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

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4 *Aljoshia Karim Schapals, School of Communication, Digital Media Research Centre, Queensland*  
5 *University of Technology, Brisbane, 4059, Australia; E-Mail: [aljoshia.schapals@qut.edu.au](mailto:aljoshia.schapals@qut.edu.au)*

6  
7 *Zahera Harb, Department of Journalism, School of Arts and Social Sciences, University of London,*  
8 *London, EC1V 0HB, UK; E-Mail: [zahera.harb.1@city.ac.uk](mailto:zahera.harb.1@city.ac.uk)*

9  
10 **Abstract**

11  
12 Using the Egyptian Revolution as a case study, this paper studies journalistic sourcing and verification  
13 through in-depth interviews with journalists in the United Kingdom. While the coverage of the event  
14 in the British media was dominated by civic, unofficial sources, interviews conducted in 2014 revealed  
15 that journalists only included these if no other sources were available. In fact, journalists voiced  
16 concern with regards to verification of online sources, and rarely included these as direct, first-hand  
17 accounts. Follow-up interviews conducted in 2020 point to developments journalism practice has  
18 undergone since, particularly in relation to open-source content verification. Overall, the picture we  
19 paint of British journalists' handling of content sourced from social media is one wedged between  
20 expressed enthusiasm and cautious scepticism.

21  
22 **Keywords** journalism, online sources, verification, social media, sourcing

23  
24 **Introduction**

25  
26 On July 7, 2005, 52 people were killed in four coordinated terrorist suicide bomb attacks on  
27 the London Underground. Within minutes of the attack, the BBC had received an unprecedented  
28 amount of audience material from citizens at the scene, amounting to more than 22,000 emails, text  
29 messages and videos shot on mobile phones. It wasn't until much later that former BBC Producer Kevin  
30 Anderson spoke of a “watershed moment” (Luft, 2006) in journalism: TV coverage of the event turned  
31 out to be particularly reliant on footage received from the public. Thanks to its human, raw and  
32 unedited nature, the newsworthiness of such audience material was rated as extremely high. Jay Rosen  
33 referred to “the people formerly known as the audience” (Pressthink, 2006), and the term ‘citizen  
34 journalists’ – signalling a shift from previously passive consumers to active producers of media content  
35 – had become firmly embedded in public debate. Likewise, Stuart Allan noted a “tipping point” (Allan,  
36 2006) for online news, forcing a rethink of *who* counts as ‘a journalist’ in the aftermath of the incident.

37  
38 Fast forward to the Arab uprisings of 2011, and once again, media commentators spoke of a  
39 “turning point” in journalism: indeed, never before have journalists been so reliant on content sourced  
40 from social media to supplement their coverage. Given the essential role social media played for  
41 protesters in terms of organising and coordinating the civic movement, commentators began to refer  
42 to the event as a “Facebook revolution” or – analogous to the 2009 Iranian Green Movement – a  
43 “Twitter revolution”. Because the uprising was initially merely considered to be “incidental”  
44 (AlMaskati, 2012), news organisations had not sent out their correspondents until the fourth or fifth  
45 day of the event taking place, making journalists particularly reliant on social media content provided  
46 by citizens on the ground – and there was no shortage of such material. Given the extraordinary  
47 frequency of audience contributions used as sources during the London bombings, back in 2005, *The*  
48 *Guardian* asserted that “the long-predicted democratisation of the media had become a reality”.

49  
50 But did that really hold water in 2011? And if so – and perhaps most crucially – how did  
51 journalists verify information sourced from social media? This study responds to calls for revisions of  
52 the study of traditional journalistic sourcing practices with the advent of social media (van Leuven et

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

57  
58 Although a content analysis published in 2016 confirmed that the narrative of the event in the  
59 British media was indeed dominated by a civic, unofficial perspective (Anonymized, 2016; Anonymized,  
60 2019), however ten in-depth interviews with senior British journalists later revealed that these  
61 journalists would only include civic, unofficial sources for opinionated and non-factual statements,  
62 citing significant concern on the verification of these sources. This directly aligns with earlier research  
63 which found social media to be supplementary material which “are only used when nothing ‘better’ is  
64 available, such as when access to foreign journalists is limited, as was the case in the Arab Spring”  
65 (Lecheler & Kruikemeier, 2016, p. 163). **Six additional in-depth interviews conducted in 2020 confirm  
66 that while little has changed in the way journalists source their stories, the issue of verification has  
67 become both more routinized and systematic. As such, this paper advances knowledge on journalistic  
68 sourcing and verification. Its set-up as a longitudinal study encapsulates a decade of insights into how  
69 the two components have changed since the Arab uprisings took hold, and what such change might  
70 signal for future reporting from often inaccessible places.** We conclude this article with an extended  
71 discussion and agenda for future research. Ten years after the uprising, the initial euphoria felt in Egypt  
72 in the immediate aftermath of the uprising proved to be short-lived; in fact, the state of journalism in  
73 particular has moved from a temporary sense of hope to one of prolonged despair (Harb, 2019a).  
74 Furthermore, the extent to which digital verification tools have since been introduced into national  
75 newsrooms, and the level of supposed confidence journalists now have in operating with these,  
76 provide fertile ground for future studies. We touch on both issues in our discussion.

## 77 78 **Sourcing and verification**

79  
80 **Research into sourcing and the epistemic foundation upon which journalists base their  
81 knowledge has a rich history dating back several centuries. In their formative piece ‘On the  
82 Epistemology of Investigative Journalism’ (1985), Ettema & Glasser referred to journalists’ network of  
83 sources, suggesting that journalists turn to authoritative and elite sources as trustworthy purveyors of  
84 information.** Similarly, in their seminal work ‘Manufacturing Consent’ (1988), Edward S. Herman and  
85 Noam Chomsky describe how US mass media serve the ends of a dominant elite in power, placing them  
86 in a symbiotic relationship with powerful sources of information thanks to economic necessity and  
87 reciprocity of mutual interests. Two years later, in his influential article ‘Toward a Theory of Press-State  
88 Relations in the United States’ (1990), Washington University Professor W. Lance Bennett similarly  
89 observed that US mass media primarily looked to government officials as a major source of daily news  
90 reporting. However, exclusively granting public officials ‘the right to speak’ restricted diversity in the  
91 marketplace of ideas, thus risking that the media abdicate its mandate to represent all people in  
92 society.

93  
94 **However, the gradual incorporation of user-generated content in the mainstream news flow  
95 has since led to persistent calls for reconceptualising the relationship between journalists and their  
96 sources.** Various scholars (Lotan et al., 2011; Strömbäck et al., 2013) describe this interdependent  
97 relationship as a symbiosis in which formerly ‘passive’ consumers of news transform into ‘active’  
98 producers by influencing and co-constructing the news agenda. Social media platforms such as Twitter  
99 play, it is claimed, an amplifying role in the dissemination of information (Lotan et al., 2011), which has  
100 a significant effect on the amount and availability of journalistic sources as informants. As a result, a  
101 growing number of studies addresses the question of online sourcing (Lecheler & Kruikemeier, 2016).

102  
103 So far, however, research portrays a contradictory image of the extent to which journalists  
104 embrace audience content. **One section of the available research highlights how online sources have**

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

118  
119 In contrast to this stand several studies which confirm journalists’ heavy reliance on  
120 established, elite sources: in her study on the British media coverage of the 2009 Iranian elections,  
121 Knight (2012) found traditional journalistic sourcing practices to prevail even in the digital age.  
122 Journalists favoured traditional voices, despite the internet’s potential of providing raw, unedited  
123 audience material. However, journalists heavily quoted government officials or other institutionally  
124 affiliated spokespeople, meaning that “the practices of journalists and the traditions of the coverage  
125 continue to ensure that traditional voices and sources are heard above the crowd” (p. 71). Similarly,  
126 newspaper coverage of the 2011 Egyptian uprising was found to be heavily reliant on conventional  
127 sources (AlMaskati, 2012). In addition, although Belgian journalists covering the Arab revolts did  
128 include ordinary citizens and non-mainstream groups as sources in their reports, they did prefer  
129 traditional source channels over user-generated content or social media (van Leuven et al., 2015).  
130 Authoritative sources were frequently quoted first in their reports to introduce an issue, while civic  
131 quotes were mainly used to express experiences and emotions of those caught up in the uprising.  
132 Further studies of Belgian journalists’ use of social media in their reporting of the Arab uprisings did  
133 confirm their struggles with verifying such content; indeed, “most journalists relied on international  
134 news media to verify the reliability of user-generated content before they incorporated it into the  
135 news output” (De Dobbelaer et al. [2013] cited in van Leuven et al. [2015: p. 560]).

136  
137 In sum, while the incorporation of social media into contemporary newsrooms has since  
138 become a normalised component despite its associated, and often challenging, verification (Zeng et  
139 al., 2019), the study of online sources remains a moving target. A study by Wardle and Williams (2010)  
140 on the integration of user-generated content at the BBC Hub asserts that journalists see audience  
141 material as “little more than another news source” (p. 790) and “just another journalistic source” (p.  
142 791); this is also confirmed in a more recent study with Irish journalists, for whom social media provides  
143 “an additional or alternative platform for accessing sources, rather than providing new root sources of  
144 information” (Heravi & Harrower, 2016, p. 1202). This underscores the importance of *familiarity* as a  
145 determining factor, which critically may be due to questions of verification, seen by some as “the  
146 essence of journalism” (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001, p. 71). Not only does previous work indicate that  
147 audience material is predominantly used for non-factual, opinionated statements (Miller-Carpenter,  
148 2019), but crucially, journalists seemingly prefer quoting established correspondents (Lecheler &  
149 Kruikemeier, 2016), thus affirming the viability of traditional journalistic newsgathering practices in  
150 the digital age. Given the inextricable link between source credibility and civic trustworthiness in the  
151 media (Reich, 2011) – a link which is particularly pronounced during times of political upheaval – a  
152 closer look at journalistic sourcing during the Arab uprisings is needed.

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157 **The role of social media**

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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).

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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).*

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*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

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

211

## 212 **Method**

213

214 The findings presented here form part of a 2016 study in which we investigated sourcing  
215 practices and verification techniques deployed by British journalists during the 2011 Egyptian  
216 Revolution. To do so, we followed a hybrid methodological approach, incorporating both quantitative  
217 and qualitative techniques: in a first step, we conducted a large-scale content analysis of the frequency  
218 and types of sources journalists working across six UK national news publishers (*The Daily Telegraph*,  
219 *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *BBC News*, *Channel 4 News*, *Reuters News*) consulted during their reporting  
220 of the event. Informed by this analysis, in a second step we conducted an additional in-depth  
221 interviews with senior British journalists having reported on the uprising during the 18-day time period  
222 (25 January to 11 February 2011). To allow for comparisons, this included ten journalists interviewed  
223 in 2014 and six additional journalists interviewed in 2020.

224

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

239

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

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

254

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

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

## 268 269 **Results**

270  
271 Overall, the results paint a picture wedged between expressed enthusiasm and cautious  
272 scepticism when it comes to online sourcing and the connected practice of verification. While we only  
273 present some anecdotal evidence that the latter has become both more routinized and systematic, we  
274 hope that, in remembering the Arab revolts, these results serve as a useful starting point for a better  
275 understanding how and if the movement facilitated changes in the relationship between digital  
276 journalism and digital activism.

### 277 278 *Supplementary role of social media*

279  
280 Despite early predictions of a ‘Facebook revolution’, in 2014, those British journalists covering  
281 the uprising regarded the use of social media merely as another source of information that would help  
282 them make sense of the events on the ground. Social media were equated with a wire service that may  
283 well provide journalists with a broader source choice, but that would not change the rules of the game  
284 altogether. One journalist at *Channel 4 News* said that “it [social media] is just another source of  
285 information, another branch to the tree if you like. I don’t think it fundamentally changes the rules of  
286 journalism or the way journalism works, which is to gather information and to corroborate it – you  
287 check it, you interrogate it, and you tell people what your take on it is” (personal communication, 21  
288 September 2014). By this token, social media seemed to have worked as an ‘extra newsfeed’, a  
289 constant stream of information that would provide journalists with useful tip-offs as to what was  
290 happening at any given moment in time. Similarly, one of his colleagues at *Channel 4 News* was wary  
291 not to overstate the use of social media at the time. To his mind, social media had not changed much  
292 other than providing both producers as well as users of news with a broader source choice. In fact,  
293 “they [users] now have a broad choice between so-called established channels or going for social  
294 media and getting it in a kind of more raw, unfinished version” (personal communication, 12  
295 September 2014). Another *Channel 4 News* journalist, also based in Egypt during the uprising,  
296 concurred. In her opinion, the use of social media offered an additional source of information,  
297 especially at times when journalists were not present at the scene, and when there would otherwise  
298 be no reporting from the area whatsoever. When talking about the transformations brought about by  
299 the inclusion of social media platforms on the international news agenda, she said: “What social media  
300 has done is that it has opened up places, and parts of stories which would otherwise be 100% dark.  
301 There would simply be no information. So, that’s why social media is useful” (personal communication,  
302 15 September 2014).

303  
304 The exclusivity of social media when faced with news vacuums was also a recurring theme  
305 during the follow-up interviews conducted in 2020. Social media gave power to ‘the people’ when  
306 documenting the events on the ground and shone light on otherwise inaccessible places. A *Channel 4*  
307 *News* journalist said that such material helps “lifting the lid on what’s happening in far-flung places”  
308 (email interview, 26 April 2020), and a *BBC News* journalist concurred with that assessment when she  
309 said that it “let[s] us know about otherwise hidden stories of our time” (email interview, 26 May 2020).  
310 While such material sourced from social media was praised for its characteristics of adding diversity,  
311 richness, excitement, and intimacy to a journalists’ output, interviewees were eager to stress that it  
312 would only work “hand-in-glove” with further methods for source corroboration and verification. In  
313 the words of another *Channel 4 News* journalist: “Social media is another source and another tool. It



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

316

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

323

#### 324 *Value of eyewitnesses*

325

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

342

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

356

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

362

363 (Personal communication, 15 September 2014)

364

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

367 deemed to be both honest and dependable. **One journalist** mentioned the importance of local experts  
368 he would seek corroboration from – preferably those whom he met in person in the past – a practice  
369 he justified by saying that “confirmation has never been more important” (email interview, 26 April  
370 2020). Unless journalists were thrown into a news vacuum – during which the role of social media  
371 would change from supplementary to exclusive – journalists’ traditional sourcing practices still applied.  
372 In the words of one *BBC News* journalist: “Nothing substitutes for on-the-ground reporting” (email  
373 interview, 10 June 2020).

374  
375 As such, journalists voiced a preference towards the remnants of traditional journalism. The  
376 value of local activists was rooted in the emotional component they added to a story (Miller-Carpenter,  
377 2019); in turn, so-called “usual suspects” (Thurman & Walters, 2012) whom journalists had relied on  
378 in the past or whose accounts were easily verifiable by other means were particularly likely to be  
379 included in the journalists’ news output.

380  
381 *Accelerated publication cycles*

382  
383 By a similar token, a further significant finding was the journalists’ use of secondary, ‘recycled’  
384 material which had already been published elsewhere. Given the commercial rivalries between  
385 competing news outlets, this is surprising, and Tereszkiwicz (2014) concurs that “this approach stands  
386 against the natural and widespread competitiveness among news outlets” (p. 308). **Four journalists**  
387 openly admitted using this strategy in their reporting. A *Channel 4 News* journalist, for example,  
388 admitted to “look at live blogs on newspaper websites, *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*  
389 especially, but I will pick things and say, ‘oh look, they’ve got an interesting video, can we see if we can  
390 find that ourselves?’, but I won’t take all of it” (personal communication, 12 September 2014). The  
391 *New York Times* as a useful resource was also mentioned by the *BBC News* reporter, who had, for  
392 example, drawn inspiration from their compelling infographics. Besides, he kept an eye on broadcaster  
393 *Al Jazeera*, which is where in fact he had first caught wind of the uprisings. He regarded this process of  
394 observing each other’s news output as a useful tip-off service, and in instances where verification was  
395 impossible to achieve, even demonstrated a sole reliance on this particular news channel (personal  
396 communication, 16 September 2014). A journalist for *The Times*, for example, praised *Al Jazeera* for  
397 their reporting and for being very “agile” in getting information rapidly (personal communication, 30  
398 September 2014). Being responsible for the production of the live blog of *The Daily Telegraph* at the  
399 time, their journalist was openly following journalists from *Al Jazeera* as well as *CNN*, an act she  
400 considered to be acceptable when dealing with challenging situations covering wide-reaching  
401 geographical areas. In fact, she echoed Tereszkiwicz’s (2014) viewpoint when she said that “to be  
402 honest, it was almost like everybody was looking at each other to see where things are coming from.  
403 ... It’s really the only sensible way in which you can operate, because otherwise, everybody gets a tiny  
404 bit of the story as opposed to getting the whole story” (personal communication, 2 October 2014).

405  
406 Corroboration with other media outlets was a theme also prominent in the follow-up  
407 interviews. Apart from the value of local eyewitnesses, journalists stressed the role of “other, formal,  
408 trusted, and traditional media sources” (email interview, 29 April 2020), “news agencies” (email  
409 interview, 26 May 2020) as well as cross-referencing by other means, such as observing the respective  
410 in-house two-source rules. While they conceded that this was a “gold standard” (email interview, 18  
411 April 2020) worth adhering to, real-life constraints – such as working towards tight deadlines in  
412 evolving scenarios – would place a burden on this standard. Indeed, they sensed that fast-paced  
413 situations would encourage journalists to take a risk, leading one *Channel 4 News* journalist to recall a  
414 near-error which had led him to “become very cautious. ... Once nearly bitten, twice shy” (email  
415 interview, 26 April 2020). While there was a sense that sourcing from social media during evolving  
416 situations would require output to be “corrected, adjusted, and sometimes discarded” (*BBC News*  
417 journalist, email interview, 26 May 2020), potential errors and audience trust was a factor journalists  
418 were acutely aware of. In the words of one *BBC Arabic* journalist: “I am always afraid of this issue, and

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

421  
422 Overall, such testimonies underscore the tension between maintaining speed and yet  
423 delivering on the journalistic mantra of ensuring accuracy in journalists’ reporting – a tension especially  
424 evident during the Arab uprisings and one far from resolved nowadays.

425  
426 *Remnants of ‘traditional’ journalism*

427  
428 Strikingly, however, journalists were keen not to overstate the role social media had played in  
429 the event, thereby stressing the continuing prevalence of traditional journalistic reporting patterns.  
430 One *Channel 4 News* journalist was convinced that revolutions such as the Egyptian uprising were still  
431 about what would eventually translate into events on the *streets*, not about what was initially  
432 happening on the *screens*. Social media, and Facebook in particular, he stressed, were important as  
433 means to setting up the demonstrations in the first place. Other than that, however, he saw little to  
434 no changes to the journalistic profession as such. To his mind, “it’s just about assessing and weighing  
435 all the different bits of information, and, as ever, condensing it down to a narrative” (personal  
436 communication, 12 September 2014). One of his colleagues at *Channel 4 News* emphasised the  
437 importance of traditional corresponding, i.e. in the form of reporting from the ground. To him, social  
438 media do not work as a *substitute* to traditional journalism but can instead be used as an excellent tip-  
439 off service to establish essential focal points in the uprising. Other than that, however, he  
440 demonstrated a firm belief in traditional journalistic working practices: “You apply the same values of  
441 trying to be accurate, trying to source your stories, trying to check your stories before just going on air  
442 with any old rumour that you see on Twitter” (personal communication, 21 September 2014).

443  
444 Further, one *BBC News* journalist stressed the importance of traditional journalistic norms and  
445 values which would have to be adhered to, despite the transformations brought about by the digital  
446 age. Both accuracy and impartiality were among these, along with the necessity to conform to  
447 traditional ways of journalistic reporting. In her opinion, “regular journalism still has a future” (personal  
448 communication, 29 September 2014). Despite the advantages brought about by the use of social  
449 media, such as a useful tip-off service, she was wary not to overstate their wider effects. Instead, she  
450 demonstrated a firm belief in traditional means of communication and remembered the civic ability to  
451 finally have “normal” conversations on Tahrir Square. These were with people from all walks of life,  
452 and their lively face-to-face exchanges made for fruitful debates she had *physically* experienced herself  
453 (ibid). By so doing, she echoed the opinion of *The Times’s* journalist not to regard social media as a  
454 substitute for traditional means of reporting. She was convinced that

455  
456 A lot of people think Twitter is *it*. Perhaps they think that social media is a replacement for actually going  
457 out and meeting people, for actually making contacts and speaking to people. But Twitter isn’t  
458 everything. It’s not a replacement for being on the ground, being there, seeing something with your  
459 own eyes, interviewing people, making contacts – that has a real premium.

460  
461 (Personal communication, 30 September 2014)

462  
463 Such a view also aligns with the follow-up interviews. Again, social media was described as a  
464 “guide and tipster” by a *Channel 4 News* journalist (email interview, 26 April 2020). As such, although  
465 journalists did not dismiss its value – particularly in inaccessible places, where the (unpalatable)  
466 alternative would be a lack of reporting altogether – they were eager to stress the remnants of  
467 traditional journalism, even years after the uprising taking place. Asked whether her newsgathering  
468 practices had changed because of social media taking hold, another *Channel 4 News* journalist stressed  
469 that they were the “same as always!” (email interview, 18 April 2020). Considering the profound  
470 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.

522

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

533  
534 Open-source investigations in particular were described by a *BBC News* journalist as doing “an  
535 amazing work of verification” (email interview, 26 May 2020), and a colleague at *Channel 4 News*  
536 described these as “a new dawn of journalistic enterprise” (email interview, 26 April 2020). Reflecting  
537 on the past ten years, the same journalist felt that verification

538  
539 Has evolved into a much more serious business than it was ten years ago, founded on the premise that  
540 you can no longer believe what you see – until you are certain that what you see actually happened  
541 where and when it purports to have happened. ... The professional instincts of a trained reporter have  
542 never been more critically important than they are today in a world where there is so much inaccurate  
543 nonsense purporting to be ‘news’ on social media (ibid).

544  
545 Although unrelated to the Arab uprisings of 2011, recent prominent examples when journalists  
546 used open-source investigations included the case of Dominic Cummings – the PM’s advisor – who  
547 falsely claimed to have highlighted the risk of a coronavirus pandemic on his personal blog in early  
548 2019. Originally uncovered by a data scientist, the BBC eventually ran the story in May this year (Islam,  
549 2020). Another recent – but unrelated – example is the speculation that surrounded North Korea’s Kim  
550 Jong-Un’s alleged death in April this year. Analysing satellite imagery of Kim Jong-Un’s private train in  
551 close cooperation with North Korean analysts provided cues as to his possible whereabouts (BBC News,  
552 2020). This underscores the extent to which the process of verification comes closer to a “acceptable  
553 plausibility” (Phillips, 2014) – in other words, an *approximation* of the actual events on the ground,  
554 rather than providing incontrovertible *confirmation*.

## 555 556 **Discussion: Beyond Egypt 2011**

557  
558 Such continuous difficulty begs the question of what transformations, if any, have occurred in  
559 this field beyond 2011, and what they mean for the practice of digital journalism and digital activism  
560 more widely.

561  
562 Ten years on from the Arab revolts, activists in Egypt are as divided as state of journalism itself  
563 – between those acting as a mouthpiece for the regime, and those whose voices are critical to convey  
564 the economic hardship, political corruption, and social injustices the country still faces (Harb, 2019b).  
565 These days, much of that narrative is, on one hand, centred on nationalistic and patriotic sentiments,  
566 and on the other, based on persistent fears and insecurities that just one year of the rule of the Muslim  
567 Brotherhood had brought to the country. The regime has succeeded in manipulating that fear – each  
568 and every time voices of dissent, mainly conveyed through social media, had risen to prominence  
569 (ibid). Accounts of trolling occurring on these platforms – used to deter journalists and activists from  
570 sharing critical views – are widespread. The extent of fear journalists and activists experience daily,  
571 both physically and psychologically, have thus extended to the virtual space. Social media trolls have  
572 engaged in campaigns to disseminate disinformation aiming at undermining the credibility and  
573 objectives of voices critical of the regime. Many of those voices have become more cautious and fearful  
574 for their safety whenever engaging in social media activity.

575 In eerie resemblance to 2011, the crackdown on journalists in Egypt, both local and foreign,  
576 continues: the latest of such clampdowns was a raid on the offices of the independent news outlet  
577 *Mada Masr*, resulting in the arrests of three journalists, including its editor-in-chief Lina Attallah and  
578 two French journalists from *France 24* who happened to be present at the scene. The new public  
579 sphere social media generated during the 2011 revolt in Egypt (Harb, 2011; Khamis & Vaughn, 2011;  
580 Khamis & Vaughn, 2014; Wolfsfeld et al., 2013; El-Nawawy & Khamis, 2013; Brym et al., 2014; Herrera,  
581 2014; Wolver, 2016) has been hijacked by authorities, who have been using social media effectively to  
582 clampdown on any dissident voices. Consequently, the lack of safety and security foreign journalists  
583 continue to experience has put pressure on international media to find alternative sources of news  
584 coming out of Egypt.

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

596 These challenges have been neatly explored more recently in studies by Brandtzaeg et al.  
597 (2016; 2018), who have also pointed to journalists’ adherence to the remnants of ‘traditional’  
598 journalism. In the course of it, the authors identified five approaches most prevalent in journalists’  
599 pursuit of accuracy. These include: a reliance on trusted sources; the use of eyewitness material;  
600 traditional methods; though rare, a use of existing verification tools; as well as workaround methods,  
601 including the issuing of house warnings. As such, traditional approaches to verification are frequently  
602 *interwoven* with novel, technology-driven endeavours (van Leuven et al., 2018), as indeed our findings  
603 indicate. According to the authors, “a fact, and the process behind the development of that fact, should  
604 be linked to a reliable process and method that can be replicated” (Brandtzaeg et al., 2018, p. 1123).  
605 To further this goal, in the short term, they suggest a more frequent use of existing tools whilst  
606 acknowledging and being open about their limitations, as well as an increase in transparency by  
607 encouraging users to check questionable facts themselves. Moving forward, empowering users  
608 through shared, collaborative fact-checking would go a long way to increase trust in fact-checking  
609 services specifically (ibid.), and in social media content generally. In the long-term, suggestions include  
610 an increased emphasis on curriculum development in educational institutions to make online  
611 verification a priority amongst journalism educators and students (Brandtzaeg et al., 2018). Another  
612 suggestion includes organisational, in-house training for journalists in using existing verification tools  
613 effectively in an attempt to move towards universally consistent patterns, as well as raising awareness  
614 for algorithmic bias when using search engines, requiring specialist knowledge beyond the surface level  
615 of operating within the interface (Lecheler et al., 2019). We will revisit these suggestions in the  
616 concluding section.

## 617 618 **Conclusion** 619

620 This study explored journalistic sourcing practices and verification techniques during the 2011  
621 Egyptian Revolution and beyond. In pursuing this dual agenda, it is worth remembering that  
622 verification techniques are “the most fundamental part of studying online sourcing” (Lecheler et al.,  
623 2019, p. 7); as such, they are not divorced from one another, but instead are inextricably linked. In  
624 addition, this study responds to an earlier study by van Leuven et al. (2015) calling for a revision of  
625 traditional journalistic sourcing with the advent of social media. In remembering the Arab revolts, we

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

632  
633 Yet, despite the open and transparent spaces of online communication, the in-depth  
634 interviews conducted afterwards point to the extent to which journalists perceived the role of social  
635 media as supplementary rather than exclusive – unless they were thrown into a news vacuum, which  
636 is when social media served as the sole means to ‘keep the story going’. While journalists seemed  
637 enthusiastic about its affordances – particularly added diversity, richness, excitement, and intimacy in  
638 their output – they stressed that its real value serves a *complement* to existing practices of sourcing  
639 and verification. These practices include, first and foremost, journalists’ heavy reliance on known  
640 individuals – preferably those they had themselves met in-person on past occasions – as well as  
641 established news outlets and agencies – particularly in fast-evolving situations, when the otherwise  
642 (unpalatable) alternative would be a lack of reporting altogether. Apart from this, journalists strongly  
643 adhered to the remnants of traditional journalism and the value of on-the-ground reporting. While  
644 they readily acknowledged the profound changes the industry as a whole had undergone since the  
645 uprisings taking place, their existing *modus operandi* remained remarkably intact – which of course  
646 could be the result of our sample consisting largely of seasoned, veteran reporters (and, thus, a  
647 possible limitation of this study).

648  
649 Despite the evident intactness when it comes to journalists’ online sourcing, there was some  
650 anecdotal evidence of movement relating to their verification techniques. While the Arab uprisings  
651 had taken journalists by surprise – often scrambling to curate accurate information – some of their  
652 testimonies presented herein point to a degree of routine and system as a result of accumulated  
653 experience since. This includes the role of specialist staff – such as the widely-cited ‘UGC hub’ at the  
654 *BBC*, or *Channel 4 News*’s practice of employing Arabic-speaking staff trawling through social media –  
655 for corroboration purposes and the use of open-source material. **Although we only present anecdotal  
656 evidence for an increase of the latter, its use when reporting from far-flung, inaccessible places such  
657 as North Korea has already surpassed more ‘traditional’ newsgathering techniques (Seo, 2020), which  
658 again underscores the importance of considering the local conditions under which journalism is  
659 produced. The picture we paint in our longitudinal study on British journalists’ perceptions of social  
660 media for sourcing and verification is one wedged between expressed enthusiasm and cautious  
661 scepticism.**

662  
663 That said, it is important to interpret these findings in light of the study’s limitations: our overall  
664 sample size remains low, and a broader sample would have led to more generalisable patterns.  
665 However, our sample size still far exceeds McCracken’s recommendation of a minimum of eight  
666 interviews in qualitative research (McCracken, 1988). In future, and as raised in the extended  
667 discussion, the issue of verification of content sourced from social media deserves more attention.  
668 With digital technologies becoming ever more sophisticated, and with social media not offering a static  
669 point of reference, it would be worth investigating journalists’ familiarity with, and ease of, using  
670 advanced verification tools. **For example, what of journalists’ internet literacy (Lecheler & Kruikemeier,  
671 2016) and their existing use of and confidence in computational news discovery tools, such as the  
672 *SocialSensor* application (Thurman et al., 2016)?** At a time in which the proliferation and spread of  
673 misinformation online extends to increasingly sophisticated, doctored video material such as  
674 ‘deepfakes’ (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020), an inquiry into journalists’ proficiency in detecting  
675 manipulated content would be a welcome scholarly addition at this stage in its evolution.

676  
677

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