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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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

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

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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**
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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:
248
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**
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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*
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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*
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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

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 Tereszkiewicz (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 Tereszkiewicz'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

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

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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