uprising were still about what would eventually translate into events on the *streets*, not about what was initially happening on the *screens*. Social media, and Facebook in particular, he stressed, were important as means to setting up the demonstrations in the first place. Other than that, however, he saw little to no changes to the journalistic profession as such. To his mind, "it's just about assessing and weighing all the different bits of information, and, as ever, condensing it down to a narrative" (personal communication, 12 September 2014). One of his colleagues at *Channel 4 News* emphasised the importance of traditional corresponding, i.e. in the form of reporting from the ground. To him, social media do not work as a *substitute* to traditional journalism but can instead be used as an excellent tip-off service to establish essential focal points in the uprising. Other than that, however, he demonstrated a firm belief in traditional journalistic working practices: "You apply the same values of trying to be accurate, trying to source your stories, trying to check your stories before just going on air with any old rumour that you see on Twitter" (personal communication, 21 September 2014).

Further, one *BBC News* journalist stressed the importance of traditional journalistic norms and values which would have to be adhered to, despite the transformations brought about by the digital age. Both accuracy and impartiality were among these, along with the necessity to conform to traditional ways of journalistic reporting. In her opinion, "regular journalism still has a future" (personal communication, 29 September 2014). Despite the advantages brought about by the use of social media, such as a useful tip-off service, she was wary not to overstate their wider effects. Instead, she demonstrated a firm belief in traditional means of communication and remembered the civic ability to finally have "normal" conversations on Tahrir Square. These were with people from all walks of life, and their lively face-to-face exchanges made for fruitful debates she had *physically* experienced herself (ibid). By so doing, she echoed the opinion of *The Times's* journalist not to regard social media as a substitute for traditional means of reporting. She was convinced that

A lot of people think Twitter is *it*. Perhaps they think that social media is a replacement for actually going out and meeting people, for actually making contacts and speaking to people. But Twitter isn't everything. It's not a replacement for being on the ground, being there, seeing something with your own eyes, interviewing people, making contacts – that has a real premium.

(Personal communication, 30 September 2014)

Such a view also aligns with the follow-up interviews. Again, social media was described as a "guide and tipster" by a *Channel 4 News* journalist (email interview, 26 April 2020). As such, although journalists did not dismiss its value – particularly in inaccessible places, where the (unpalatable) alternative would be a lack of reporting altogether – they were eager to stress the remnants of traditional journalism, even years after the uprising taking place. Asked whether her newsgathering practices had changed because of social media taking hold, another *Channel 4 News* journalist stressed that they were the "same as always!" (email interview, 18 April 2020). Considering the profound transformations journalism as an industry had undergone since, a *BBC News* journalist said:

471 “Everything has changed, and nothing has changed in journalism. ... There is still no replacement for  
472 the face-to-face, heat-and-dust, kind of journalism” (email interview, 26 May 2020).

473  
474 This corresponds to previous research having found that “journalists commonly stick with  
475 traditional methods such as turning to previously trusted sources or contacting them directly to check  
476 their credibility” (Nygren & Widholm, 2018, p. 42). As such, while journalists recognised that journalism  
477 as an *industry* is changing, their adherence to the remnants of ‘traditional’ journalism remained  
478 remarkably intact.

#### 479 480 *Verification practices*

481  
482 Adhering to the remnants of ‘traditional’ journalism was indeed a theme that featured  
483 prominently amongst our interviewees. Yet, numerous factors compromised the critical role  
484 verification played for journalists at the time: several correspondents were not actually on the ground,  
485 particularly not in the early stages of the uprising taking place, likely a result of it being merely seen as  
486 “incidental” (AlMaskati, 2012) at the time and, thus, not expected to lead to any significant outcome.  
487 Interviewees reflected on the extent to which the events unfolding in Egypt had taken them by  
488 surprise, which resulted in their heavy reliance on content from social media – sourced from activists  
489 and citizens alike – in their reporting. Others, who were not subsequently sent out to Egypt, continued  
490 to report on the events from their London newsrooms, leading one *BBC News* journalist to reflect on  
491 his struggles in “overcoming the knowledge gap” and experiencing “sourcing complications” when  
492 incorporating content lifted from social media to supplement his coverage (personal communication,  
493 16 September 2014). Likewise, his *BBC News* colleague, who has based in Egypt at the time, “got lost  
494 in a fog of uncertainty” immediately following the resignation of Hosni Mubarak, citing the ongoing  
495 political volatility in the country and uncertainty as to where it would be heading next. She said: “When  
496 the truth becomes so complicated and when public opinion becomes so divided, this is when ... you  
497 have to become even more cautious of social media and fact-checking” (personal communication, 29  
498 September 2014).

499  
500 In countering such uncertainty, two interviewees referenced specific techniques they  
501 deployed in order to have claims made on social media further substantiated: a *BBC News* journalist,  
502 for example, cross-referenced pictures claiming to come out of Egypt with webcams placed around  
503 Tahrir Square to corroborate their accuracy, and used Google’s reverse image search to check if the  
504 picture had appeared elsewhere, and possibly in a different geographical context, before. A *Channel 4*  
505 *News* journalist spoke of double-checking if a multitude of users had been tweeting the same picture  
506 instead of relying on an isolated case, or whether the same incident had been tweeted from different  
507 angles.

508  
509 That said, however, the journalists’ techniques were characterised by a degree of *randomness*  
510 rather than *consistency*. As such, in the various instances in which content could not be independently  
511 verified, they demonstrated a heavy reliance on caveats, or house warnings, to convey that the veracity  
512 – particularly of visual material – could not be determined beyond reasonable doubt. Yet, according to  
513 the journalist working at *The Times*, such content would still merit publication, saying “once you accept  
514 that you have to be guarded about how you treat the information, it’s incredibly valuable in itself”  
515 (personal communication, 30 September 2014). A *BBC News* journalist concurred with the importance  
516 of issuing house warnings, referencing cases where videos he had seen on YouTube claiming to come  
517 out of a particular location were actually filmed elsewhere. Strikingly, one *Channel 4 News* journalist,  
518 also an Arabic speaker, bemoaned this practice, stating “the story of verification has made the world  
519 worse” (personal communication, 22 September 2014). In referencing journalists’ heavy reliance on  
520 established correspondents, to his mind, journalists were often too “frightened” to use eyewitness  
521 footage, thus inadvertently diminishing their value in their pursuit of absolute certainty.

Unlike the previous four sections – which concerned themselves exclusively with sourcing, and which detected no major changes – the practice of verification has changed, as anecdotal evidence presented herein indicates. What was initially an act of *randomness* seems to have been replaced by greater consistency and systematicness in the pursuit of accuracy. Although the issuing of house warnings is still made use of at times when confirmation cannot be attained beyond reasonable doubt – as mentioned by all six interviewees – overall, one *Channel 4 News* journalist, for example, described the process of verification as “easier” and mentioned feeling more “comfortable” due to his increasingly routinized experience in the process (email interview, 29 April 2020). Open-source investigations were mentioned by four journalists, in addition to forensic video verification, including geo-location techniques.

Open-source investigations in particular were described by a *BBC News* journalist as doing “an amazing work of verification” (email interview, 26 May 2020), and a colleague at *Channel 4 News* described these as “a new dawn of journalistic enterprise” (email interview, 26 April 2020). Reflecting on the past ten years, the same journalist felt that verification

Has evolved into a much more serious business than it was ten years ago, founded on the premise that you can no longer believe what you see – until you are certain that what you see actually happened where and when it purports to have happened. ... The professional instincts of a trained reporter have never been more critically important than they are today in a world where there is so much inaccurate nonsense purporting to be ‘news’ on social media (ibid).

Although unrelated to the Arab uprisings of 2011, recent prominent examples when journalists used open-source investigations included the case of Dominic Cummings – the PM’s advisor – who falsely claimed to have highlighted the risk of a coronavirus pandemic on his personal blog in early 2019. Originally uncovered by a data scientist, the BBC eventually ran the story in May this year (Islam, 2020). Another recent – but unrelated – example is the speculation that surrounded North Korea’s Kim Jong-Un’s alleged death in April this year. Analysing satellite imagery of Kim Jong-Un’s private train in close cooperation with North Korean analysts provided cues as to his possible whereabouts (BBC News, 2020). This underscores the extent to which the process of verification comes closer to a “acceptable plausibility” (Phillips, 2014) – in other words, an *approximation* of the actual events on the ground, rather than providing incontrovertible *confirmation*.

## **Discussion: Beyond Egypt 2011**

Such continuous difficulty begs the question of what transformations, if any, have occurred in this field beyond 2011, and what they mean for the practice of digital journalism and digital activism more widely.

Ten years on from the Arab revolts, activists in Egypt are as divided as state of journalism itself – between those acting as a mouthpiece for the regime, and those whose voices are critical to convey the economic hardship, political corruption, and social injustices the country still faces (Harb, 2019b). These days, much of that narrative is, on one hand, centred on nationalistic and patriotic sentiments, and on the other, based on persistent fears and insecurities that just one year of the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood had brought to the country. The regime has succeeded in manipulating that fear – each and every time voices of dissent, mainly conveyed through social media, had risen to prominence (ibid). Accounts of trolling occurring on these platforms – used to deter journalists and activists from sharing critical views – are widespread. The extent of fear journalists and activists experience daily, both physically and psychologically, have thus extended to the virtual space. Social media trolls have engaged in campaigns to disseminate disinformation aiming at undermining the credibility and objectives of voices critical of the regime. Many of those voices have become more cautious and fearful for their safety whenever engaging in social media activity.

In eerie resemblance to 2011, the crackdown on journalists in Egypt, both local and foreign, continues: the latest of such clampdowns was a raid on the offices of the independent news outlet *Mada Masr*, resulting in the arrests of three journalists, including its editor-in-chief Lina Attallah and two French journalists from *France 24* who happened to be present at the scene. The new public sphere social media generated during the 2011 revolt in Egypt (Harb, 2011; Khamis & Vaughn, 2011; Khamis & Vaughn, 2014; Wolfsfeld et al., 2013; El-Nawawy & Khamis, 2013; Brym et al., 2014; Herrera, 2014; Wolver, 2016) has been hijacked by authorities, who have been using social media effectively to clampdown on any dissident voices. Consequently, the lack of safety and security foreign journalists continue to experience has put pressure on international media to find alternative sources of news coming out of Egypt.

Such difficulty journalists face can be transferable to other regions with similar authoritarian regimes and authoritarian media systems, **such as Syria. Here, the lack of on-the-ground reporters working for global news networks only exacerbated the aforementioned tensions evident in Egypt. We argue that the popularised term of the ‘Arab Spring’ suggests a misleading universality of what are, indeed, very distinct local conditions across several Arab countries. The same note of caution must be applied to the equally popularised ‘citizen journalism’ concept: importantly, the act of producing citizen journalism is rooted in predominantly Western contexts, suggesting a direct link between journalism, democracy, and an ‘enlightened’ citizenship – a narrative which risks overlooking the local conditions under which it is produced (Al-Ghazzi, 2014; 2019).** Meanwhile, foreign journalists’ access to information in Egypt via social media has become ever more testing; accordingly, assessing the credibility and veracity of sources have become defining challenges for journalists.

These challenges have been neatly explored more recently in studies by Brandtzaeg et al. (2016; 2018), who have also pointed to journalists’ adherence to the remnants of ‘traditional’ journalism. In the course of it, the authors identified five approaches most prevalent in journalists’ pursuit of accuracy. These include: a reliance on trusted sources; the use of eyewitness material; traditional methods; though rare, a use of existing verification tools; as well as workaround methods, including the issuing of house warnings. As such, traditional approaches to verification are frequently *interwoven* with novel, technology-driven endeavours (van Leuven et al., 2018), as indeed our findings indicate. According to the authors, “a fact, and the process behind the development of that fact, should be linked to a reliable process and method that can be replicated” (Brandtzaeg et al., 2018, p. 1123). To further this goal, in the short term, they suggest a more frequent use of existing tools whilst acknowledging and being open about their limitations, as well as an increase in transparency by encouraging users to check questionable facts themselves. Moving forward, empowering users through shared, collaborative fact-checking would go a long way to increase trust in fact-checking services specifically (ibid.), and in social media content generally. In the long-term, suggestions include an increased emphasis on curriculum development in educational institutions to make online verification a priority amongst journalism educators and students (Brandtzaeg et al., 2018). Another suggestion includes organisational, in-house training for journalists in using existing verification tools effectively in an attempt to move towards universally consistent patterns, as well as raising awareness for algorithmic bias when using search engines, requiring specialist knowledge beyond the surface level of operating within the interface (Lecheler et al., 2019). We will revisit these suggestions in the concluding section.

## Conclusion

This study explored journalistic sourcing practices and verification techniques during the 2011 Egyptian Revolution and beyond. In pursuing this dual agenda, it is worth remembering that verification techniques are “the most fundamental part of studying online sourcing” (Lecheler et al., 2019, p. 7); as such, they are not divorced from one another, but instead are inextricably linked. In addition, this study responds to an earlier study by van Leuven et al. (2015) calling for a revision of traditional journalistic sourcing with the advent of social media. In remembering the Arab revolts, we

first revisited our previous 2016 study which found that the narrative of the event in the British media was dominated by a civic, unofficial perspective, thus potentially opening up the public sphere to lesser represented voices during times of political crises. It is thus not unfounded to assume that the frequent inclusion of unofficial perspectives to some degree attributed citizens with a degree of legitimacy for their grievances to resonate in the international media, informing the outside world of the events on the ground.

Yet, despite the open and transparent spaces of online communication, the in-depth interviews conducted afterwards point to the extent to which journalists perceived the role of social media as supplementary rather than exclusive – unless they were thrown into a news vacuum, which is when social media served as the sole means to ‘keep the story going’. While journalists seemed enthusiastic about its affordances – particularly added diversity, richness, excitement, and intimacy in their output – they stressed that its real value serves a *complement* to existing practices of sourcing and verification. These practices include, first and foremost, journalists’ heavy reliance on known individuals – preferably those they had themselves met in-person on past occasions – as well as established news outlets and agencies – particularly in fast-evolving situations, when the otherwise (unpalatable) alternative would be a lack of reporting altogether. Apart from this, journalists strongly adhered to the remnants of traditional journalism and the value of on-the-ground reporting. While they readily acknowledged the profound changes the industry as a whole had undergone since the uprisings taking place, their existing *modus operandi* remained remarkably intact – which of course could be the result of our sample consisting largely of seasoned, veteran reporters (and, thus, a possible limitation of this study).

Despite the evident intactness when it comes to journalists’ online sourcing, there was some anecdotal evidence of movement relating to their verification techniques. While the Arab uprisings had taken journalists by surprise – often scrambling to curate accurate information – some of their testimonies presented herein point to a degree of routine and system as a result of accumulated experience since. This includes the role of specialist staff – such as the widely-cited ‘UGC hub’ at the BBC, or Channel 4 News’s practice of employing Arabic-speaking staff trawling through social media – for corroboration purposes and the use of open-source material. *Although we only present anecdotal evidence for an increase of the latter, its use when reporting from far-flung, inaccessible places such as North Korea has already surpassed more ‘traditional’ newsgathering techniques (Seo, 2020), which again underscores the importance of considering the local conditions under which journalism is produced. The picture we paint in our longitudinal study on British journalists’ perceptions of social media for sourcing and verification is one wedged between expressed enthusiasm and cautious scepticism.*

That said, it is important to interpret these findings in light of the study’s limitations: our overall sample size remains low, and a broader sample would have led to more generalisable patterns. However, our sample size still far exceeds McCracken’s recommendation of a minimum of eight interviews in qualitative research (McCracken, 1988). In future, and as raised in the extended discussion, the issue of verification of content sourced from social media deserves more attention. With digital technologies becoming ever more sophisticated, and with social media not offering a static point of reference, it would be worth investigating journalists’ familiarity with, and ease of, using advanced verification tools. *For example, what of journalists’ internet literacy (Lecheler & Kruikemeier, 2016) and their existing use of and confidence in computational news discovery tools, such as the SocialSensor application (Thurman et al., 2016)?* At a time in which the proliferation and spread of misinformation online extends to increasingly sophisticated, doctored video material such as ‘deepfakes’ (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020), an inquiry into journalists’ proficiency in detecting manipulated content would be a welcome scholarly addition at this stage in its evolution.



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