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Contentious information: Accounts of knowledge production, circulation and consumption in transitional Egypt

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Graduate Program in Library & Information Science
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Doctor of Philosophy
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CONTENTIOUS INFORMATION: ACCOUNTS OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION,
CIRCULATION AND CONSUMPTION IN TRANSITIONAL EGYPT

Monograph

by

Ahmad Kamal

Graduate Program in Library and Information Science

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.)

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
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Abstract

While the 2011 Egyptian Uprising renewed attention to revolutionary news platforms such as Al-Jazeera and Facebook, citizens continued to be understudied as active consumers of information. Yet citizens' perceptions of their informational milieu and how they responded in consuming, processing, and interpreting facts offer crucial insight into the turbulent transition that followed the initial uprising. This study analyzes Egyptian citizens' accounts of their information environment and practices amid socio-political change. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 31 politically-engaged citizens from various political and professional backgrounds. Participants were asked to discuss the state of public discourse, the institutions responsible for the circulation of information, and their own practices to become informed, with on-going political controversies used as case studies.

The findings are presented into two parts. The first part compiles responses regarding institutions (the state, broadcast media, and social media) which were found to be functionally interconnected and interdependent, forming Egypt's *information ecosystem*. This ecosystem systematically rendered information elusive, equivocal, and unreliable, but also demonstrated the importance of official information, a tolerance for partisan news, and the complementary role of social media. The second part examines citizens' practices (the characteristics of consumers, the types of sources they relied upon, and the tactics they employed to become informed) which constituted an *information culture*, the information ecosystem's counterpart. This culture was characterized by skepticism, mistrust, ingenuity, bias, and elitism, with sources being conceived as individuals and classified according to their proximity and type of knowledge; and consumers employing tactics involving the parsing of subtexts and the juxtaposing of claims from multiple texts. The characteristics, sources, and tactics of consumers reflected an information culture influenced by and responding to socio-political conditions.

Drawing on both the disciplines of media and information studies, this study offers a new approach for exploring the societal dimensions of information through the narratives of citizens on the production, circulation, and consumption of information in the context of dramatically shifting political and media landscapes. Besides advancing information

practices research beyond traditional settings, the fieldwork was conducted in the weeks prior to the controversial overthrow of Egypt's first elected president and therefore provides insights into a dramatic episode in the country's transition.

Keywords

Egypt, media, contentious politics, government, information, audiences, information practices, political transition, controversies

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Everyone was taken aback by the dramatic events of early 2011, when Egyptians staged 18 days of civil disobedience which led President Hosni Mubarak to step down after nearly thirty years as the autocratic ruler of the world's most populated Arab country. But aside from the abruptness of the Uprising, the revolt seemed to fulfill the anticipations surrounding the Middle East's modern information environment. The last three decades witnessed the circulation of information diversifying and decentralizing through the growth of off-shore presses, satellite broadcasting, liberalized media markets, mobile phones, and the internet; this transformation had long been expected to undermine the control over discourse and knowledge authoritarian regimes traditionally enjoyed. This, in turn, was expected to lead to new political possibilities. The 2011 Uprising seemed to vindicate these expectations given the prominent role ascribed to platforms such as Al-Jazeera, Twitter, and Facebook in the protests and international pressure that led to Mubarak's ouster.

Only two and a half years later, a second Egyptian president was removed—Mubarak's democratically elected successor and Egypt's first civilian president, Mohamed Morsi—after his first and only anniversary in office. But while the spectacle of Mubarak's fall had been met with fanfare, outside observers witnessed Morsi's fall with bemusement. Haphazard reporting by international media was partially to blame, as global attention had shifted away from Egypt following Mubarak's removal and ignored successive events, leading outlets to be "caught off guard" by the anti-Morsi protests and scrambling "to explain why so many Egyptians were calling for the downfall of an elected leader" (Iskandar, 2013b, para. 3).

If the vehement rejection of a democratically elected leader was confusing, events subsequent to the anti-Morsi protests made even less sense: a popularly-backed military coup, an army general in *de facto* control, widespread violence, political persecutions, and diminishing civil liberties. The situation seemed a complete turnaround from the

course laid out by the Uprising, despite having been under writ by a progressive, “democratic” communication environment. The dynamics between the modern information landscape and political transition were not as simple as assumed, it seemed. Absolutist pronouncements of this or that information outlet functioning as “the beacon of freedom to Arab world”, as the *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman once described Al-Jazeera, were obviously an insufficient narrative to explain what was transpiring. The enthusiasm over new sources of information and their transformative potential, combined with a shortage of studies into local audiences, facilitated deterministic suppositions which are undercut by the most recent events in Egypt. A closer examination of the information environment people inhabited and how they negotiated it is therefore essential; the turmoil in Egypt suggests local factors shaping information’s production, circulation, and consumption which cannot be discounted without severely misinterpreting social trajectories. It is with this point in mind that I offer the current study.

The study presented here explores the accounts of politically-engaged, moderate-to-high status Egyptians regarding their informational milieu and how they respond in consuming, processing, and interpreting facts. Besides complicating the view of the Middle East’s information consumers,¹ including the connection between knowledge and

¹ The term *consumer* is used to identify people as they act to selectively absorb and use information. A consumer, as well as the act consumption, is commonly linked to a capitalist market economy to describe one’s relationship to *products* and *commodities*. But I use the term in relation to something ingested, however metaphorically, to describe an actor *taking-in* information. I employ *consumer* as shorthand for *information consumer* or *news consumer*, irrespective of whether this occurs insider or outside the market. I set aside the market sense of consumer because the issue of commodification and market exchange of information is not wholly appropriate to the array of phenomena under analysis (e.g., state institutions or interpersonal exchanges) nor is the economic system in Egypt amenable to the same critiques aimed at free-market economies.

Unlike the term *citizen* which emphasizes a person’s membership in the political community (even when discussing her informational activities), describing a person as a *consumer* focuses on her actions and perceptions squarely with respect to the circulation of information. The two labels are not mutually exclusive, but *citizen* and *consumer* emphasize different things: the first points to one’s status or identity, the second to a specific realm of activity or performance. Nor is my use of the term intended to suggest that *consuming* information is a passive act, treating “consumers as receptacles for content both mass produced and mass distributed” (Greene and Jenkins, 2005, p. 111); rather, I see *consumers* undertaking highly selective, sophisticated, and meaningful activities (as will be especially apparent in later chapters). The term *user* is sometimes utilized as a synonym for consumer when discussing media or information

politics, this study offers insight into a critical period—the lead-up to President Morsi’s overthrow. Fieldwork for the study was conducted during last few months of Morsi’s rule, ending only a few weeks prior to the June 30, 2013 protests that led to his removal. The findings here shed light on this tumultuous phase while highlighting the situational nature of information. In this view, information is constituted locally and historically, rather than considered a universal and ahistorical phenomenon.

This brief chapter introduces the basic problem and purpose driving this research, followed by a summary of the chapters to follow. By outlining the structure of the dissertation, I present the various lines of investigation and the central arguments developed in response to the study’s chief goals.

1.2 Problem

To date there has been relatively little academic research into the intensely contentious transitional period preceding Morsi’s ouster. This is in part due to the proximity of events which, in the aftermath of the June 30 coup, forthcoming studies on this historical moment will no doubt redress. But hitherto, as with international media, so too has scholarly attention been largely diverted from the most recent developments in Egypt. Most contemporary research on Egypt overlooked crucial contextual elements and changing political tides in favor of a narrowly circumscribed research interest (Matar, 2012). For instance, the initial period of the Revolution, leading to Mubarak’s ouster, received far more attention than the periods that followed which, while less dramatic, were no less important. This timeframe-bias also led to a viewpoint bias, giving primacy to the political perspective of young revolutionaries and ignoring the diversity of Egypt’s political spectrum. The Manichean spectacle of the early revolution has proven more

(Chandler and Munday, 2011); I have chosen instead to specifically apply user to people employing the highly interactive medium of social media as opposed to a broadsheet or television set, though this distinction only emphasizes the nature of the different platforms and is not intended to suggest that online consumers are more active than offline consumers with respect to information itself (e.g., how they consume and interpret it).

attractive to the imagination of casual observers than the messy follow-up events, when both the political actors and the role of media became less distinct (Matar, 2012). There was also a tendency to focus on specific channels of information, especially social media, at the expense of a broader communication environment which includes word-of-mouth, satellite and terrestrial TV, newspapers, religious authorities, and so on. Finally and most significantly, for all the emphasis placed on Egypt's changing information environment, there is relatively little investigation into how citizens² are responding and reacting to information and media sources. Understanding recent developments in the local availability of information entails understanding how this politically revitalized polity views and processes the sources that surround them. Such an investigation stands to reveal that people's perceptions, expectations, and practices regarding either being informative or becoming informed are local and contextual developments. Such contexts can include the historical experience of authoritarianism, the re-alignment and reform of media, or the wider struggle over Egypt's political future.

1.3 Purpose

The purpose of this study is to describe how politically-engaged Egyptian citizens interpret contested information and perceive the sources available to them. Beyond investigating the consumption of specific channels or responses to specific texts, the study seeks to understand the wider landscape of knowledge production: the sources available, the interests and institutions responsible, or the ideals such sources were held to. The views of citizens provide insight not only into the consumption of facts and news, but into the state of knowledge formation in contentious and insecure circumstances and how people respond.

² The term *citizen* is used in reference to people as members and agents of a political community, the Egyptian polity. This term also recognizes that said membership in the national context operates as a basis of personal identity. Caveats can then be made to refer to different classes of citizens, as frequently done by the participants, who variously allude to *privileged citizens* (e.g., better connected, more affluent) and *ordinary/average citizens* (e.g., the poorer, less-educated members who are seen as more representative of the Egyptian public). By referring to my participants as *politically-engaged citizens*, I emphasize their attention and involvement regarding political issues given that not all citizens necessarily share the same degree of interest or engagement.

By examining the narratives of politically-engaged Egyptians this study addresses three central research questions: (1) how do participants identify and characterize the variety of sources available to them; (2) how do participants negotiate among these sources and interpret their texts; and (3) what is the connection between local context (culture, history, demography, etc.) and the answers to the previous two questions. The study aims to answer these questions from across Egypt's ideological spectrum. In the process of shedding light on how this information environment is perceived and negotiated by a variety of Egyptians, this study sets out to provide diverse insights into a climactic episode in Egypt's transitional period.

The final motivation of this study is to apply the approach of the discipline of information studies outside the traditional setting (Western, stable, and democratic) to expand the conceptual tools of the discipline. By exploring the production, circulation, consumption, and interpretation of information in the context of a tumultuous political and communicational landscape, this study also aims to develop the conceptual tools for analyzing the societal dimensions of information. In periods of intense contention and instability, the societal nature of information (and its corresponding concepts of trust, certainty, and credibility) becomes most visible. Conversely, such moments can also reveal how people's information practices are forms of political participation, reflecting the cultural and social context people inhabit.

1.4 Outline

The next three chapters (2-4) present the foundation of this study. Chapter 2 is a background chapter, preparing any readers unfamiliar with contemporary Egypt for the throng of local entities, identities, issues, and developments referenced henceforth. It offers a background on the main factions, recent political events, and the changing information environment in the lead-up to the period in question. The literature review of Chapter 3 presents the scholarly research underpinning the current study. It does this first by drawing on the most relevant field on the subject of the information practices of Egyptians: Arab media studies. Drawing on this body of research is appropriate because it is contextually sensitive, demonstrating an awareness of local particularities affecting the kinds of sources citizens are exposed to and how citizens are likely to respond. This

establishes the research context, but as will be seen, often falls short due to certain limitations. It is for this reason that the review then explores relevant approaches offered by the field of information studies, focusing especially on the works of Reijo Savolainen and Elfreda Chatman. Their work on information practices contributes to the framework shaping the study. After the scholarly foundation of the study is established, Chapter 4 goes on to explain the methods and methodology employed in the study, describing the study's means of data collection, handling, and analysis and the rationale for the choices made by the researcher. The strengths and weaknesses of these approaches are also discussed here, as well as the challenges encountered in the course of conducting fieldwork and how these challenges were remedied.

The next six chapters (5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10) form the core of the study, where the findings are presented in two parts that develop two separate but interrelated concepts: an *information ecosystem* (chapters 5, 6, and 7) and an *information culture* (chapters 8, 9, and 10).

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 present and analyze the views of participants regarding the institutions responsible for the production and dissemination of information: the state, broadcast media, and social media. The findings suggest a fundamental interconnectedness among these sources of information, whereby the weaknesses and strengths of any source is relational, reproducing, countering, and reflecting facets of the communication environment elsewhere.

Chapter 5 presents views on the state as a producer of information. The term "state" refers to both the permanent institutions (such as state agencies) and the government holding office (the executive and legislature). For all the attention given to ICTs and the media in the production and dissemination of information, little attention tends to be given to the role of the state beyond its role in curtailing or protecting the freedom of expression. In Egypt, the state's capacity to generate knowledge is found to be seriously undermined by the legacy of authoritarian regimes, whereby secrecy, inaccessibility, and propaganda become the standard modus operandi of state institutions. These malpractices are seen to have systematic repercussions on non-state sources (media, civil society

organizations, scholars, online communities) undermining the wider social network of information. In a backhanded manner, these discussions simultaneously reveal the state's centrality in domestic knowledge creation; where the state's ability to produce information is weak or suspect, information from all corners becomes doubtful. Chapter 5 demonstrates that the information landscape is not confined to the media or the internet; state institutions are perhaps the most fundamental entities in the production, regulation, and circulation of information, affecting the performance of the entire knowledge society.

Broadcast media is the subject of Chapter 6, addressing print and television. Following on the background provided in Chapter 2, participants testified to the radical polarization taking place in Egypt's transitional period as witnessed in and perpetuated by the media. This chapter compiles the views of citizens to show the partisan and unprofessional character of media outlets. There was consensus among participants that the media was indeed highly partisan—adopting pro-Brotherhood and anti-Brotherhood perspectives—but participants varied in their assessment of this politicization. The diverse appraisals and competing expectations of participants reveal that the ideals set for the media are not monolithic. Experience and context are operative in shaping what is deemed acceptable.

The issues raised in Chapter 6 regarding broadcast media naturally lead us to explore the function of social media. The Egyptian Uprising, dubbed by some a “Twitter Revolution” or “Facebook Revolution”, drew attention to the impacts of social media as a radically new and alternative medium in the current information landscape. But Chapter 7 shows that social media and broadcast media are not isolated circuits of information, with one qualitatively performing better or even independently of the other. Content and sources diffuse across both spheres, and this bidirectional flow is what makes social media so useful to heavy users and activists. Social media could therefore be seen acting as an intermediary layer over broadcast media. Social media is no more trustworthy than traditional media, but it enables new capacities in vetting and sourcing that overlay standard news and information. Social media was used as a compensatory mechanism to redress shortcomings rather than a competing source. But because of this complementarity to broadcast media, as well as the state to a lesser extent, social media also reproduced many of its shortcomings. As such, social media must be understood as

functionally converging with broadcast media and state institutions. Social media operationally remediated some shortcomings in official and broadcasted information, making it a convergent and interdependent source, connected to the wider network of information creation and circulation.

The responses regarding information institutions in these three chapters—discussing the state, broadcast media, and social media platforms—demonstrate that these sources are functionally interconnected and interdependent, forming an *information ecosystem* where information was systematically rendered elusive, equivocal, and unreliable. After having established the informational milieu citizens inhabit—riddled with secrecy, ignorance, and partiality, Chapters 8, 9, and 10 shift the scope of analysis from views on institutionalized sources of information (e.g., government agencies, satellite channels, or online networks) to the public who serve as the actual or prospective audiences to these sources. In the discussions presented here, participants described themselves and the rest of the society reacting to the environmental conditions presented in the first part. In describing the information practices of citizens, the second part examines the dispositions they adopted as consumers (Chapter 8), the types of sources they relied upon (Chapter 9), and the tactics they employed in becoming informed (Chapter 10). Collectively, this array of attitudes and strategies constituted a locally-shaped *information culture*, the counterpart to the local *information ecosystem*.

Chapter 8 explores the characteristics of consumers, who are variously seen to be skeptical, suspicious, biased, inventive, and elitist. Uncertainty was a prevalent disposition of citizens when exposed to information, as was mistrust towards sources. Unsurprisingly, consumers also described being disposed to consume along ideological lines. They also described applying their personal ingenuity when arriving at an understanding of a situation; for better or worse, this ingenuity was accepted as an aspect of Egypt's national identity. Finally, consumers differentiated between classes of audiences, reinforcing socio-economic, ideological, and geographic divisions in the country. The perceived distribution of information across society was constitutive of social divides between urban and rural, rich and poor, conservative and progressive, or religious and liberal, often legitimizing the voice of one segment over the other. These

characteristics form the foundation of the *information culture*, which shapes the behaviours described in the two subsequent chapters.

Besides building upon the foundation established in Chapter 8, Chapter 9 also follows up on the type of trust initially discussed in Chapter 7 by more thoroughly exploring how sources are approached by citizens. In this suspicious climate, participants commonly characterized information sources as individual people rather than mediums, organizations, or channels. Personalized sources were classified and assessed according to their proximity and the type of knowledge they held. Approaching sources as individuals enabled information consumers a more differentiated and granular means of assessing credible and meaningful reports, thereby expressing the characteristics (especially skepticism, suspicion, and ingenuity) seen in Chapter 8. This finding demonstrates that the objects of consumption need to be operationalized (whether as individuals, mediums, channels, or messages) from the perspective of audiences themselves. Furthermore, the findings show that non-mediated information (gained face-to-face or first-hand) is of critical importance when trying to understand information practices during this period.

Chapter 10 presents the tactics participants described consciously employing in order to analyze and negotiate claims about political incidents. These tactics served to circumvent falsehoods, exaggerations, and omissions in order to become genuinely informed. The two tactics that reveal themselves are the parsing of texts for hidden meanings (reading between the lines) and juxtaposing the contents of multiple texts (piecing things together). These practices show that becoming informed involved a complex engagement with documents—cross-examining assertions, juxtaposing multiple accounts, and excavating subtext—to construe meaningful and complete information. Once again, these patterns of processing information evince the characteristics described in Chapter 8. In contrast to the LIS concept of information literacy and mainstream studies of information behavior, I suggest that the information practices instantiated in these tactics are more sociologically meaningful when viewed as representational performances rather than as instrumental processes.

Collectively, the three chapters—characteristics, sources, and tactics of consumers—reflect an information culture which was influenced by and responded to socio-political conditions, including the *information ecosystem* where the culture is enacted. The final chapter (Chapter 11) revisits the central findings of the study, discussing the significance they pose for the field of information studies as a sociological endeavor, and their domestic implications for Egypt's transitional experience.

Chapter 2 - Background

2.1 Introduction

Despite sharing many commonalities with its neighboring states—Arabic speaking, a Sunni Muslim majority, an authoritarian regime—Egypt is also exceptional in many regards, both positive and negative. Egypt has long occupied a preeminent (though declining) position in the Middle East and North Africa due to its massive population of around 88 million, twice the next largest Arab country; its strategic location between Asia, Africa, the Mediterranean, and the Red Sea; a “continuous” history from antiquity through to modernity; and its historic influence on politics and culture across the region. Yet Egypt also suffers from its own set of challenges: provisioning for its sizable population density, poor economic performance, an “utterly dysfunctional educational system” (Beinin, 2009, p. 42), massive socio-economic divisions, a disintegrating social contract, an unpopular treaty with Israel, an equally unpopular alliance with the US, and humiliation over its falling status in the Arab world. These stresses were drivers of the unrest that boiled-over into the 2011 Uprising.

The lead-up and aftermath of the Uprising are explored in this chapter. I briefly describe the core political entities and identities, the sequence of central events, and the evolution of Egypt’s media, this last section serving to illustrate the local information milieu. This background serves to elucidate the context of this study and familiarize the reader with key issues, events, and players that will be raised in later chapters.

2.2 Factions

Going into the Uprising, the main political actors could be divided between the state on the one hand, made up of the regime and its backers, and a heterogeneous opposition on the other which variously worked against and within the establishment. The state forces were composed of Mubarak, his National Democratic Party (NDP), the security and intelligence sector, Egypt’s business elite, and the army. The opposition to the Mubarak regime was composed of Islamist and secular strains, the latter of which the revolutionaries of the Uprising could be included; it must be stressed that this opposition

was not a consolidated alliance against Mubarak, despite occasional collaborations among them. Nor should any of these factions be treated as static. The constellation of state interests was somewhat rearranged once the Uprising ejected Mubarak from its nucleus, but the political rearrangement the opposition underwent during the transition was even more dramatic. Nevertheless, understanding these groupings explains the political terrain that this study's participants situated themselves within and the identities they assumed during the period under examination.

2.2.1 The former regime and its allies

2.2.1.1 Mubarak and the NDP

Hosni Mubarak and the National Democratic Party (NDP) ran the executive office and legislature, respectively, as a secular civilian regime renowned for its cronyism. Mubarak rose from vice-president to president in 1981 when the previous office holder, Anwar Sadat, was assassinated by militant Islamists. Mubarak, a military officer like Egypt's previous three presidents, continued the trend of autocratic rule by concentrating power in the executive office with the acquiescence of the military. In the 1990s, Mubarak undertook a series of neoliberal economic reforms that had begun under the Western-leaning Sadat, immensely benefiting members of the NDP and the circle of prominent businessmen around his son, Gamal Mubarak, who was being groomed to succeed the aging autocrat (Mubarak was born in 1928). The government was dominated by Mubarak's NDP, a loose cadre without any actual political base or ideological core, only existing to maintain the regime. The NDP's relevance and influence was derived from its proximity to Mubarak, and it operated as "a machine for distributing patronage and an arm of the regime which would have no coherence without access to state power" (Beinin, 2009, p. 25). The legitimacy of the regime was based on its image as a government that (in collaboration with security services and military) offered stability and safety (for instance, in the face of "radical" elements such as militant Islamists), development (as a supposedly efficient government engaged in professional policy and economic reform), and modernity (cultivating a secular, rational, and nationalist state as opposed to one ruled by tradition and religious dogma) (Droz-Vincent, 2009; Wurzel, 2009). These rationales offered the pretext for neoliberal policies which exacerbated

social inequality and repressive security measures used to control the polity. Following his removal from office in 2011, Mubarak was jailed on charges of corruption and the murder of protestors. The NDP was eventually dissolved, though former members of the party were still able to participate in future elections.

2.2.1.2 Business elites

A business class arose during Mubarak's tenure which promoted non-threatening, self-serving neo-liberal reforms, with the approval of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. For example, steel magnate Ahmed Ezz emerged from the government's privatization projects owning 60% of Egypt's steel market and assumed the office of NDP secretary, demonstrating the fusion of political and financial elites under Mubarak. This business class pursued seats in parliament, winning 22% of parliament in 2005 and 35% in 2010 (Soliman, 2012), whether running as NDP members or joining the NDP after being elected; others simply resided in the orbit of Gamal Mubarak to consolidate his future rule (Wurzel, 2009). The business elite, as with the NDP, represented numerous competing factions seeking privileges from the state and without a consistent class consciousness nor political project, making them malleable to the regime while giving the regime indirect control of private sectors of the new economy (Wurzel, 2009). One area of the economy of particular interest to us where these business elites became major shareholders was Egypt's media and telecommunications sector, which Mubarak's former associates developed and continued to operate in the aftermath of his downfall.

2.2.1.3 Security forces

The security sector—police, paramilitary, intelligence, and even hired thugs—were an essential component of Mubarak's regime. They ensured domestic security under the purview of Egypt's notorious Ministry of Interior or by reporting directly to the President, though other branches of government eventually formed their own law-enforcement agencies (Droz-Vincent, 2009; Springborg, 1989). The extent of powers given to these forces, especially with the country under martial law since 1981, effectively turned Egypt into a *security state* and a *mukhabarat* (intelligence) *state* which

sustained the regime through domestic spying, harassment, intimidation, brutality, and torture to curb any potential threat to Mubarak's order:

The security sector has taken a new 'regulative' role in the containment of political and societal activities and as the ultimate defender of the regime. The prolonged state of emergency has criminalized public life. (Droz-Vincent, 2009, p. 238)

The violence Egyptians experienced at the hands of the security services was one of the triggers for the Uprising, which rallied in commemoration of the murder of Khalid Said and Sayed Bilal. But for all its transgressions, before and during the Uprising, the aftermath of the revolt witnessed very few members of Egypt's security sector beyond Interior Minister Habib Al-Adly being convicted of any crimes and almost no reform to the domestic security apparatus. This later posed a serious challenge to Morsi's Islamist government, which had a tense relationship with the security sector that had a legacy of ruthlessly targeting Islamist movements with fervor, including the Muslim Brotherhood the new president hailed from.

The resilience of the regime's security services was not unique; former members, supporters and enforcers of Mubarak's regime were perceived to still be active and influential players in the post-Uprising period. These actors, seen as vestiges of the old, corrupt order, were dubbed *feloul* (remnants) and accused of plotting to reverse the inroads of the "Revolution". As one report observed following the 2011 Uprising:

There is no doubt that the remnants of the old system (for example, some National Democratic Party (NDP) members, networks of economic interests that benefited from the old regime, and state security forces involved in corruption and torture) are still working to abort the revolution and trying to reorganize themselves in order to regain power. (El-Agati, 2011, p. 11)

Frequent references will be made to this "feloul" faction in the chapters that follow, but let us finally turn to the final faction of the "old system"—the military.

2.2.1.4 Military

Despite the Egyptian military's historic influence and prestige, its political role was not "at the centre of the political system but at the periphery" (Droz-Vincent, 2009, p. 225; see also Wurzel, 2009). Mubarak had continued the work of his predecessor of displacing the army from actively governing the country, growing a civilian-led government that relied on the domestic security sector where force was needed. The army was left to manage itself without civilian oversight and tend to its own corporate projects, estimated to make up anywhere between 10-40% of the economy. Mubarak continued "to protect the army and reward the officers corps [...] for their exceptional obedience" (Droz-Vincent, 2009, p. 226) even when pressed by his associates for neo-liberal reforms when said reforms collided with military interests. Nevertheless, the army's suspicions of the regime's political and business elite created tensions regarding the succession of Gamal Mubarak, whose power-base rested on this business class and who had no personal connection with the military. This may partially explain the reluctance of the military to come to the defense of the regime when the Uprising took place. While the military itself faced much criticism for its actions as interim government following Mubarak's ouster (more below) and their handling of the transitional process, the institution continued to command much respect and trust, only to gain more as the civilian government of Morsi became less popular. The army remained above reproach in the eyes of many citizens.

The institutionalization of these forces is sometimes called the "deep state", referring to secret, entrenched, unchecked, and authoritative movers of the nation across its bureaucratic, financial, political, and security arenas (Iskandar, 2013a). Yet the above shows that this constellation was quite fluid and competitive, suggesting that "the Egyptian 'deep state' is neither as deep nor as coherent as the term implies," though still enjoying "more depth and coherence than those outside of it" (Brown, 2012, p. 13). It is on that note that we can now introduce those who stood on the "outside", the opposition.

2.2.2 Oppositional currents

The Mubarak regime's opposition consisted of a spectrum of interests and ideologies, as well as degrees of hostility (though I exclude from this list militant opposition, such as the Islamic Group or Egyptian Jihad).

2.2.2.1 Islamist opposition

First and foremost among the opponents were those advocating for governance according to Islamic teaching, i.e., Islamists. The largest and most established Islamist group was the Muslim Brotherhood. Founded in 1928 as part of an anti-imperialist and modern revivalist movement, over time the Brotherhood had created branches and affiliates across the Middle East, such as the eponymous organization in Kuwait, Hamas in Palestine Territories, and Islah in United Arab Emirates. Due to their earlier incarnation as an armed insurgency against Gamal Abdel Nasser's regime in the 1950s-60s, the organization was officially banned. The Brotherhood eventually demilitarized and focused their resources on funding and running charitable works and unofficially running members in low-level elections (e.g., professional syndicates and student associations). Stepping into the welfare vacuum created by the state's economic restructuring, the social programmes of the Brotherhood and other Islamist groups earned them a broad base of support in Egypt's poor and marginalized communities. Though the ban on the Brotherhood was not lifted till after the Uprising, the Brotherhood were tolerated to operate on the whims of the regime, with whom they "continue[d] the mutually beneficial cat-and-mouse game that constrains their activity but ensures their survival" (Beinin, 2009, p. 41). The Brotherhood shared a distinctive pyramid structure: the urban poor formed their base constituency, its formal membership composed of professionals and educated Egyptians, and at the top Islamist businessmen who funded it and held its highest offices, like the organization's deputy, commercial tycoon Khairat El-Shater. With this structure, the Brotherhood also enjoyed a centralized decision making system, though this made it vulnerable to cooption by the state. As the Mubarak regime vacillated between persecution and incorporation, this relationship between regime and the Brotherhood "led to the emergence of unspoken rules of engagement that enabled the MB to oppose the regime while not seriously challenging it" (El-Houdaiby, 2012, p. 133).

The judiciousness of this strategy seemed to pay-off in 2005, when candidates from the Brotherhood won a surprising 20% of seats in parliamentary elections, though the state retaliated through a series of prosecutions against Brothers for supposed financial and electoral improprieties. This precarious co-existence between the Brotherhood and the regime, on top of Islamic opinions condemning any form of civil disobedience, made the Islamists wary of participating in the Uprising; the Brotherhood did not officially join the Uprising until it was well underway, discrediting them as opportunists in the eyes of some. Despite this handicap, the Brotherhood enjoyed a broad base and a well-honed organizational capacity that guaranteed the Islamists would become serious contenders in any open and fair election after the regime fell, as turned out to be the case (see below). The success of other Islamist groups, such as those ascribing to the more conservative school of Salafi Islam, would be more surprising. Moderate Islamists like Abdul Mounem Abu Fatouh, who splintered from the Brotherhood, also competed, but with less success.

2.2.2.2 Secular opposition

Undermining the regime's false dichotomy of "us or the radicals", there was indeed opposition beyond Islamists; "since the 1980s, dozens of secular, liberal, and leftist NGOs rooted among oppositional intelligentsia" (Beinin, 2009, p. 26) became a growing political faction and source of criticism against the regime. The non-Islamist opposition was more fragmented than the Brotherhood and lacked their large electoral base; as such, it largely operated outside formal institutions such as the parliament (with the notable exception of Egypt's historic El-Wafd Party). The currents within the secular faction could be ideological (socialist, liberal, Nasserist) or issue-based (gender equality, human rights, social justice, worker entitlements, or foreign policy). These non-Islamist currents grew in size and volume around issues such as the Second Intifada in Palestine and US invasion of Iraq, since matters of international politics where the regime was more permissive; meanwhile, economic concerns in the face of the economic restructuring and crony capitalism mobilized working class movements, professional associations, and other middle class citizens. The revolutionaries of 2011 could be connected, ideologically and organizationally, to this faction, since the "explosion of socioeconomic and political demonstrations in the early 2000s—from which religious influence was almost entirely

absent—was an important factor in the growth of new secular and youth movements” (Sika, 2012, p. 76).

The terms such as “secular” or “liberal” used to describe currents within this faction require some clarification. Secularism, as a political concept, has various interpretations: American secularism emphasizes the separation of church and state, whereas French secularism eliminates religion from public life. Egyptian secularism is rooted in an anti-clerical doctrine, whereby religion and religious authority is subordinate to state authority (Bulliet, 2009). Nationalists, leftists, and liberals can all be classified as forms of secularism. Liberalism, meanwhile, carries elitist undertones specific to Egypt, where it is frequently (but not necessarily) “characterized by a Right-wing ideology, more interested in preserving the economic and social interests of the Egyptian bourgeoisie than in securing political freedom for all citizens” (Abu-Rabi, 2004, pp. 76–77). Setting the precedent, early Egyptian liberals “spoke about justice and legal rights” but they did so as self-conscious members of an enlightened elite, surrounded by a degenerate majority and “threatened by the absence of the mental habits of industry and obedience which would make possible a social order” (Mitchell, 1988, p. 116). This class elitism, combined with their lack of popular base, suspicion of Islamists, and doubt of Western-style democracy, explains why self-proclaimed Egyptian “liberals” are at times willing to support seemingly illiberal practices and policies.

With the cast of Egypt’s political stage introduced, the next two sections outline the recent histories wherein these forces competed and collaborated, providing the context in which the fieldwork was undertaken and the events actors and participants allude to. Any actors or incidents which are especially significant to subsequent chapters are placed for further information in Appendix 2, where many actors and institutions mentioned here can also be found.

2.3 General developments³

2.3.1 Before the Uprising: Pre-2011

The assortment of factions described above show that the Mubarak's regime (1981-2011) did not go unchallenged prior to the Uprising. As the US began to stress "democratization" in the Middle East, coinciding with its invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Egyptian regime came under pressure to restrain its response in the mid-2000s to various demonstrations, including rallies against the war in Iraq, the *Kifaya* movement of secularists and Islamists against another presidential term for Mubarak or the succession of his son, a revolt of judges against state interference in judicial affairs, and workers' strikes and demonstrations for labour rights. The state even held a competitive parliamentary election, where the Brotherhood made significant inroads, and a competitive presidential election for the first time, though riddled by fraud. But the US began relaxing pressure on the regime as the situation in Iraq worsened, leading to "the abatement of any criticism of how the regime deals with the opposition, Islamists or otherwise" (Wurzel, 2009, p. 117). Mubarak's regime became once again intolerant towards popular expressions of discontent, regardless of the quarters from which it came:

Since early 2007, the regime has demonstrated signs of desperation, internal division, and weakness. Tolerance for expressions of political opposition diminished markedly as it lashed out at Muslim Brothers, NGOs, bloggers, journalists, workers, students and Kifaya members, and blocked oppositional websites. Street demonstrations and other public protests were increasingly met with repression reminiscent of the 1990s. (Beinin, 2009, p. 40)

2.3.2 The Uprising: January 25 – February 11, 2011

Yet the suppression did not stem the discontent, nor could it obscure deteriorating living conditions for poor and middle class Egyptians, especially among the bulging youth demographic. Rather, the brutality and impunity with which the security forces conducted

³ Drawn largely on Iskandar (2012), Freedom House (2013c, 2014c), Sakr (2013), Atlantic Council (2013)

themselves only added to the grievances, leading to activists from the *April 6 Youth Movement* (an organization supporting labour actions) and *We are all Khaled Said* (a campaign commemorating the young activist and citizen journalist murdered by police) to organize marches against police brutality scheduled on January 25, 2011—Police Day (Lim, 2012). This demonstration grew into a general expression of public discontent with the Mubarak regime across the country, though it was Tahrir (Liberty) Square in downtown Cairo that garnered most attention. The protestors faced repression from security forces (Appendix 2: Killed revolutionaries) and smears in domestic media; in an attempt to curtail the demonstrators' capacity to coordinate, cellphone networks and the internet service were shut down. Adding to the chaos, following the most violent day of the confrontations (January 28, dubbed the "Day of Anger") security presence disappeared across the country, and reports spread of attacks of police facilities and prisons, freeing around 20,000 inmates (El-Bendary, 2013) (Appendix 2: Prison break). Whether the attacks were due to third parties or an attempt by the state itself to sow fear and reassert the status quo was and remains unclear. Regardless, these events did not deter the revolt. The protestors were further encouraged by the army's refusal to act against them, the swelling number of protestors despite the ICT blackout, the decision of the Brotherhood to officially support the demonstrators, and the favorable coverage they received through Al-Jazeera and other foreign correspondents. Mubarak ultimately stepped down on February 11 and the NDP-dominated parliament was dismissed, with the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) taking over as an interim government to oversee the political transition to civilian rule. SCAF consisted of a committee composed of senior army officers, putting the country under a military regime for the next 18 months.

2.3.3 Provisional military rule: February 2011 – June 2012

The SCAF regime soon found itself the subject of demonstrations in reaction to its forceful handling of dissent, the lack of political or economic progress, and growing suspicions of a military dictatorship. Notorious actions against protestors fueled hostility against the army, such as the administration of virginity tests to female protestors or brutal attacks on activists and their families. After an especially bloody dispersal of

Coptic (an Egyptian Christian denomination) demonstrators in October 2011 and the military's subsequent cover-up of the incident (Appendix 2: Maspero massacre), a campaign called *Askar Kazeboon (Army Are Liars)* to challenge the accounts of the officers came into being. Another campaign, *No to Military Trials for Civilians*, opposed the use of military courts to try civilians without due process or impartial hearings. In another illustration of the SCAF crackdown, in December of 2011 the offices of several foreign non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in the field of democratic reform and civil liberties (including Freedom House, International Republican Institute, International Center for Journalists, National Democratic Institute) were raided and 43 workers arrested (Appendix 2: NGO trial). The organizations were charged for receiving up to \$50 million in illegal funds, though accusations also circulated of foreign interference, perhaps in an attempt by SCAF to rally anti-American public sentiment and attribute any criticism of their rule to foreign agitators.

By January 2012, elections for the People's Assembly (the lower house of parliament) were completed, which resulted in a Islamist landslide with the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party claiming around half the seats and another quarter going to the Nour Party, a Salafi group. Results for secular parties were paltry by comparison, with liberals like the Egyptian Bloc coalition or the Wafd Party winning 7% and 8%, respectively, and revolutionary-based parties barely winning any seats. The repeated success of Islamists in the Shura Council (the upper house) elections a few months later confirmed the electoral base they enjoyed over secular factions. The electoral dominance of Islamists worried mainstream liberal strips in society as well as religious minorities like Coptic Christians; the Muslim Brotherhood and revolutionaries were also increasingly at odds, with Islamists supporting formal institutions of the state and condemning demonstrations and strikes as "damaging Egypt". In February, a startling massacre took place at a soccer game in the Suez city of Port Said, when fans of the local team attacked the fans (called the Ultras) of Cairo's visiting Al-Ahly Club, resulting in the killing of 79 and 1000 casualties (Appendix 2: Port Said massacre). Security forces were widely condemned for their negligence that permitted the massacre to take place, and some suspected the massacre was orchestrated in retribution for the Ultras role in the Uprising.

Presidential elections took place in the summer of 2012, with Islamist liberal, socialist, and pro-military candidates. The Brotherhood originally stated it would not field a presidential candidate, but then submitted its deputy, Khairat El-Shater, as a candidate. El-Shater was ultimately disqualified by the courts in what was interpreted by some as politically motivated decision. Mohamed Morsi, the relatively unknown chairman of the Brotherhood's newly formed Freedom and Justice Party, ran as El-Shater's replacement. The democratic course of the country experienced a sudden reversal around this time when Egypt's constitutional court dismissed the newly elected People's Assembly on the account of an electoral irregularity—another contentious decision that would pit the Islamists against the judiciary (Appendix 2: Judicial authority). This did not stop the Brotherhood's candidate from moving into the second round of elections with Ahmed Shafiq, the military candidate who represented the pre-Uprising order. With a 24% turnout, Morsi won with 52% of the vote. With only Morsi and Shafiq in the final round of voting, many revolutionaries and other secularists reluctantly voted for Morsi alongside more willing supporters rather than allow a Mubarak regime apologist take office and effectively nullify the success of the Uprising. With this narrow margin, Mohamed Morsi became Egypt's first democratically elected president: an Islamist, a Muslim Brother, and a civilian.

2.3.4 Morsi's rule: July 2012 – June 2013

Despite this nominal change in leadership, SCAF had passed laws prior to the election eroding the power of the executive office, regardless of whoever might ultimately sit in it. The army generals still reigned supreme. But two months after assuming office, unknown assailants attacked a military post in Sinai border and killed 16 soldiers (Appendix 2: Sinai soldiers), giving Morsi a political opportunity to end the power struggle with SCAF by ordering its leading generals into retirement. In their place, Morsi appointed General Abdel Fattah El-Sisi—the man who would remove and replace Morsi a year later—as his defense minister. Morsi also reinstated the executive powers curtailed by SCAF while placating the army with the familiar executive-military pact, securing the armed forces from external interference (El-Ghobashy, 2012).

With the military removed from government, Morsi set out on a series of economic and political projects. The economic projects focused on increasing the state's capital and stemming the country's dwindling foreign reserves, whether by agreeing to \$6-8 billion in contributions from Qatar, seeking a \$4.8 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Appendix 2: IMF loan), or issuing Islamic bonds to subsidize state projects (Appendix 2: Islamic bonds). Controversy surrounded both these plans as the conditions and consequences of these projects were unclear to the public. Meanwhile, the country throughout this period was plagued with energy shortages, with long queues at gas pumps, insufficient supplies of natural gas for domestic use, and chronic power outages. Many frustrated citizens had taken to exclaiming "Goddamn you, Morsi!" at each brown-out. Another important resource perceived under threat was the Nile River: a source of national pride and nearly all of Egypt's water supply. News that Ethiopia was in the process of building a dam on the upper Nile sparked indignation both against the Ethiopians and the Morsi government for his handling of this development (Appendix 2: Ethiopian dam).

On the political front, an assembly (formed by the Islamist-dominated parliament prior to its dissolution) was preparing a new constitution. This constitution became increasingly a point of contention among Islamists and non-Islamists. Fears that the government would use the constitution to permanently enshrine Islamic principles upset Copts, women's rights activists, revolutionaries, liberals, and other non-Islamist factions. The minority of non-Islamist representatives withdrew from the constitutional assembly in protest, leaving the drafting to the remaining Islamists, only further breeding distrust for the future document (Appendix 2: Islamist constitution). The constitution also increased the antagonism between the courts and the government. By the fall of 2012, fearing the courts would dismiss the constituent assembly—maybe even the Shura Council—and scuttle the new constitution, Morsi took the fateful step of issuing a decree absolving him from any court oversight and taking from the judiciary any power to annul his decisions. With this immunity, Morsi also removed the current prosecutor general, a Mubarak-era appointee, and appointed his own replacement in defiance of normal procedure. These autocratic moves spurred demonstrations outside the presidential palace, and Morsi supporters clashed with protesters, leaving hundreds of casualties for which the

Brotherhood and Morsi personally were held accountable. Morsi rescinded his declaration once the constitution was ratified in a general referendum, but the damage had already been done. Giving himself unchecked executive powers (however temporarily) and pushing through an “Islamist” constitution severely and irreparably polarized the polity.

Moving into 2013, with living conditions worsening, many citizens blamed the Morsi government for advancing the interests of the Brotherhood at the expense of the country. A grassroots campaign called Tamarod (Rebel) began advocating for new presidential elections. Mass demonstrations against Morsi and the Brotherhood were scheduled on the anniversary of him assuming office, June 30, 2013. The movement eventually morphed into a call for Morsi to step-down. On June 30, Egypt saw its largest demonstrations ever, with counter-rallies backing the president. The next day, defense minister General El-Sisi issued Morsi a 48 hour deadline to meet the demands of the protestors (in 2011, the military had waited 18 days before directly intervening). When Morsi ignored the ultimatum, he was arrested and his constitution suspended. Most secular factions, the country’s state and religious institutions, and even the major Salafi party backed the coup, and a judge from Egypt’s Supreme Constitutional Court was appointed interim president.

2.3.5 The coup’s aftermath: July 2013 onwards

Supporters of the president and the Brotherhood continued their own sit-ins in Cairo, arguing that Morsi remained the legitimate ruler of the country. The violence with which the sit-ins were dispersed in August dwarfed any previous attack, with an estimated 900 people killed in a day. But reactions in Egypt were largely unsympathetic. Following the bloody dispersal, retaliatory attacks were conducted against Coptic Christian communities (who were blamed for Morsi’s overthrow) and security forces around the country. In response, public protests became subject to harsh laws and penalties, irrespective of whether they were Islamist or non-Islamist. In a few months, the Muslim Brotherhood was declared a terrorist organization and its assets seized by the government.

The data for this study was collected in the spring of 2013, in the period between the Islamist constitution being passed and the June 30 protests. As summarized above, this phase saw government supporters and detractors facing off over innumerable issues. Egyptians struggled to remain informed about the latest developments and revelations over the course of the transition but, as will be illustrated in the next example of the media landscape, the sources of information available to Egyptians were often themselves extensions of the political environment they reported upon.

2.4 Media developments

2.4.1 Before the Uprising

Egypt historically sat at the heart of the Middle East's media culture, whether in radio, print, cinema, and television, though its contribution became more controversial after an officer's coup transformed Egypt into a republic in 1952. The regime of President Gamal Abdel Nasser (1954-1970) centralized the control and development of mass media in order to mobilize audiences at home and abroad (Boyd, 1999; Rugh, 2004), nationalizing the largest newspapers and creating the Voice of the Arabs radio broadcasts. Defeat in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War led to the decline of both Nasser and his propagandistic media system. After Nasser's death, President Sadat (1971-1981) tentatively opened up the media sector, staging a multi-party political system and allowing parties to print their own papers, including the banned Brotherhood. When Mubarak took over after Sadat's death, he continued liberalizing the media sector. This latest round of media reform was driven by several rationales: as a part of a state restructuring project; to fulfill conditions for international loans; to catch up with other Arab states who were displacing Egypt's role as a media hub; the advances in information and communication technologies, such as satellite broadcasting; and demands from business elites eager for new investment opportunities (Lynch, 2008; Sakr, 2012; Saleh, 2012). A special zone for investment, development, and licensing named Media Production City was created for private broadcasters who accepted the state's conditions. The first private satellite channel in Egypt, Dream TV, was founded by appliances and real estate tycoon Ahmed Bahgat and began broadcasting in 2001; other gradually followed. The state, meanwhile, continued to hold the monopoly on terrestrial broadcasts.

The decade leading up the 2011 Uprising saw a diversifying media landscape, with new or re-opened newspapers and satellite television networks. These outlets often brought new techniques, expertise, and genres from abroad, in stark contrast with sclerotic state media productions. While newspapers still enjoyed high circulation, television remained the dominant medium (Hamdy, 2013a). Public affairs talk-shows became the most popular source of current news, with the presenters becoming household names (Sakr, 2012). The outlets could ultimately be divided into three categories according to ownership: state-run, party-run, and privately-run media (El-Bendary, 2010). Among the privately-run media were both secular and religious outlets. Salafi channels like *Al-Hekmah (The Judgement)*, and *Al-Nass (The People)* emerged, possibly encouraged by the government as a means to counter the popularity of the Brotherhood. Secular media, meanwhile, were highly concentrated among Mubarak-affiliated business elite. Construction and telecommunications tycoon Naguib Sawiris owned *ONTV* and shares of the leading private newspaper, *Al-Masry Al-Youm*; El-Sayed Al-Badawy, pharmaceuticals tycoon and leader of the secular Wafd (Delegation) Party, owned *Al-Hayat (Life)* network and *El-Destour (The Constitution)* newspaper alongside his party's official, eponymous newspaper. This ownership structure somewhat undercut the superficial diversity in the media sector, and Egyptian media followed a meandering course between conformity and freedom (Rugh, 2004). Besides the media restrictions created by Sadat still in force the emergency laws passed by Mubarak, the business class could also intervene on Mubarak's behalf. This was the case when *El-Destour* was taken over by Al-Badawy, who promptly fired the paper's editor and outspoken government critic, Ibrahim Eissa. In 2010, Eissa was muzzled again when his show on Sawiris's *ONTV* was cancelled.

The increased permissiveness to political activism in the 2000s was "accompanied by enhanced, but still limited, freedom of the press" (Beinin, 2009, p. 28). The new transnational sources were also influential, exposing citizens to news beyond the regime's news bubble. For instance, during the Second Intifada (2000-2005) "when violent Israeli retaliation was broadcast live by new Arab satellite media such as Al-Jazeera, which broke the state's information monopoly in Egypt" (Droz-Vincent, 2009, p. 235) many Egyptians reacted to these images by joining the opposition against Mubarak, who

collaborated with the US and Israel. Yet the growing diversity in Egyptian media also reflected the political fragmentation that left the regime unchallenged in the political sphere: “While this proliferation has many positive aspects, it is also a symptom of the inability of the intelligentsia to unite in opposition to the regime.” (Beinin, 2009, p. 28)

Concurrent with the transformation of Egypt’s broadcast media sector (print and television) were changes to the telecommunications infrastructure. Both mobile phones and the internet arose from a combination of economic and national interests, once again driven by the business elite who saw new media as offering new commercial opportunities, attracting foreign investment, and cultivating a more modern and advanced society by global standards (Rinnawi, 2011; Saleh, 2012). The rate of penetration of these technologies was rapid, with internet access rising from 16% in 2007 to 50% in 2014, by which time Egypt’s population of 84 million held 101.93 million mobile subscriptions (Freedom House, 2014a). Access to these technologies remained unevenly distributed due to adult literacy standing at around 70% (with a large gender disparity), underdeveloped infrastructure in non-urban areas, and, with more than a quarter of Egyptians below the poverty line, unaffordable costs. Despite its narrow reach, the internet in Egypt was unique in the region for its lack of surveillance and censorship mechanisms (Kalathil & Boas, 2003), permitting a plurality of discourse unmatched by broadcast media and making it an attractive outlet for citizen journalists, government critics, and other dissidents. Besides the online forays of state institutions and broadcast media, users could also access information from activists, political parties, civil society organizations, foreign sources, the Egyptian diaspora, and independent contributors. The Brotherhood, for instance, became the most extensive political presence in the Egyptian blogosphere (Etling, Kelly, Faris, & Palfrey, 2009) and created its own information platforms (IkhwanWeb, IkhawnOnline). The internet became a site for accessing information and opinions excluded from broadcast media—though on several occasions, online content boomeranged back into mainstream media after accruing attention online (Isherwood, 2008). Paralleling events in the offline world, however, towards the end of the 2000s this relaxed attitude to online activity changed. As online content increasingly documented regime corruption and police brutality, alongside with calls for mobilization, the Mubarak regime started “engaging in surveillance, online censorship, and

cyberattacks – especially against sites related to the Muslim Brotherhood and other opposition movements” (Freedom House, 2013a).

2.4.2 Post-Uprising⁴

Many studies have documented and debated the role of media in the Uprising (e.g., Aouragh & Alexander, 2011; Lim, 2012; Sakr, 2012). What I wish to emphasize instead is how the Uprising proved a watershed moment in Egypt media. For one thing, the event exposed allegiances and biases in the media, as had happened to Nasser’s media apparatus in 1967, with state media especially losing credibility through its defamation of the protests and defence of the regime. The revolution also marked an acceleration of previous trends such as the expansion of the private market, with over 25 new channels founded following Mubarak’s departure (Freedom House, 2014a). Private satellite networks opened in 2011 included *CBC (Capital Broadcasting Center)*, *Al-Nahar (The Day)*, *25TV* and *Tahrir (Liberation)*, along with new papers going into publication like *Al-Tahrir (The Liberation)*, *Al-Watan (The Homeland)*. The Muslim Brotherhood also launched a party paper, *Al-Hurraya wal-Adalla (Freedom and Justice)*, and their own satellite broadcasts, *Misr25 (Egypt25)* (Sakr, 2013).

As mentioned in the previous section, the provisional SCAF rule eventually found itself incurring vehement opposition. This conflict loosely divided the media into critics of the military government (e.g., 25TV, Al-Tahrir and ONTV) and defenders (state television, Al-Hayat, CBC, Dream TV, and Al-Nas [a Salafi channel]); the former appealed to sustaining the revolutionary fervor of January 25 while the latter treated the revolution as a *fait accompli* and advocated for stability (Iskandar, 2012). Demonstrating either the standing or the influence of the army, most outlets were reluctant to feature any critical coverage of the military, and even some spread misinformation on behalf of the military. But as sentiment against SCAF grew, effects were even witnessed in state media, when its employees protested at the Minister of Information’s office over pay and censorship. Perhaps a sign of the declining credibility in state media, by 2012 the privately-run *Al-*

⁴ Drawn largely on Iskandar (2012, 2013b), Freedom House (2013b, 2013c, 2014b, 2014c)

Masry Al-Youm (The Egyptian Today) would out-sell the state-run newspaper paper *Al-Ahram*, hitherto the highest circulating daily in the Arab world (Dubai Press Club, 2012).

Social media especially grew to prominence for its role in coordinating activities and in the circulation of information and opinion during the Uprising. Facebook became the most visited website in the country (Freedom House, 2014a), with Facebook users doubling from 5.4% of the population (4.6 million) on the first day of 2011 to 11.2% (9.3 million) one year later (growth slowed the following year) (Dubai School of Government, 2014a). The status of Facebook was such that official statements from the political parties, the military, and even the presidency were first made there. SCAF was quick to establish a Facebook page and a Twitter feed on assuming power. The Brotherhood, which already had a strong presence online (Etling et al., 2009; Herrera, 2014; Isherwood, 2008), used it for mustering political support. Twitter, though important for the spread of information among activists and journalists, had a paltry user community compared to Facebook at only 0.1% of the population (Dubai School of Government, 2014b). For many, whether social media platforms or news websites, the internet was preferable to traditional media for being less censored and more diverse, provocative, immediate, and interactive. With broadcasters reluctant to challenge SCAF's narratives, and often supporting it, the internet grew as a site for counter-information. The video production collective *Mosireen (Determined)* used online media to collect and disseminate information, exposing state crimes, and even held showings in public spaces. The *Askar Kazeboon* campaign circulated videos on YouTube of armored vehicles plowing through demonstrators in the Maspero Massacre (Appendix 2: Maspero massacre). *No Military Trials for Civilians* was described as "a primary example of sharing information and messages online, in order to rally supporters on the internet to participate in offline actions" (Freedom House, 2014a). Meanwhile, the information available online and their authors increasingly became a source of content for broadcasters (Sakr, 2012).

The contention in the media would only grow when Morsi and the Brotherhood came into power. The polarization witnessed around SCAF seemed to be transferred to and intensified around the Islamists, with Morsi's rule marked by "increased polarization

between pro- and antigovernment outlets” (Freedom House, 2014b, para. 2). The widespread polarization “along political and ideological lines” (Freedom House, 2014c, para. 1) seemed to hijack the trend of more plural, critical, and professional media (Sakr, 2013), “making unbiased information difficult to obtain” (Freedom House, 2014c, para. 17). The growing freedom of expression following the post-Uprising period permitted to Egyptian media “quickly led to two encampments—either watchdog or lapdog for those in power” (Iskandar, 2013b, para. 6). Whereas this was also the case under SCAF, there had been increased restraint (read: self-censorship) regarding the military—especially among private media. Such restraints disappeared under Morsi with a re-oriented political contest “pitting secularist outlets against their Islamist counterparts” (Freedom House, 2014b, para. 2). Objectivity and professionalism were supposedly undermined as “state and private media were increasingly driven into adversarial Islamist and non-Islamist camps” (Freedom House, 2014c), with each rallying support while demonizing and dehumanizing opponents (Iskandar, 2013b; Youssef, 2013). This polarization may have reflected the failure of the revolution to genuinely reform the media sector, state- or privately-owned, as they carried on in their traditional their role as propaganda machines, mobilizing the public at the expense of truthfulness and impartiality, “telling us what it thinks should happen rather than what is happening” (Carr, 2013, para. 21).

With the new government, state media was now realigned to promote the Brotherhood, despite their “longtime institutional animosity toward the Islamist group” (Iskandar, 2013b, para. 2). Brothers were assigned to head state newspapers and hold the office of Information Minister, controlling the editorial line of the state media (Freedom House, 2014b). Private religious media—including Salafi channels like *Al-Nass* and *Al-Hafez*, alongside the Brotherhood’s *Misr25* (a TV channel) and *Freedom and Justice* (a newspaper)—were already ideologically aligned with Morsi’s government. A notable foreign network, Al-Jazeera Arabic and its local broadcast, Al-Jazeera Mubashir Misr (Egypt Direct), also sat in the Morsi camp. Together, these media operated side-by-side and promoted the “blurring of journalism and political messaging that was visible to most Egyptians” (Iskandar, 2013b) with content extolling the government and vilifying its opponents. Pro-Brotherhood media engaged in regular “liberal/secular-bashing” by labelling Morsi’s opposition as feloul, thugs, or infidels (Freedom House, 2014b;

Iskandar, 2013b; Mabrouk & Hausheer, 2014). The outlets also enjoyed preferential access to official sources, as the “government selectively granted unfettered access to its media supporters while withholding information from critical outlets” (Freedom House, 2013b, para. 11). The pro-Brotherhood camp was also extensive online, where the Brotherhood had “built their own formidable online media apparatuses to spread propaganda and rally supporters” (Freedom House, 2013a, para. 12). The Rassd News Network, which began as a Facebook page as an activist news outlet exposing Mubarak-era corruption was transformed into a pro-Brotherhood news outlet. A dedicated user community of Brotherhood supporters entered the social media platforms “writing in English and Arabic have steered online discussions in favor of the Morsi government” (Freedom House, 2013a).

Meanwhile, instead of upholding journalistic standards of accuracy and balance, the secular private media perpetuated their own political biases and incited antipathy against Islamists (Carr, 2013). Sources such as satellite channels ONTV, Al-Hayat (The Life), CBC (Capital Broadcasting Center), Al-Tahrir (Liberation), Al-Nahar (The Day), DreamTV, and Al-Kahera Wal-Naas (Cairo and the People) and newspapers like Al-Masry Al-Youm (Egyptian Today), Al-Youm Al-Saba’ (The Seventh Day), El-Destour (The Constitution), Al-Fagr (The Dawn), the leftist Al-Badeel (The Alternative), and Al-Shorouk (The Sunrise) “were whole-heartedly in the anti-Morsi camp,” giving jaundiced coverage “of the Muslim Brotherhood’s conduct, Morsi’s presidency, and Islamist politics in general” (Freedom House, 2014b, para. 10). Anti-Brotherhood media often countered Islamist accusations of being “infidels” by accusing Islamists of being “sheep” (Carr, 2013) or “terrorists” (Bradley, 2014). The secular media was undoubtedly radicalized in part by the attacks they experienced from the Morsi government and his supporters in the form of “a heightened use of defamation laws against the press, and physical harassment of journalists by nonstate actors with the tacit support of the authorities” (Freedom House, 2014b, para. 2). Despite this general overlap among the anti-Brotherhood media, this faction was less compatible or coordinated than their opponents. The anti-Brotherhood media was a more varied assortment, described as “a hodgepodge of outlets with different interests and objectives as well as opaque funding streams” (Iskandar, 2013b, para. 2). Ownership and revenue for many private outlets

were traced to tycoons formerly associated with the Mubarak regime. And once again, international media was not impartial, as the Saudi-funded rival to Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya, sided against the president. Online, the information environment was no different, where despite the Brotherhood's extensive online network, oppositional parties, citizen journalists, social movements, online campaigns, news sites, and other sources circulated their respective content. This digital battlefield was as much a boon as a hindrance for reliable information, however, as the "popularity of social media has also galvanized the spread of gossip and rumors, further polarizing the country's politics" (Freedom House, 2013a, para. 18). The Brotherhood at large found itself the subject of intense dissent online as they "lost their advantage in the realm of social media, which remained a space of dissent that was difficult to control" (Herrera, 2014, p. 126).

Most information sources become instigators in the contention which boiled over on June 30, 2013, by which point audiences were "mired in a partisan environment that seems to have put aside reporting for shrill demagoguery" (Mabrouk & Hausheer, 2014, p. 17). Following the coup, with Morsi imprisoned and the crack-down on Muslim Brotherhood supporters, the distinctions of private and state-owned media have blurred, with private media "becoming difficult to separate from that of state media, in terms of support for the government and anti-Brotherhood feeling" (Mabrouk & Hausheer, 2014, p. 17). What Islamist media were under Morsi, secular private media have become under his replacements.

2.4.3 Consumption patterns

Television stands as the most popular media consumed in Egypt, with 98% of the population watching television compared to the 25% who read newspapers or the 22% who use the internet (Dennis, Martin, and Wood, 2013). The average Egyptian watches 3-4 hours of television daily. While much television content is consumed as entertainment, information has recently become the primary reason for watching television as 84% of Egyptians believe that television is an important source of news, whereas newspapers and the internet are deemed important sources of news by 23% and 22% of Egyptians, respectively (by contrast, 64% consider interpersonal contacts crucial sources of information) (Dennis, Martin, and Wood, 2013). In keeping with this finding,

the most popular genre of television programmes is news programming, followed by movies and dramas (Dubai Press Club, 2012). Talks shows like Al-Hayat Al-Youm (Life Today) on Al-Hayat TV and Ashera Masa'an (10 pm) on Dream TV are the most commonly watched programmes, where current affairs and political matters are discussed (Dubai Press Club, 2012). The most watched channels are private, free-to-air satellite networks such as Al-Hayat, Al-Mehwar, Dream, and CBC. Satellite penetration stands at around 40-60% nationally, but pirated reception may push this number to over 80% (Abdulla, 2013; Dubai Press Club, 2011). The state's terrestrial channels also remain a significant share of the market, with 59% penetration across the country and 41% of TV viewers still watching these government channels (Dubai Press Club, 2011; 2012). Only two percent of Egyptians watch TV in English, and only two of the top ten channels are non-domestic channels (Dennis et al, 2013).

Newspaper circulation is consistently strong in Egypt, with 45% of Egyptians reading a newspaper every day, though only 2% have newspaper subscriptions (Dubai Press Club, 2012). Al-Masry Al-Youm is the most widely read newspaper across the country, consumed by 61% of readers, followed by the state-run Al-Akhbar (53%) and Al-Ahram (51%). The average amount of time spent consuming newspapers is only a fifth that of television watching or internet usage, with the average reader spending 4 hours per week reading newspapers.

Internet usage is relatively low in Egypt (22%), and only half of internet users have an internet connection at home (Dennis et al., 2013; Dubai press club, 2012). Broadband penetration is very low at around 2% (Dubai press club, 2012). Over half of internet users (56%) go online to look for news, with the most frequently visited websites including news outlets like Al-Youm Al-Saba'a (The Seventh Day), Al-Masry Al-Youm (The Egyptian Today), and Masrawy (the first two are also newspaper publications) (Dennis et al., 2013; Dubai press club, 2012). Despite this, only 22% of surveyed Egyptians find the internet an important source of news. Sixty percent of users visit social media sites (Facebook, YouTube, etc.) daily; Facebook is the most visited site on the internet, compared to 4% using Twitter. A higher amount of non-Arabic content is accessed online than offline, with a quarter of users accessing English websites.

Chapter 3 - Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

This study is largely based on scholarship from two intersecting fields, media studies and information studies. The regional sub-field of Arab media studies (supplemented with some political science research) establishes the subject, context, and justification of this study; information studies and its investigations of people's *everyday information practices* complements this knowledge base while providing the conceptual and analytical tools for further exploration, equipping this study with its empirical approach. The literature review which follows is divided into two sections reviewing a selection of relevant scholarship from each respective discipline to situate the study as a whole as well as the separate discussions of successive chapters.

The first part predominantly presents findings and analyses from Arab media studies, which are pertinent to the investigation of information consumption in Egypt, where a quarter of all Arabs reside. This section complements the background on media provided in the previous chapter (**2.Background**). There, the reader was introduced to the contemporary news and information landscape in broad brushstrokes, concurrent to Egypt's recent socio-political history, without delving into the general body of scholarship on the media or its consumers. The section here expands upon that background with academic research into the character of the modern Arab media as a rich, interconnected assemblage of sources. While **2.Background** showed the *polarized* character of the local information environment, here we see its *convergence*. This is supplemented with some political science literature to re-introduce the role of the state in the circulation of information. The review then returns to the media literature to present studies exploring a central concern of this investigation, Arab audiences, as they respond to this evolving information complex. The last part of this section presents the critical reflections of Arab media scholars on the empirical and analytical limitations which have beleaguered their field's study of non-Western societies. This review of media literature is less concerned with the hard data from basic research on Arab news consumers (e.g., perceptions of Al-Jazeera's credibility, readership of state-run versus private

publications, or habits of Facebook users) than with the contours of the Arab media landscape, the practices of audiences in informing themselves, and epistemic challenges the field has faced in its efforts to document the consequences for and responses of citizens. The literature from media research elucidates the particularities of the setting and its peoples, points to important lines of investigation, suggests means of conducting said investigation, and cautions against potential threats to such an undertaking.

In contrast to media studies, the field of information studies has produced very little literature on practices and behaviours of people in Egypt or the Middle East. Nevertheless, the field offers frameworks to incorporate the concerns raised in Arab media studies while superseding some of that discipline's constraints. Information studies presents us with the model of *everyday information practices* to document more broadly and deeply the activities and perceptions of subjects in the course of consuming and processing information, situating the practices of information consumers within a social, economic, and cultural context. This section traces the conceptual development of everyday information practices, presents suggestive findings from studies conducted in this tradition, establishes useful foci of analysis, and spotlights the works of two researchers—Eflreda Chatman and Reijo Savolainen—who served as main reference-points orienting the present study.

Underpinning both media and information scholarship is the connection between information and society. This study was founded on the complementary knowledge (factual and procedural) each field offers, redressing and reinforcing one another, to comprehensively explore how information is circulated and consumed in Egypt's transitional period.

3.2 Media (and political) studies

3.2.1 Arab media

The introduction of satellite broadcasting and the internet to the Arab world in the 1990s ushered new scales of communication, varieties and genres of content, methods of production, and access points for public knowledge, increasing the amount and range of information available to citizens. Other new means of circulating information also were

available over this period, some predating the digital era (audio cassettes, fax machines, video cassettes, photocopiers, private and off-shore presses) and others that spread later (e-mail, mobile telecommunications, social media). International, regional, and domestic content increasingly overlapped in circulation; terrestrial and satellite signals filled the airwaves; semi-liberalized markets competed with private, state, and quasi-state institutions; stories cut across the mediums of print, radio, television, and internet; new venues proliferated such as talk shows, call-ins, and public affairs programmes; new professional practices were adopted; and novel technologies competed and blended with traditional technologies. In his history of Arab radio, Muhammed Ayish observed this period as a turning point that even engulfed the region's hitherto most influential medium in the multimedia age of *convergence*: "By the end of the twentieth century, media convergence was already taking root in most of the Arab communications landscape, with varying effects on media channels and institutions" (Ayish, 2011, p. 72).

Observing the changes of the final decade of the 20th century, anthropologists Jon Anderson and Dale Eickelman (1999) also used the term "convergence" to describe the evolving patterns they had witnessed in the media environment. They anticipated one of the consequences of the new communication landscape was to challenge authoritarian media power, predicated on an antiquated system of isolation and monopoly:

Convergence of media and wider participation in communication underlie the global information revolution now permeating the Arab Middle East and bypassing efforts of nearly all governments of the region to control the print and broadcast media. (J. W. Anderson & Eickelman, 1999, para. 2)

In this view, new sources and formats for disseminating information eroded the ability of Arab regimes to contain and guide public discourse, undermining the state's role as *knowledge gatekeeper*. In a key report on the Middle East's changing media environment, Jon Alterman (1998) documented the various economic, cultural, and political aspects of this "information revolution" underway. Alterman saw the new media environment fostering a *marketplace of ideas* which promised that "more access means more news means better informed citizens throughout the Middle East" (Alterman, 1998, p. ix). With

choice restored, Anderson and Eickelman (1999) anticipated a “post-mass media” era “marked by audience fragmentation, diversity, seeking over receiving” (J. W. Anderson & Eickelman, 1999, para. 15).

Similar observations were made contemporaneously by Edmund Ghareeb (2000), in whose assessment the Arab world’s “information revolution”—though accessible only to elite segments of the population—lead to a pan-Arab public transcending the confines of state-level government control. Like others, Ghareeb focused less on the informational role of this revolution than the cultural impact, as the global and regional reach of the new media addressed an international community of Arabs, allowing for “transnational discourse” that precipitated in post-ideological, issue-based movements (e.g., uniting Arabs against military actions towards Iraq). Ghareeb noted, however, that despite challenging state media and state controls over public discourse, new media could still be influenced through official political channels or financial stakeholders (e.g., advertisement revenue). New media also became themselves the battleground (rather than just the conduit) for local culture wars, with Al-Jazeera accused of not being “Arab enough” or failing to uphold “Arab priorities.” Ghareeb’s assessment is also useful for highlighting the role of historical events in shaping the media environment, which were not simply driven by technological developments. The media era owed its genesis to the First Gulf War in 1991, when CNN’s 24-hour coverage sparked the growth of international media and news production, undermining reports from censored domestic media (see also Hafez, 2001; Sakr [2007b] similarly observed that Egypt’s satellite deployment was a response to Iraqi media propaganda in the war). In this way, CNN was a proof of concept, but frustrations with its Western-biases (such as its uncritical and dehumanizing coverage of the war) discredited Western media and pushed Arab media development, such as Al-Jazeera (launched in 1997). The Arab diaspora was another sociological catalyst Ghareeb connected to the growth of pan-Arab newspapers and the Arab internet, which Anderson elaborates upon elsewhere on the evolution of online Islamic community (J. W. Anderson, 2003).

In his study of Arab Gulf countries, Eickelman (2001) saw the 1990s information revolution supported by new public education programmes providing the populace with

the prerequisite literacy and language to participate in the widening media landscape. As with Ghareeb, Eickelman saw the revolution defying barriers and boundaries, providing citizens with greater exposure to different peoples and ideas, allowing new types and levels of interaction, and ultimately shattering ossified authority figures (political and religious). Public debates aired on satellite television or in pan-Arab presses created a preference of “ideas and practices that can be explained, defended, and foregrounded” (Eickelman, 2001, p. 200) rather than being justified on the pretext of dogma or tradition.

The observations made by Eickelman and Ghareeb would be elaborated by Marc Lynch (2003) as the *Arab public sphere*. The Arab public sphere was based on the concept of the bourgeois public sphere developed by Jürgen Habermas, describing the genesis of proto-democratic public opinion in eighteenth century Europe. The Arab public sphere, argued Lynch, emerged from the new transnational media landscape of online papers, satellite talk shows, and listservs outside state-imposed agendas to concentrate on issues of collective concern to Arabs (e.g., Palestinian conflict, Arab unity, democratization, Iraq sanctions). The knowledge and viewpoints available to citizens grew dramatically with the increased accessibility, the circumvention of state censors, the broadcasting of contending opinions and editorials, and the exposure to contributors from different backgrounds. According to Lynch this transformed public opinion among the region’s nations into a significant political force, which had previously been dominated within fragmented and controlled information silos—even without the institutional mechanisms where such opinions could be formally expressed (e.g., fair and open elections). Lynch illustrated the force and formation of this Arab public sphere with the case of Iraq sanctions in the 1990s, which within this transnational multimedia environment galvanized Arab public opinion and led to several key policy reversals in nevertheless authoritarian Arab states, including Egypt.

In a similar approach to Lynch, Hassan Mneimneh (2003) traced the discourse emerging through what he called the *intra-Arab cultural space*. Mneimneh illustrated this cultural space by examining the circulation of mediated responses within the Arab community to the open letter “What We Are Fighting For” (first printed in 2002), an intellectual apologia for the American “war on terror”. The intra-Arab cultural space was nurtured

from the emergence of new media (the internet, mobile communication) and the evolution of old media (offshore newspapers, satellite television), argued Mneimneh. The main features of the intra-Arab cultural space was its simultaneous *diversification* of content (the internet being more domestically oriented while satellite television content being more regional) and *convergence* of format and producers (e.g., all media outlets creating online components or news producers working synergistically), supporting the assertion that media diversification and convergence are “two sides of the same phenomenon” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 10). As with Lynch and Ghareeb, Mneimneh saw the heterogeneous, multi-modal discourse within this mediated space as post-ideological in character, frustrating any attempt from a state to censor or followers of a particular political doctrine (e.g., conservative Islamists) to dominate.

Kai Hafez admitted the international flow of information allowed those who enjoyed such access “to interact with a global discourse and bypass the limits of authoritarian information control” (Hafez, 2001, p. 1), but he cautioned against the fanciful expectations surrounding this period of media change. Hafez argued that the belief “that access [to media] could revolutionize Middle Eastern societies, wipe away authoritarian rule, or modernize traditionalist lifestyles would be rather simplistic” (Hafez, 2001, pp. 1–2). Formal media, according to Hafez, had long repudiated any role as information provider, and instead “act[ed] as a government-controlled apparatus to create and distribute pseudo-facts and disguise information about the most important political, social, and cultural developments in the country concerned” (Hafez, 2001, p. 10). Reiterating the points acknowledged in-passing by other scholars, Hafez observed that foreign programmes and regional broadcasts were largely consumed by only a narrow band of privileged citizens, while the greater majority “are still primarily consumers of the indigenous media” (Hafez, 2001, p. 2). Even so, Hafez observed that the focus of media scholars on traditional media like print and television *underestimated* the breadth of information available to average citizens in the new millennium. To truly measure the information available to citizens, attention would need to be given to the new participatory modes of communication available to citizens that existed wholly outside the purvey and control of dominant political forces, including fax machines, photocopiers, computers, pamphlets, video recorders, and audio cassettes. Without

attending to these “alternative-independent” media, argued Hafez, observers would overstate the censorship and repression citizens experienced under authoritarian regimes. Hafez further reminded readers that citizens continued to rely on traditional communication for vital information, whether face-to-face exchanges or gatherings in markets and mosques, especially among the large segments of semi-literate/illiterate and rural citizens. Hafez noted that this was not simply a question of exclusion or lack of access, but also a critical response to the unreliability of formal sources:

[T]raditional communication in many countries and regions is the most important source of political information. In many cases where modern mass media became victims of state censorship, traditional communication took care of the distribution of the banned items of information. (Hafez, 2001, p. 11)

It was for this reason that informal channels and small scale media which enabled more participatory production and circulation deserved more attention. Hafez’s analysis suggested that the new, complex information environment around the turn of the millennium was ever richer and more complex than already understood.

The internet seemed a growing force in the “alternative-independent” media diversifying public knowledge. As the internet advanced, it created new opportunities for participatory engagement, especially with the growth in the mid-2000s of social media (social media are defined as interactive and networked online platforms enabling users to consume, contribute, and share content). Prior to this period, limited access to the internet in the Arab world made earlier scholars like Alterman rather tentative regarding its impact. By the mid-2000s this had changed as social media created new hubs for user-generated content such as public diaries in blogs and online video-sharing portals like YouTube (launched in 2005). Exploring the growth of the internet in the region, Deborah Wheeler (2006) conducted ethnographic research in internet cafes in early 2004 in Egypt and Jordan, using interviews from 230 internet users, mostly of modest socio-economic status. Wheeler found the internet a prized resource for information among her participants:

Repeatedly, internet café users in Jordan and Egypt celebrate the tool's ability to give them new opportunities to develop their knowledge and opinions of politics and social issues, cultural differences and identities, especially on those subjects which might be taboo in face to face interactions. (Wheeler, 2006, p. 14)

Lynch (2007) saw one of the earliest form of social media, blogging, as an expansion of the informational foundation of the Arab public sphere. While the blogging community might not be large (at around 10% in Lynch's estimate) it was prominent among public opinion leaders and social elites (e.g., journalists, diplomats, scholars, and activists). Responding to Lynch's study, Tom Isherwood (2008) added and emphasized the role of blogs for citizens journalists, creating an arena for non-mainstream news which broadcast media outlets self-censored (e.g., stories exposing police brutality). In Isherwood's view, blogs were not new or revolutionary, but served to intensify and accelerate trends in satellite and private presses towards "covering the regime much more aggressively in the past few years than previously [...] by providing an outlet for any story or opinion that is too controversial even for such newspapers" (Isherwood, 2008, para. 56). Nagwa Fahmy's (2010) examination of blog content confirmed Isherwood's assertions, finding that Egyptian blogs gave space to the stories censored from mainstream media. Moreover, Fahmy's analysis showed the bloggers "use many strategies to vouch for the credibility of the news they publish [...] such as] video clips, sometimes recorded on mobile phones, and provide links to other sources that confirm their stories" (Fahmy, 2010, p. 21). This supported findings from the comprehensive study of the Arab blogosphere conducted by Etling, Kelly, Faris, and Palfrey (2009). Etling *et al.* observed a particular kind of information sharing culture emerging through social media that relied heavily on links to substantiate the claims contributors presented:

Linking has contributed to a 'show me' culture on the internet where readers see for themselves the sources of information a blogger has referenced and make their own judgments about the validity of the source. (Etling et al., 2009, p. 13)

For instance, Etling *et al.* found that YouTube was the most common out-linked site in the blogs they analyzed (the second ranked was another social media site, Wikipedia) and most of the links led to socio-politically significant videos.

The later developments of online platforms such as the social network Facebook and the micro-blogging network Twitter continued this seeming online divergence from broadcast media (print and TV), with the newer interfaces increasing peer-to-peer communication, facilitated primary and secondary user-generated content production, and interconnected networks of content. This social-versus-broadcast binary among media scholars can be demonstrated in a content analysis of Hamdy and Goma (2012). Hamdy and Goma compared the content covering the Egyptian uprising in state-owned newspapers, private newspapers, and social media content (YouTube videos, Facebook posts, Twitter tweets, and blog entries). The authors found stark narrative discrepancies in how the January 25 demonstrations were portrayed: state media generally portrayed a “conspiracy” by “foreign” or domestic “political interests” employing “thugs” and “agitators”, advocating that Mubarak “remain” in office and that “order” be asserted; social media generally presented “human interest” stories of a “revolution” against “dictatorship” and “corruption”, advocating for Mubarak’s “resignation”; private newspapers presented a variety of narratives between these extremes.

Superficially, such observations suggest that broadcast media and participatory media worked in opposition—the former fettered, professional, and hierarchical and the latter free, amateur, and egalitarian—resulting with different outlets provisioning different types of information. Yet such impressions are misleading: sufficient scholarship shows that convergence joins social media with broadcast media to profound degrees. In Etling *et al.*’s study the third and fourth ranked links in blogs were formal media websites: Al-Jazeera and BBC. The study further found that domestic media outlets were commonly cited by local blogs (i.e., Egyptian blogs linked to Egyptian media, Saudi blogs to Saudi media). Furthermore, content moved in both directions, from broadcast media to social media and from social media to broadcast media. The top linked video among Egyptian blogs was amateur footage of an altercation following a traffic accident, where the woman at fault is filmed wielding a cattle-prod and phoning her father, a high ranked

security official, to send her one of his officers as she threatens the other driver. This story of abuse of power and privilege did not remain on social media, and was soon taken up by a private Egyptian newspaper. This case of mutual penetration by online and offline media was not an exception. Social media was not simply a parallel system to broadcast media; if it was, it would be a negligible medium. Isherwood observed that the convergence of social media with broadcast media that afforded social media its disproportionate impact upon the wider public discourse and circulation of news:

[B]logs have a ‘multiplier effect’ because they influence the print media, email newsletters, and satellite television, which all reach larger audiences. (Isherwood, 2008, para. 14)

In Naomi Sakr’s study of the relationship between Egypt’s offline and online media in the first decade of the twenty-first century, she observed a co-dependent hybridity of social media with the growing popularity of political talk shows in Egypt. Social media content was printed in newspaper columns and openly discussed on television. This interpenetration continued in a different form after 2007, when the government began to increasingly clampdown on online and offline media (see **2.Background**). In this period of elevated censorship and self-censorship, the “evidence of hybridization between online and offline media emerges not so much on television screens as behind them, in personal contacts more than programs,” when “the most-watched TV hosts were all following a range of subjects discussed on Facebook and reflecting this in their shows” (Sakr, 2012, p. 331). Sakr paints the image of a complementary and interdependent informational milieu rather than one of clear-cut division and distinction between social media and broadcast media:

Concerned Egyptian citizens, journalists, and politicians made heavy use of online space for political communication precisely because mainstream offline media were largely closed to them. The teams behind Egypt’s main evening television talk shows learned to interact with bloggers and Facebook campaigners because, in the shared context of political repression, these sources were relevant to viewers. (Sakr, 2012, p. 334)

Emblematic of the media convergence in Egypt, Sakr (2013) observed in her study of changes within Egyptian journalism around the Uprising that the “[t]ake-up of blogging and social media in Egypt amply demonstrated how participatory, cross-media journalism could act as a corrective to the shortcomings [e.g., lack of transparency, poor fact-checking] of offline news media not only in reporting events, but also in doing so with a fuller range of voices and perspectives” (Sakr, 2013, p. 43). Sakr’s analysis of “corrective” information practices is reminiscent of Hafez’s argument a decade earlier of interdependent-participatory media (e.g. cassettes and photocopiers) and interpersonal communications operating as supplements to formal sources subject to regime coercion. But while Sakr found in the fluidity of the media environment myriad avenues to circumvent authoritarian control, she also demonstrated that both online and offline platforms were subject to their respective forms of coercion: Egypt’s business elite actively set limits in the realm of television production; international corporations like YouTube and Facebook intervened in content on their platforms, such as removing videos exposing police abuses under the pretext of user code-of-conduct violations. The dichotomy of a free online and shackled offline remains a fantasy: “offline–online media interaction was constrained by the way hierarchies in offline power relations shaped the points of access” (Sakr, 2012, p. 334).

Aouragh and Alexander (2011) conducted a series of interviews with 2011 revolutionaries to disclose how they employed (and did not employ) social media in their activities. The study challenged the narrative of a “Facebook Revolution” and any tacit division between social and broadcast media. Activists demonstrated a keen awareness of the limitations of social media (e.g., relying on face-to-face interactions to establish trust or covertly coordinate activities), while the actions of Al-Jazeera journalists relying on Facebook, Twitter and blogs to continue reporting once its offices were attacked blurred the categorical separation of these spheres of media. Arguing that the 2010-2011 Arab revolts “reconfigured the very division of the media architecture”, Aouragh and Alexander wrote:

It has reached the point where we need to think beyond the satellite-internet divide and try to understand how it

emerges as a single powerful disseminator that includes traditional and new forms of mediation. We propose to consider this revolutionary stage as consolidating a synchronization of new social media and satellite media. (Aouragh & Alexander, 2011, p. 1351)

Marwan Kraidy's (2008, 2010) work on the media industry is also useful here, despite his focus on non-news content. Kraidy observed that with the rise of private media and telecommunications sectors in the 2000s, media convergence was accelerated in the pursuit of financial viability and success, pushing for a multi-platform, cross-genre, interactive, and trans-national communication ecosystem. This could take the form of mobile phones used to vote on *American Idol*-like programmes or value-added online content to complement traditional media products. Given these developments, Kraidy advised that media scholars "go beyond the exclusive focus on television and build research frameworks that integrate the press, television, mobile devices, and the internet" (Kraidy, 2008, p. 100). Kraidy labeled this context of multiple media convergence *hypermedia space*, where the roles of sender/receiver or producer/consumer were blurred in a continuous communication process characterized by surveillance, feedback, and so on.

Based on this literature, the information milieu Egyptians currently negotiate evolved over the course of that last thirty years. Its contemporary configuration has been given several descriptors over the course of its expansion: convergence, marketplace of ideas, intra-Arab cultural space, Arab public sphere, hybridization, synchronization, and hypermedia space. What is consistent is that however complex and multifaceted, the circulation of information remains interconnected within a greater assemblage, in reference to which I will employ the term *convergence*. Before turning to the next section on the study of audiences and their responses in such a setting, a digression is necessary to include another facet of the information milieu hitherto neglected: the state.

3.2.1.1 Addendum: The state

Literature on this transformative period (post-1990s) of private media and telecommunications developments afforded little analytical attention to the role of the

state beyond its practices of promoting or (more frequently) inhibiting the circulation of information. This seemed to be a trend regarding scholarship surrounding the information revolution, both inside and outside the Arab world. The same year Alterman published his report on the Arab media environment and its potential political impacts, political scientists Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye Jr. castigated “information revolution” boosters for ignoring the role of official institutions. The authors emphasized the importance of formal institutions for the production of information: “The quantity of information available in cyberspace means little by itself. The quality of information and distinctions between types of information are probably more important. Information does not just exist; it is created” (Keohane & Nye Jr, 1998, p. 84). To ground the rhetoric around the information revolution, the authors reminded readers that it “exists in the context of an existing political structure, and its effects on the flow of different types of information vary vastly (Keohane & Nye Jr, 1998, p. 85).

Keohane and Nye drew attention to the role of the state for being as pertinent as ever, even in an era of transnational communication where the state was increasingly treated as irrelevant at best or obstructionist at worst in the production and circulation of information. In the Arab world, these sentiments could be seen in the 2003 Arab Human Development Report, which compiled feedback from preeminent scholars from the region to discuss the status of the region’s knowledge society (UNDP, 2003). A questionnaire on issues about knowledge acquisition was sent to a sample of Arab university faculty as representatives of intellectuals across the region. Respondents expressed dissatisfaction in general with the status of knowledge acquisition in their countries (only 38% satisfaction score). The lack of a reasonable measure of freedom in radio and television was ranked as the highest impediment, yet the 2003 AHDP report also repeatedly highlighted the influence of politicization and censorship in the domestic production and circulation of knowledge. Furthermore, anticipating the polarized information environment presented in the last chapter (**2. Background**), the report found that knowledge often became the battlefield—and by extension, the victim—of competing political interests:

Knowledge conflicts in the Arab world are often versions of political conflicts in societies where both the sanctioned knowledge paradigm and that contesting it are motivated and sustained by the deep and opposing ideological objectives of ruling powers and their opponents. (UNDP, 2003, p. 147).

These informational influences of political powers and the state are elaborated in greater detail by El-Mikawy and Ghoneim (2005) in their report on knowledge production in Egypt. Based on interviews with scholars, ministry advisors, and journalists regarding state institutions and government agencies, El-Mikawy and Ghoneim charted the “governmental dominance of the supply of information” (2005, p. 5) and the dysfunctions this incurred. The authors detail how state institutions such as the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics monopolized the creation, collection, and provision of social data, as well as the licensing of independent researchers. El-Mikawy and Ghoneim also described the obscurity under which most figures are produced, often manipulated to create certain preferred results. Despite a growing multiplicity of knowledge producers and disseminators in state institutions (cotemporaneous with the media’s information revolution) including quasi-governmental bodies, advisory councils, think tanks, and non-government organizations, the researchers warily observed these new producers were “albeit not all of good quality” (El-Mikawy & Ghoneim, 2005, p. 11). Information creators were often pressured “to produce the ‘politically correct’ information which considers only some voices whose demands can be accommodated,” and exhibit an aversion “to collect too much information on the impact or result of economic reform, lest information brings it under more fire and criticism” (2005, p. 20). The geo-political overlap between urban centres of political power and information production intensified this pressure to self-censor.

As we will see in successive chapters (especially in **5.State Information**), the state’s practices in producing and circulating knowledge converge with the rest of the information landscape. Though the role of the state (beyond analysis of state-run media and the regime’s interference with non-state media) falls outside the purview of most media studies, the influence of the state deserves more attention to understand the larger

context of knowledge in Egypt. With that said, the next section returns to media scholarship and its observations of Arab audiences.

3.2.2 Arab audiences

Returning to the early period of the modern information landscape in the 1990s, Alterman (1998) anticipated that the exposure of Arab audiences to the new diversity of content would create “an increased premium on their ability to sort through that information and separate the important and meaningful from the scurrilous or irrelevant” (Alterman, 1998, p. 59). According to Alterman, in this information-rich setting, with various sources competing over citizens’ limited attention, the ability to influence the public would be increasingly defined by how audiences actively filtered and assessed information. To decide among competing sources, credibility would become an increasingly important basis for negotiating this new marketplace, forcing Arab governments to “put forward information in a competitive marketplace of ideas in which those ideas will increasingly stand or fall based on their acceptability to the public rather than on governments’ ability to compel their acceptance” (Alterman, 1998, p. 60).

Alterman’s expectations, while not unfounded, illustrated analyses of audiences removed from any historical or cultural context, instead portraying them in the role of generic “consumers” in the new “marketplace of ideas.” Countering this, Mamoun Fandy (2000) emphasized the legacy of state propaganda and servile media on the habits and practices of Arab audiences, predisposing them to adopt skeptical and sophisticated information consuming and processing practices long before the arrival of satellite signals. Characterized neither by kneejerk incredulity nor credulous gullibility, citizens raised in these environments rife with misinformation had cultivated a “special talent for distinguishing true news from false” (Fandy, 2007, p. 125). According to Fandy, information consumers relied on a combination of mass media and interpersonal communications for information; they searched for cues of a source’s trustworthiness; they read for hidden meanings or implications; and they sought to identify the biases and motivations of speakers. To assert the veracity of news, Fandy (2000, 2007) described citizens relying on chains of provenance to substantiate any claims (i.e., knowing the source of a source’s news, and their source’s source, etc.); he also observed that

audiences used linguistic markers to sort speakers (e.g., formal Arabic denoting an elite source). Taking advantage of the new global flows of communication, another consumer tactic Fandy detailed was the *anywhere but here* approach to information where outside sources—as disinterested parties to the events they represented—were preferred to domestic sources on domestic matters (e.g., trusting a Qatar station for news on events anywhere but in Qatar); this practice is partially supported by the observation that that foreign satellite broadcasts tend to be given more credibility than local terrestrial broadcasts (Amin, 2008).

Fandy's "anywhere but here" tactic may be attributed to the tendency of Arab audiences to conflate their perception of media with their respective country, seeing little separation. Aziz Douai observed this in the responses of Moroccan viewers of the U.S.-backed *Al-Hurra* news station: "no respondent was able to isolate 'Al-Hurra' from the United States, and no respondent was able to isolate the credibility of the station from the credibility of the United States" (Douai, 2010, p. 86). Arab audiences typically perceived media as serving the interests of their "owners", as Al-Hurra viewers found it "only 'natural' that Al-Hurra would seek to 'promote' its sponsor's interests in the region" (Douai, n.d.). Douai concluded that Al-Hurra viewers ranged from "suspicious" to the "selective", "diverse and hostile, but still willing to engage" (Douai, n.d., p. 17). That this skepticism was expressed by actual viewers of the station indicates how Arab audience listen without definitive expectations of objectivity, neutrality, balance, or professionalism, and instead are continuously engaged in analyzing and processing of the information they consume. Indeed, Douai remarked in his review of Arab audience research that "accumulated empirical evidence strongly suggests that audiences are active agents" (Douai, n.d., p. 5).

Such consumption patterns are not unique to the digital era, but once again fall within a longer historical experience. In the era of radio, with Arabic language broadcasts from Voice of America, the BBC World Service, and Radio Monte Carlo, many Arabs simply used these nominally "more credible stations" to supplement their domestic information with foreign sources (Boyd, 1999). Douglas Boyd's survey of Arab radio and television found that "listeners understand that the government has its priorities and its points of

view, and those who listen to non-Arab international broadcasts appear to be listening to gain another opinion about a local or international event” (Boyd, 1999, p. 5). This suggests a far more nuanced negotiation of multiple sources beyond an outright rejection of one in favor of the other.

The work of William Rugh (2004), a former diplomat, explored the permutations of cultural, economic, political, and legislative forces shaping the media industries across the Arab world. Rugh’s observations of Arab audiences supports the portrait Fandy, Douai, and Boyd paint of Arab audiences, describing newspaper readers exercising a great deal of scrutiny in analyzing and extracting information:

Readers look for information, but they also seek nuances in language and even omissions in reporting, which they may detect if they listen to foreign radio broadcasts. In an area of the world where public opinion polls and open parliamentary debates are rare, observers look to media content for indicators of political trends and probable future developments. (Rugh, 2004, pp. xv–xvi)

Along with these consuming behaviour practices, many observers have noted the propensity of citizens to rely on conspiracy theories when processing information. As opposed to those who attributed such conspiracy thinking to irrationality or chauvinism (e.g., Cass Sunstein and Daniel Pipes), Anderson (1996) considered conspiracy theorizing in the Arab world as a response to the paucity of reliable information, claiming that conspiracy theories “proceed from too little information, from information that is imprecise, where too little is known (especially about motives, intent, and context)” (J. W. Anderson, 1996, pp. 96–97). In Douai’s (2010) reflections on conducting audience research in the Arab world, he noted that the citizens manifested a “culture of suspicion largely stems from the domestic and global political landscape in the region” (Douai, 2010, p. 85). This climate of mistrust was so widespread that it permeated the research process itself, with participants becoming suspicious of researchers asking for their attitudes and views, leading some “respondents to disguise their genuine/honest opinions” (Douai, 2010, p. 85).

Charles Hirschkind's (2006) rich ethnography of religious audio-cassettes that widely circulate in Egypt since the 1970s is useful here for the connection it demonstrates between media content and consumer sensibilities. Hirschkind found that the styles and content of these cassettes, exposing listeners to myriad Islamic sermons and exegeses, conditioned how audiences engaged in public discourse, shaping their "modes of appraisal." The media of sermon cassettes oriented the attentions of audiences to particular communications, and the ways they intellectually engaged with the claims they encountered day-to-day (on religious matters). Hirschkind emphasized that consuming these sermons did not homogeneously or mechanistically inscribe the thoughts and beliefs of listeners; rather, the religious media sensitized listeners to certain styles of communication and matters of discourse, wherein individuals nevertheless engaged in open debate and exercised independent reasoning. Hirschkind wrote that "the affects and sensibilities honed through popular media practices such as listening to cassette sermons are as infrastructural to politics and public reason as are markets, associations, formal institutions, and information networks" (Hirschkind, 2006, p. 9).

Observations like Hirschkind's, atop those previously presented, suggest contextually conditioned dispositions of audiences towards the consumption and processing of information. Connecting these frameworks to the new media landscape presented in the previous section, it is useful to revisit the notion of *convergence*, but as it was theorized by Henry Jenkins (2006). According to Jenkins, convergence could not be reduced to the recirculation of content, the mergers of content producers, or the duplication of formats across platform. Instead, convergence for Jenkins referred to the public culture that developed around these phenomena, "a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 3). This emphasizes the "work" spectators perform in the contemporary media setting as they interact with information:

Convergence does not occur through media appliances, however sophisticated they may become. Convergence occurs within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others. Each of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and

fragments of information extracted from the media flow and transformed into resources through which we make sense of our everyday lives. (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 3–4)

For this reason, we see Kraidy (2008) advising any researcher investigating Arab audiences to move past traditional frameworks studying media consumption oriented around one specific medium, network, or programme, and use instead frameworks “that integrate the press, television, mobile devices, and the internet” (Kraidy, 2008, p. 100).

If Kraidy pushes for the study of audiences within a culture of convergence, the observations of Fandy, Anderson, and Rugh push for the study of audiences within a culture of contention (doubt and distrust) (for the environmental counterpart to this latter culture, see **2.4. Media developments**). But if the convergent or contentious aspects of modern Arab audiences are under-explored, they ought to be considered an extension of a much larger problem several prominent Arab media scholars have observed: the lack of research on Arab information consumers.

For all the academic documentation that exists on Arab media detailing the inner workings of Al-Jazeera and its geo-political ramifications, the innovative applications of social media, or the practices of domestic censorship, the audiences themselves remain largely unknown. Seven years later after his initial report, Alterman complained that media scholars “know shockingly little about what the people of the Middle East watch, and how they interpret that information” (Alterman, 2005, p. 207), making it impossible “to understand what is happening in the Middle East today, and to have any sense at all of what will happen in the future” (Alterman, 2005, p. 207). One particular oversight was how citizens themselves were responding to the transforming information landscape. Naomi Sakr, a long time scholar of the institutional changes undergirding the Arab satellite era, similarly noted that the “expansion of political content in Arabic on television and the internet during the late 1990s and early 2000s was not matched by a corresponding volume of ethnographic studies of relevant user responses” (2007a, p. 3). This lacuna regularly permitted media scholars to exaggerate the impacts of these transformations, whether as positive and negative developments:

With the voices of ordinary television audiences still barely audible, and with only a relatively short time having elapsed since satellite broadcasting and the internet became prominent elements in Arab politics, pronouncements about new media influence have too often been limited to observations about causality that are broadly positivist in character but without being grounded in empirical research. (Sakr, 2007a, p. 4)

Noting that “audience narratives remain conspicuous by their absence, replaced by the assumption that voices heard in public represent those that remain unheard” (Sakr, 2007a, p. 5), Sakr called on a research agenda employing thick description in the spirit of Clifford Geertz to reveal the everyday culture of people to remedy this vacuum.

In his review of Arab audience research, Hussein Amin (2008) described the area of audience research as an understudied facet of the Arab media field. Amin attributed the field’s state of “infancy” to the repressive actions of “historically authoritarian governments whose strict control and distrust of the mobilizing effects of mass media have hampered the development of indigenous approaches to communications research in general and audience research in particular” (Amin, 2008, p. 70). But the growing political and economic diversity Amin witnessed in Arab societies in recent years created a need for a responsive approach from media studies: “The speed of technological and political change in the region calls for a renewed commitment to quality communication research, with a particular stress on understanding Arab audiences” (Amin, 2008, p. 87). Mohamed Zayani (2012) similarly blamed the lack of development in Arab media studies on state repression, with institutional and political restrictions on audience research having led to a dearth of “any current, reliable, independent data with which to analyze viewing habits, patterns and preferences” (Zayani, 2012, p. 57). But Zayani also found the Middle East’s academic system partly responsible by encouraging highly disjointed and parochial research. Zayani described Arab media studies as a “relatively new”, fragmented, “unevenly developed”, and under-theorized field, singling out as a case in point how few studies exist on Arab audiences as indicative of the field’s current deficiencies. He noted that those studies of audiences which do exist tend to be descriptive and exploratory with little theoretical depth.

Having established the need for further research on information consumers, as well as identifying several attributes of the local audience culture (i.e., contention and convergence) for further investigation, the next section presents insights from scholars on how to go about redressing these issues.

3.2.3 Lessons for research

Drawing on the research paradigms outlined above, social media and broadcast media are interwoven in a convergent culture. This convergence, combined with the contention introduced in the last chapter and expanded upon above, entail from audiences a corresponding set of competencies for navigating the assortment of content and negotiating its range of quality. Investigating these contextualized audience practices requires integrating several conclusions from Arab media scholarship regarding the scope, concepts, and methodology necessary for such an investigation.

3.2.3.1 Wider social and historical milieu

In his review of Arab media scholarship, Zayani criticized the field for relying on “a set of unrevised assumptions, which are insufficient to explore a region-specific set of dynamics that have been accentuated and altered by the forces of globalization” (Zayani, 2012, p. 59). He argues that the application of theories developed for historically-bound cases in the West must not be prematurely applied to starkly different political, institutional, economic and media environments. Zayani criticizes for instance the application of Habermas’s theory of the bourgeois public sphere, utilized by Arab media scholars such as Lynch.

One step to avoid imposing inappropriate outside frameworks is to recognize what Fandy called *false cultural cognates*, whereby observers make assumptions based on superficial similarity between Arab media to media in the West. He points to political debate programmes such as *The Opposite Direction* on Al-Jazeera—a station itself sometimes referred to as the “CNN of the Arab world” (see Johnson & Fahmy, 2008)—that resemble CNN debate programs with guests expressing different opinions, engaging in open argumentation, and soliciting audience participation. Fandy accused analysts such as Lynch of mistakenly conflating the similarity in *form* with similarity in *content*,

obscuring the “staged-ness” of these programmes, and thereby overstating their socio-political significance.

These warnings invite us to be more circumspect about the frameworks we risk imposing on the local context, even ones as basic as the public-private dichotomy. Sakr noted that in the Middle East media agendas can be enforced on outlets regardless of their nominal independence from political or economic elites, and she cautioned against “drawing simplistic distinctions between market and state” (Sakr, 2007b, p. 3). Fandy confirmed this, arguing that transferring the notions of “private vs. public” as an analytical tool “fail to comprehend the subtleties of the connections between journalists, owners, repressive apparatus uses and a very peculiar system of punishment and reward” (Fandy, 2007, p. 14).

Expanding the analytical aperture of a study demands including the wider historical and social contexts shaping information consumption practices. Walter Armbrust, scholar of Arab media and culture, has criticised the myopia that otherwise contaminates research. Without situating media innovations (e.g., satellite broadcasts and blogs) in the history of innovations and their consequences produces a body of literature that “is completely ahistorical” (Armbrust, 2012b, pp. 42–43), veering into reductive technological determinism as any new technology becomes “a new champion that will slay whatever beast we fear, whether it takes the form of authoritarianism, terrorism, Western dominance, or patriarchy” (Armbrust, 2012b, p. 49). Armbrust gave the example of the so-called “Al-Jazeera effect”, “that the new medium, harnessed to the function of providing information, would cause dramatic change” (Armbrust, 2012b, p. 48), whether as change towards radicalization or democratization. Armbrust dismissed the notion of “dramatic change”, arguing that “change is more often a gradual process of slow sedimentation; in other words, the gradual changing habits and practices over long periods” (Armbrust, 2012b, p. 49). And this is not to suggest that change is linear or predetermined; rather, Armbrust observed that teleological assumptions around media obscure the reactive nature of change: “we should be attentive to how media does what it does, rather than select in advance to enable a particular outcome, blinding ourselves to alternative possibility” (Armbrust, 2012b, p. 48).

An extension of analytical *presentism* and *technological determinism* is the problem of *media-centrism*, i.e., the exclusive focus on the media, treated as an autonomous social agent. Arab media scholar Dina Matar observed how the Uprising, where new media were leveraged for political movements, led to “media-centric or technologically-deterministic arguments that remain underpinned by deep-seated convictions, and biases, about the power of media and its potential role in socio-economic and socio-political change” (Matar, 2012, p. 76). Not only is this fallacious, but it forecloses much richer explorations of the local significance of media. Zayani criticized the media-centric approach for obscuring “the fact that media speaks of wider processes at work” (Zayani, 2012, p. 55) and “context-specific forces of a social, political and cultural nature” (Zayani, 2012, p. 64) in the Middle East’s complex social fabric, where there exists a “tight connection between media, political communication, political economy and, in fact, culture at large” (Zayani, 2012, p. 55). To capture these complex dynamics, Zayani recommended a cultural studies approach to resolve these omissions in Arab media studies, thereby foregrounding the anthropological and socio-political and giving “attention to the integration of media in everyday life [which] can prove useful in understanding the manifestation and implications of the changing media ecology in the Middle East” (Zayani, 2012, p. 70). This demands situating people’s mundane and routine experiences as consumers within the wider confluences of forces and institutions:

Understanding the significance of media-mediated experiences in their full complexity necessitates attention to the political, economic and social dimensions underlying the multiple discourses of everyday life. (Zayani, 2012, p. 70)

Over a decade prior, these same criticisms were raised by Annabelle Sreberny. While Sreberny did not dismiss media-centric models outright, she noted their limitations by relegating the “specific histories, congeries of social, political, and cultural forces” into the background while casting media as a divine intervention “from the ‘outside’” (Sreberny, 2000, p. 74). Once again, the call for studying media in the Middle East required moving past media-centric models to explore the wider social dimensions they were interwoven with:

In many non-Western contexts, the particular histories of media development, their intersections with political and economic power, and their contribution to and impact upon cultural values are still poorly understood; here media studies remains an emergent kind of analysis, and only makes sense as a serious analytic enterprise if conducted within broader sociopolitical contexts. (Sreberny, 2000, p. 74)

3.2.3.2 Convergence of information

As already mentioned, there is a need to recognize people's consumption of media and news as more participatory, diverse, contested, and multifaceted than commonly assumed—that they are negotiated through a culture of convergence (Jenkins, 2006). Many published studies exhibit a tendency of conceptualizing media as monolithic blocks, whether it is domestic versus foreign broadcasts, Al Jazeera versus CNN, or social versus broadcast media for comparative research. But we have already seen there is a growing recognition of the multimedia milieu citizens inhabit, with all media formats, types, and programming making up a single, interconnected Arab media environment. Whether this milieu is referred to as media convergence, the Arab public sphere, hypermedia space, or any other title, it remains a variegated landscape where audiences simultaneously negotiate between competing sources. A contextually sensitive study must appreciate that alternative sources do not replace other sources, but operate alongside them, and audiences negotiate between them simultaneously.

But if one wishes to truly capture the convergence of information flows in the modern Arab landscape (as well as escape the paradigm of media-centrism), we must also look beyond the media to include non-mediated communication. Face-to-face exchanges in private, semi-private, and public spaces (e.g., markets, coffee houses, mosques) are traditionally very important channels of information alongside broadcast media. Hafez (2001), Fandy (2007), and Rugh (2004) argued that in Arab societies there is generally an inverse relationship between the remoteness of formal, institutional sources and their perceived reliability, suggesting that interpersonal contacts—as potentially the most trustworthy entity in one's environment—serve as vital sources of information and

opinions alongside institutional outlets. Focusing on one without understanding the role of the other precludes a large, important segment of people's information environment; it makes even less sense in the era of social media, which further blurs the line between interpersonal and broadcast communication by enabling two-way communications, whether one-to-one, one-to-many, or many-to-one.

3.2.3.3 Thick-description

As the review of the literature above demonstrates, there is an outstanding need for data on Arab audiences, especially qualitative, contextually-sensitive data. Several Arab media scholars have expressed frustration with the over-reliance on surveys (what few that exist) which leave little room for the narratives of audiences in their active engagement with content (Abu-Lughod, 1997; Armbrust, 2012b; Hafez, 2008a; Kraidy, 2008; Zayani, 2012). Sreberny wrote that beyond appreciating the influences of surrounding institutions and the legacy of history when studying audiences, "we need thick description of internal processes as well as analysis of external forces" (Sreberny, 2000, p. 74). Meanwhile, Sakr observed that "the voices of ordinary television [read: any media] audiences [are] still barely audible" (Sakr, 2007a, p. 4) and that their "narratives remain conspicuous by their absence" (Sakr, 2007a, p. 5). To remedy this lapse, she too called for thick, ethnographic studies.

Thick-description, served up through ethnographic research stands to reveal these internal processes, exposing new contextual interactions previously unknown, and permitting participants to speak to phenomena which might otherwise be prematurely predefined by the researcher (e.g., regarding how information is consumed and processed).

Furthermore, Sakr emphasized, ethnographic studies give recognition to otherwise disenfranchised populations. Douai, by way of example, employed an ethnographic approach in his study of *Al-Hurra* because it "seek[s] to provide a first-hand account with a 'thick description' (Geertz 1973) of the social world surrounding the act of communication" (Douai, 2010, p. 79), placing "events and people in the social, cultural and political history and contexts in which they are constituted" (Murillo, in Douai, 2010, p. 81). He found that such an approach permitted his participants to "be self-reflective, openly critical, and candid in their assessments of the channel" (Douai, n.d., p. 21),

thereby capturing the “interpretive relation between audience and medium” (Livingstone, in Douai, n.d., p. 6).

Drawing primarily on media studies literature, this section presented insights into the context and population of the present study, as well as several gaps awaiting investigation. It is with these facts and questions established that I now turn to literature from the field of information studies and more specifically, the sub-field of everyday information practices, as a research framework through which the points just raised can be incorporated.

3.3 Information studies

3.3.1 Background

In a review examining the intersection of philosophy with information studies, Jonathan Furner (2003) succinctly defined the latter as an interdisciplinary field which examined the “phenomena that are thought to be closely related to information and the ways in which people interact with information and with information-related phenomena” (Furner, 2003, p. 166). Information studies, as such, includes a broad category of interests, encompassing “various overlapping subfields and related professions [e.g., librarianship, social informatics, information retrieval]” (Furner, 2003, p. 166). The area of information studies undergirding the present study is what Reijo Savolainen termed *everyday information practices*, an outgrowth of the more established concept of *information behavior*, defined in a key work compiling the core information behaviour paradigms as “how people need, seek, manage, give and use information in different contexts” (Fisher, Erdelez, & McKechnie, 2005, p. xix).

According to Tom Wilson—described as “perhaps the most influential advocate of the concept” (Savolainen, 2007, p. 113)—information behaviour consisted of “the totality of human behavior in relation to sources and channels of information, including both active and passive information seeking, and information use” (T. Wilson, 2000, p. 49).

Information was treated as something people *needed*, *sought out*, and *used*, with each of these three groups of activities having their own respective categories of phenomena: information needs, information seeking/searching, and information uses. The behaviours

in question were studied according to a wider range of artifacts, such as databases, libraries, catalogs, books, newspapers, face-to-face communication, websites, search engines, and even TV advertisements. In David Ellis's (2011) study of information behavior as an evolving discipline—the emergence of which he dates to the 1970s—he described the subfield being characterized by four main features: an epistemic orientation to the social sciences, methodological orientations to qualitative (over quantitative) research and empirical validity, and a productive orientation towards modelling behavior. Given the service-oriented nature of the wider field of information studies, Ellis noted that information behavior was originally concerned with the study of professionals (e.g., engineers and scientists) in order to provision better services and systems. Donald Case's (2006) literature review of recent information behavior research published between 2001 and 2004 found the majority of studies remain focused on social elites, with over half of all studies exploring people in specific occupations (scholars, engineers, managers, etc.). Yet, already by this period, the scope of study had begun shifting towards looking at information behaviors outside the workplace, exploring the informational activities of subjects not defined as professionals, students, or workers, but as citizens.

According to Case (2012), *citizen information behavior* became a catchall phrase for non-occupation problem-solving across a range of matters such as health issues, the pursuit of hobbies, deciding who to vote for, or learning about civic opportunities. But the inherent limitations of this early formulation was highlighted in an encyclopedia article by Reijo Savolainen (2009a), who observed that citizen information behavior offered a limited scope which “primarily refers to people’s rights and obligations toward social institutions as voters or participants in activities of civil society” (Savolainen, 2009a, p. 1781). To better represent the interests of some information scholars into the “relatively stable and recurrent qualities of both work and free time activities” beyond problem-solving or decision-making scenarios, and without the normative assumptions attached to the notion of citizenship, the qualifier of “citizens” was replaced with “everyday life”. Savolainen distinguished two kinds of everyday life information: one kind intended to solve problems (e.g., seeking a migraine remedy) and another kind consumed to help one orient oneself (e.g., watching the daily news). However, he later clarified that this distinction

was an analytical one since a set of information activities could move between the two categories.

Another shift in research sought to redefine its subject of investigation as information *practices* in the place of information *behaviors* to represent an epistemic orientation to language and social interactions in constructing knowledge and reproducing social relations. This approach is opposed to the cognitivist/behaviorist basis of information behavior research, wherein information is approached psychologically and individualistically “as the act that causes a change in a person’s mental state, internal ‘knowledge structure,’ or ‘image’ of the world, or as the event in which such change takes place” (Furner, 2003, p. 175). Savolainen, a central proponent of information practices, claimed that the distinction marked a shift in focus “away from the behavior, action, motives, and skills of monological [i.e., isolated] individuals” (Savolainen, 2007, p. 120). Information practices accordingly presents a more sociological (pace psychological) approach to information’s consumption (Case, 2012; Savolainen, 1995, 2008a). Savolainen (2008a), for instance, states that:

Information practice may be understood as a set of socially and culturally established ways to identify, seek, use, and share the information available in various sources such as television, newspapers, and the internet. (pp. 2-3)

Based on exploring inter-subjective, routine, informal, and contextualized information activities, the information practices research relies largely on in-depth interviews to develop ethnographic insights. Research within information practices varies according to the populations studied (e.g., expectant mothers, prisoners, students, abused women) and the researcher’s analytical interest (e.g., authority, serendipity, class).

The significance of the difference between information practice and information behaviour was openly contested in a debate between Savolainen and Tom Wilson, with Wilson arguing that the schism was a distinction without a difference based on a “straw-man” representation of information behaviour (Savolainen & Wilson, 2009). Though the debate remains inconclusive, Savolainen admitted that the distinction mostly served as “a self-reflexive and critical attitude among researchers toward their familiar concepts in

order to avoid being ‘trapped’ in their own discursive formation” (Savolainen, 2007, p. 127). It is with this reflexivity in mind that I undogmatically label the present study as an investigation in the category of everyday information practices, without the intention of precluding it from sphere of information behavior or entrenching this intra-disciplinary division.

3.3.2 Everyday information practices

As information behavior scholars looked to civilians in a wider range of everyday scenarios, their conceptual frameworks grew as well. One core approach, bought forward by Brenda Dervin (1983) in her sense-making model, emphasized that information should be viewed as a means rather than an end in itself. Moreover, the need for information reflected the situation in which a consumer found himself, conditioning his drive for information, his selection of information, and his activity in selecting and using information. Dervin’s model represented an alternative to the transmission model of information, where information is an objective entity transferred from possessors to the dispossessed. Dervin invited scholars to examine “how people cope with their worlds, given the constant human imperative of making sense where none is given” (1983, 161). According to Dervin, “to study information, we must understand what the information-seeker calls information, that is, what makes sense to that person at a particular point in time and space” (in Harris & Dewdney, 1994, p. 17). Five premises underpinned Dervin’s model (Dervin, 1983):

1. Information was not an end, the acquisition of which was the goal, but a means to an end, allowing subject to progress through troublesome situations;
2. Information was simply that which informs, whether subjective or objective in nature, whether it was derived internally or externally, and whether it addressed open-ended or close-ended situations;
3. People employed various tactics in “moving forward”, usually with high reliance on informal networks and low emphasis on the less personalized formal networks;

4. People informed themselves under the conditions of the specific context which exercised predictable influences; and
5. The utility of information was assessed in a variety of ways, including making decisions, making progress, getting support, gaining self-control, and so on.

Dervin called for research to take on the perspectives of information consumers—their drive, motivations, setting, goals—shifting the focus away from information systems to users (Dervin & Nilan, 1986; Dervin, 1983). In Christina Courtright's (2003) review of how contexts were conceptualized in information behavior research, she credited Dervin's user-centered paradigm for pushing information scholars to explore the context in which practices took place. The new paradigm described by Dervin focused on the user's subjective experience in the examination of information needs and uses, encompassing the motivations, situations, and viewpoints of consumers.

Reinforcing and expanding upon Dervin's findings, Roma Harris and Patricia Dewdney (1994) summarized the result of research into the six principles of information practices of people:

1. Need for information arises from the position and character of the seeker (cf. Dervin point 1)
2. Many factors, physical or social, affect the pursuit of information, and the perceptions of its helpfulness over basic qualities such as information's authoritativeness (cf. Dervin points 4, 5);
3. People usually seek to expend as little effort as possible, looking for information that is most (physically, emotionally, financially, cognitively) accessible and familiar, except in certain situations that seem urgent, encouraging people to spend a lot of effort (cf. Dervin points 3,4);
4. People tend to go first to interpersonal sources, especially people like themselves (unless costs of going to personal contacts outweigh benefits) (cf. Dervin point 3);
5. Seekers expect emotional support;

6. People have patterns or routines for information seeking.

The principles identified by Harris and Dewdney encapsulated core tenets of everyday life information practices, according to Savolainen (2009a), with the prominence of information practices as routine, non-rational, social, and situational reiterated by various studies in successive decades. The next three sections will review studies on certain aspects of information practices which are relevant for orienting the present study: people's negotiation of various *sources*, the role of *context* in information practices, and the influence of *attitudes*. The last two sections go on to focus on two everyday information practice scholars whose works are central to the conceptual design of the present study, Elfreda Chatman and Reijo Savolainen.

3.3.2.1 Sources

As research expanded its exploration of citizens, including marginalized communities, people's preference for first-hand experience and interpersonal sources over mediated or formal sources was reiterated time and again (see Dervin's point 3; Harris and Dewdney's points 3, 4). This was seen in domestic studies by Harris and Dewdney (1994) on abused women or Amanda Spink and Charles Cole of poor Afro-Americans (in Case, 2006). The few international studies conducted—as summarized by Case (2006, 2012)—replicated these findings: Ikoja-Odongo, Mooko, Jiyane and Ocholla found South African women relying on word-of-mouth as their primary source of information; Beer found Scottish rural islanders averse to outsider information and withholding information from outsiders; Savolainen and Kari found Finnish citizens preferring information from personal sources such as friends and colleagues over print sources, and print over the internet.

Case noted that the studies demonstrated citizens consuming and evaluating sources in a comparative fashion, wherein any one source was positioned within “the usual array of interpersonal and mass media sources of information” (Case, 2006, p. 302). This was especially true for the internet, which was “most often a complement to or substitute for other sources”, with the quality of information found online determined through comparison with other sources, demonstrating that sources such as the internet needed “to

be considered within the larger context of other sources and the person's [...] everyday reality" (Case, 2006, p. 303). This revisits the question of information consumption in a culture of convergence.

In conceptualizing how consumers broached sources, several researchers relied on the work of Patrick Wilson (1983), who presented a sociological deconstruction of the authority of information sources. Whether said source was an individual (e.g., a scientist), an institution (a library, an agency), or a document (newspapers), its authority rested on its perceived credibility. Patrick Wilson's analysis explored how citizens struggling to understand the world must negotiate a gamut of "journalists, political analysts, social commentators, politicians and statesmen, other observers and participants, propagandists" (1983, p. 143) of variable and inconsistent quality to choose who to rely upon for their "second-hand knowledge":

We must constantly question the authority of our sources. But it is not so much their special competence at observation or reporting that we question but rather their honesty, ability, or inclination to avoid bias. (P. Wilson, 1983, p. 143)

Wilson developed the notion of *cognitive authority* to explain people's choice of sources and how they made use of them. Cognitive authority referred to the influence conferred to certain sources within a specific sphere of interest, such as a scientist speaking on climate change or an athlete regarding fitness. Such authorities were not just relied upon for their stock of knowledge (answers to closed questions, e.g., what chemicals have a greenhouse effect) but their opinions (answers to open questions, e.g., what are the long-term consequences of global warming). Wilson observed that the more invested and dedicated the information consumer, the greater importance they placed on the authority of sources. The status of a cognitive authority was voluntarily conferred and deferred to—unlike formal authority which can be imposed regardless of consent—and could just as easily be withdrawn. For instance, the consumer may reject the authority of the source if it is incompatible with the values and aspirations important to her. Wilson's concept would be applied and expanded by Pamela McKenzie (2003), whose analysis of the discourses of pregnant women revealed how fluid and negotiable cognitive authority can

be, that “it was developed, presented, challenged, and accepted in a conversational interaction” (McKenzie, 2003, p. 283). Acquaintances, fellow mothers, and medical professionals could find their authority validated or contested, and participants even conferred on themselves the requisite authority by virtue of their first-hand experiences: “They sometimes relied on themselves as cognitive authorities, using their own reasoning, bodies, or experience as evidence against which to test the authority of another source” (McKenzie, 2003, pp. 281–282).

The sources people choose were therefore subject to particular situations and the competing options available. As point 2 from Harris and Dewdney state, these factors meant authoritativeness in itself did not explain people’s consumption patterns. The studies—as well as Harris and Dewdney’s points 3 and 4 and Dervin’s point 3—show that people only rarely seek out formal sources of information. Case observed that “perhaps the ‘most authoritative source’ is not what many people prefer when seeking information; maybe they would rather have the most entertaining one” (2006, p. 127). This observation reiterates critiques raised by both Dervin and Wilson regarding the divide between information and entertainment, which they consider an arbitrary distinction (Dervin 1983; Wilson 1983). Wilson found following the news comparable to listening to Bach as “a form of play, but a deeply serious one” (P. Wilson, 1983, p. 143).

3.3.2.2 Context

As everyday information practices widened its scope to consider the influence of context on the actions, views, and interests of participants, it also faced the challenge of conceptualizing a context and setting its boundaries for civilians, which is much simpler for studies of information behaviour in workplaces. In Christina Courtright’s review of context in everyday information practices, she compiled several parameters which had been examined in respect to subjects: the institutional context (surrounding institution and agencies), the social context (networks and norms), and the cultural context (population-diffuse factors).

Courtright also noted different sorts of context-individual interactions presented in the research. The most basic was the context-as-container model, with the context serving as

the backdrop to information behavior findings in a contingent and predicable manner. Second was the person-in-context model, investigating the subject's situational perspective and the variable interactions that thereby emerge. The third approach was an extension of the former with the social nature of surroundings emphasized, the person-in-social-context model. The last was the embedded-context model, a co-constructive approach which treated information practices as constitutive and inseparable from the context, rather than taking place *within* it. The co-constructive approach seems especially relevant to the present study, as it treats participants as “members of various groups and communities that constitute the context of their mundane activities” (Savolainen, 2007, p. 120). Overall, the literature suggests a spectrum of approaches through which to conceptualize context.

3.3.2.3 Attitudes

The final approach sets out to explore the internal, psychological factors influencing everyday information practices, whether self-perception, motivations, interests, cognitive styles, affective responses, confidence, or other attributes. Jannica Heinström argued that alongside the newfound appreciation for the effects of context in research there ought to be equal attention to the psychological dispositions of participants. Whereas standard information behavior studies had already begun including such dimensions—for instance, Carol Kuhlthau's (2013) decades of work on dynamic cognitive and emotional states over the course of information searching—Heinström looked to supposedly stable characteristics of personality. Using a combination of information behaviour surveys and personality questionnaires, Heinström found that people who tested high for competitive personalities were more critical information consumers, while more neurotic personality types were less effective at information retrieval, were biased towards corroborative information, had difficulty with assessing relevance, or felt insecure when searching.

In a similar vein, Diane Nahl (2005) looked at the intersection of emotions with information behavior in her *affective load theory*. Nahl found that participants who experienced a sense of self-efficacy and optimism resulted in better performance, revealing how “diverse affective behaviors interact to produce an effective coping style when searchers feel challenged by uncertainty”. Matching Heinström, Nahl observed that

“[a]ffective load is high when people operate with ineffective cognitive behaviors. For example, cognitive ambiguity, uncertainty, or information overload attract affective behaviors that are negative and counter-productive to the searcher’s goal” (2005, p. 41). Lynda Baker’s work (based on the psychologist Suzanne Miller’s Behavioural Style Scale) on personal styles of information gathering, classifying people as “blunters” or “monitors”, is another example of personality intersecting with information activity. In a problematic or painful situation, monitors sought out relevant information about their situation, since gaining information reduced their stress; meanwhile, blunters avoided information and distracted themselves, since information increased their stress.

While such studies are informative, and authors admit that attitudes are not wholly responsible for the practices of information consumers, this psychological focus demonstrates an essentialist spirit, presupposing that “the core personality will remain the same although the way it is expressed and how much it influences behaviour varies according to context” (Heinström, 2003, para. 87). A more interactionist approach to information practices, however, suggests that personal dispositions are dynamic extensions of the context in which they are situated. This, as well as several other points raised, can be seen in the work that follows in the next section, spotlighting information scholars Elfreda Chatman and Reijo Savolainen.

3.3.2.4 Spotlight 1: Elfreda Chatman

Elfreda Chatman worked towards building a theory of information poverty by conducting a series of ethnographies on poor and marginalized people (janitors, senior-home residents, and prisoners) to record the meanings, feelings and expressions that reflect the social realities of these individuals, employing in-depth interviews alongside documenting media consumption (radio, TV, papers, magazines) (Case, 2012; Chatman, 1999). Retirement home residents, blue-collar workers, and incarcerated women all shared insecure, vulnerable, confined, and precarious existences, whereby the social alienation they experienced (meaninglessness, isolation, self-estrangement) influenced how they consumed, handled, and shared information. Chatman found that these marginalized populations concerned themselves largely with immediate issues, expressed low self-efficacy and fatalism, were mistrustful of outsiders, routinely exercised secrecy

and avoidance, relied on media for entertainment and distraction rather than knowledge, and preferred intimate sources of information while neglecting official or institutional resources. Chatman also found that impoverished citizens prioritized experiential, situational knowledge, relying primarily “either on one’s own experience or on hearsay from someone else” (Chatman, 1991, p. 440). Chatman made the distinction between first-level and second-level knowledge to explain these practices: first-level knowledge is knowledge *of* things the information consumer personally experienced, while second-level knowledge is knowledge *about* phenomena outside of the consumer’s personal experience and, by extension, from sources positioned outside her lived world. Chatman’s participants preferred first-level information because “it conforms best to common sense” as well as the reliability and verifiability such sources offered:

[T]he information is credible because the provider is trusted. Viewed from a small-world perspective, information is accepted because the source’s claims can be easily researched and verified. Moreover, the sense-making activities that accompany the information occur within a context that is shaped by cultural norms and mores.
(Chatman, 1999, p. 215)

In the confined and precarious world of her participants, information was consumed according to “its need to respond to immediate concerns, its pragmatism, its focus on concrete situations and its reliance upon first-level experience” (Chatman, 1991, p. 440).

Central to these practices were the systematic avoidance of information, the reliance on secrecy, and the underlying sense of risk motivating these tactics (Chatman, 1996, 1999). The practices reflected the deficit of trust and solidarity within her participants’ communities (Case, 2012). This perspective was then further developed in Chatman’s study of prisoners, who participated in a complex social network and shared reality, leading to her theory of *life in the round* (Chatman, 1999). Life in the round was defined as “a life lived with a high tolerance for ambiguity [...but also where] most phenomena are taken for granted [...and events] are viewed as reasonable and somewhat predictable” (Chatman, 1999, p. 213). Supported by a prosaic sense of stability, people living life in the round had a threshold for imprecision that encouraged information avoidance in

everyday practices. Another factor in these people’s decision to avoid or withhold information was their identity as an “insider.” Being an “insider” meant being an authority, having “grasped the totality of their world” (Chatman, 1999, p. 212) and being “in the know”: knowing who to trust, what is accessible, and what to avoid. This communal insight of like-minded individuals constituted the social reality collectively experienced when living life in the round. This explained why information may be avoided: the seeking and having of certain information could undermine a person’s inclusion in this shared reality, incurring risks of exclusion and expulsion. This was how information circulated—or failed to circulate—in a world lacking in solidarity and trust. The bounded, hive-like round is also characterized by its own worldview, a set of values particular to the community. Among the prisoners, this could be seen in the new set of beliefs and goals adopted by inmates over the course of their incarceration.

The work of Elfreda Chatman on marginalized people reveals attributes of immediate world-view, low self-efficacy, mistrust of outsiders, and a sense of fatalism. Her exploration of the co-construction of context in information practices led to a distinctly non-rationalist view, treating information as a *performance*:

In trying to explain how information aids in forming a worldview, a conclusion I’ve reached is that information is really a performance. It carries a specific narrative that is easily adaptable to the expectations and needs of members of a small world. It also has a certain form. In this situation, the form is interpersonal, and for the most part is being used by insiders to illustrate ways of assimilating one’s personal world to the world of prison life. (Chatman, 1999)

3.3.2.5 Spotlight 2: Reijo Savolainen

Savolainen’s approach to information practices, because of its scope and framing, has been described as one of the “more sociological” models in information studies research (Case, 2012). Compared to Chatman’s ground-up theory development, Savolainen applied a structured model of everyday information practices, seeking to capture “the role

of social and cultural factors that affect people's ways of preferring and using information sources" (Case, 2012, p. 143) by exploring:

The ways by which the individual monitors daily events and seek information to solve specific problems are determined by values, attitudes, and interests characteristic of their way of life. (Savolainen, 1995, p. 267)

Savolainen studied the impact of context on the development of these preferences: "how people perceive their daily information environments and how they evaluate the usefulness of alternative sources in contexts" (Savolainen, 2008b, p. 275). Information practices research is therefore the means for exploring these activities as conditioned by the milieu people inhabited. Savolainen's approach to information seeking and use is connected to Anthony Giddens' reflexive modernity, entailing more individualization within a zeitgeist of greater risk and insecurity: "From the perspective of reflexive modernization, the use of information about the conditions of activity is a core means of regularly monitoring and redefining what that activity is" (Savolainen, 2008a, p. 1). It is partially through our information practices, according to Savolainen, that we make sense of the everyday world and everyday events. Despite the significance of these practices, they are often invisible. According to Savolainen (2008a), information practices represent highly diffuse social activities which are mundane, routine, and naturalized experiences that can be easily overlooked; yet information practices are made up of specific actions—like identifying sources or evaluating them, that may be physical (scanning a newspaper) or discursive (asking a librarian for assistance)—which are systematized by a "stock of knowledge" across typical situations, guiding the choice of sources to consume and those to avoid.

Savolainen based his research on two populations, environmentalists and unemployed persons. As with Chatman, Savolainen combined the study of information with the study of media. Instead of isolating a study of information from a study of the media that circulates it, he used the terms "information practices" and "media habits" interchangeably to describe people's routine uses of new media, old media, and interpersonal contacts (Savolainen, 2008a). Like Chatman, he used in-depth interviews to

analyze these practices and to “focus on the ways in which people make their experiences and choices accountable to themselves (and the researcher) in the context of an interview” (Savolainen, 2008a, p. 5). Along with this data, Savolainen used various quantitative tools to map the relative significance of the various media (from high, moderate, or marginal importance) and relevant factors (content, accessibility, usability, and user characteristics). Savolainen was also careful to distinguish source preferences from source attributes (as opposed to assuming, for example, that a more credible source is the preferred source). Savolainen found that when seeking problem-specific information, human sources were the most important and print sources were only minimally important; by contrast, when people sought orienting information, the regular monitoring of everyday and current events, this pattern was reversed.

But Savolainen’s approach to information practices is not simply the “seeking” of information, but also its subsequent processing and application. He wrote that these too are socially meaningful activities, but observing these patterns requires looking beyond what Savolainen calls the “micro-level” scope of information practices of immediate, real-time reactions to focus instead on the “macro-level”, where “people interpret the value of information sources more generally” (Savolainen, 2008a, p. 149). Macro-level studies investigate the recurring challenges consumers face and the responses they adapt:

In such studies, questions worth closer examination include the value or relevance of everyday information, the criteria by which information from diverse sources is accepted or rejected, the credibility of information, the problems of information overload, as well as, the ways in which people may cope with everyday problems by making use of information” (Savolainen, 2008a, p. 8).

In other work, Savolainen (2009) synthesized the constructivist and information processing approaches to define information use as “interpretation of the quality of things,” and he emphasized that such interpretations are dependent on relating and contrasting information entities (e.g., messages, sources, formats, experiences) through strategies such as satisficing, elimination-by-aspect, attribute weighing, and personal reflection. This perspective is useful for studying any information environment,

recognizing as it does the diverse and complex setting citizens negotiate simultaneously rather than piecemeal or sequentially. These facets of everyday information practices led Savolainen to attend to matters of media credibility, cognitive authority, coping with information overload, and handling uncertainty. Reminiscent of observations in the previous section regarding Arab media developments, Savolainen observed that credibility was particularly important in situations of contentious information and within increasingly complex media ecologies. He notes the need for more everyday information practices research exploring situations where people “assess the credibility and cognitive authority of alternative sources” as they are faced with an “increasing number of alternative sources [that] are competing for people’s attention in the daily information environment” and thereby increase their chances to “encounter conflicting information” (Savolainen, 2008a, pp. 149–150).

In keeping with the notion that information is a means rather than an end, Savolainen insisted that information practices were important to people because they advance particular *projects* that occupy and define people (e.g., spreading awareness of environmental degradation; supporting new eco-friendly legislation). Savolainen focused on how participants’ interests “structure everyday knowledge into regions of decreasing relevance and that this structuring is also reflected in the ways in which actors assess the importance of sources” (2008a, p. 111). Over time, individuals developed their everyday information practices through concrete experiences “concerning the usefulness of different information sources while monitoring daily events and solving everyday problems,” coalescing into a “set of attitudes and dispositions toward information seeking and use in certain situations” (2008a, p. 53).

Savolainen’s model deserves expansion in approaching a consumer’s context as something broader than the perceived information sources to include the socio-political backdrop against which participants and information institutions operate, or the historical experiences that shape the expectations of participants. This more detailed approach to context would allow the study of information practices to take into account the climate of distrust in Egypt and situate these practices within personal, institutional, and national narratives.

One limitation of Savolainen's approach, however, is his operationalization of media according to medium (i.e., newspapers, television, and internet). It is evident that Savolainen's broad media categories overlook distinctions within formats, channels, programmes, issues, institutions, styles and ideologies across sources, all of which serve as discriminating factors when negotiating media in a climate of distrust. The shortcoming of Savolainen's approach of analyzing media/sources by medium is even evidenced by the responses of Savolainen's participants, about half of whom when asked could not state which type of media was the most credible, and instead (quite naturally) answered: "it depends" (Savolainen, 2008a). Furthermore, though Savolainen acknowledged in his research that no one type of source was consumed to the exclusion of others, yet more work needs to be done on how consumers of information simultaneously and differentially negotiate these different sources. For instance, Savolainen (2008a) observed that personal contacts were important not for information per se but for opinions on mediated information; and that while popular sources such as national newspapers were perceived as suffering from inadequate content, they were appreciated for providing background information on issues. Familiar, ritually consumed sources (especially print and television) become important for orienting information, but insufficient for more focused interests.

Chatman's ethnographic approach and her framing of the role of avoidance, status, deception, secrecy, and risk-taking are necessary considerations for the current study. These considerations are also reflected in Savolainen's studies, which not only observed the dependence of his environmentalists on personal contacts, but saw these contacts as being a part of closed and exclusive networks based on trust. His participants, skeptical of general media, would essentially cultivate their own "life in the round" as they turn to thematically-specific sources and trusted contacts. Both Chatman and Savolainen's investigations into media practices and information interpretation help lay the conceptual groundwork for the present study. Applied critically, both Chatman and Savolainen offer useful tools for exploring how politically-engaged Egyptians negotiate contentious and convergent information.

3.3.3 Conclusion

The literature from information studies has been largely confined to participants in the West. Case observed that “the research community has become global, with leading investigators found in other parts of Europe (especially Scandinavia), along with Africa and Asia,” yet in his 2012 review he admitted the West-centric focus persisted. In light of the concerns raised by Arab media scholars, relocating the area of study (i.e., Egypt) should also alert researchers to the risk of importing geographically and historically circumscribed suppositions. Again, thick-description and context-sensitivity can mitigate this danger, which are both fundamentals of information practice research. Interviews remain the most popular method for data collection in information behavior research—used in a third of all studies—allowing researchers to tease out otherwise innocuous everyday practices and develop a more global understanding of cultural and social conditions (Case, 2006). Both the individual and society have come into focus, resulting in more attention to context and social influence, more effort to “get inside the head of the seeker, more time spent with individual informants, and greater depth of description overall” (Case, 2006, p. 314). Intensive interviews are therefore used in this study for offering both objective and subjective insights, gathering responses reflecting the richness of individual information consumption habits and local contexts. The next chapter discusses the interview design in more detail, along with the overall methodology informing the study.

Chapter 4 - Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses how the study was designed and conducted, following on the previous chapter (**3.Literature Review**) where methodological issues were already raised. As was seen in the literature review, whether one talks of Arab audiences or everyday information consumers, a number of scholars in both media and information studies have called for thick, descriptive research and demonstrated the utility of intensive interviews. Analytically, they advocate for adopting a wide social and historical scope, recognizing the complex character of the contemporary information landscape, and attending to the habitual activities of participants. The following chapter details the design for the present study in response to these points and more.

The study was designed to document the subjective views of citizens on their information environment and how they and those around them reacted to this environment. Following a small test study in Canada (see 4.5.Stages below), qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured interviews employing open-ended questions from thirty one (31) participants in the spring of 2013, all but one of whom was residing in Cairo, Egypt. These participants were of moderate-to-high socio-economic status from various political and occupational backgrounds. Participants were asked to discuss the state of public discourse, the institutions responsible for the circulation of information, and practices for keeping informed on major social and political issues. Case studies of specific, contemporary political controversies were used to focus and substantiate those responses. The data was then transcribed and thematically analyzed through several cycles of descriptive coding. Of the categories of data that emerged, a select few were used to address the study's central questions and generate a cohesive theoretical framework describing information environments and practices in Egypt. Precautions were taken throughout to ensure the study met ethical standards for social science research according to the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans 2010* and with the approval of a full board review conducted by The University of Western Ontario's Non-Medical Research Ethics Board.

The methods just summarized are elaborated below. First, the basis of the study is presented, including the theoretical approach adopted and the core questions it was designed to address. Next, the design of the study, relying on qualitative methods and the case study technique, is explained. The sample of participants providing the data for the study is then described, including how participants were selected and recruited. The procedures undertaken for data collection and data analysis are presented afterwards. The chapter ends by discussing additional methodological and ethical considerations regarding the study, including the potential risks this study presented (to the researcher and the participants) and the precautions taken to mitigate them.

4.2 Researcher Subjectivity

My identity and background are intricately woven into this study, from the research questions that drive it to the sample recruited to participate in it. As an Egyptian who spent several years in Egypt, frequently visited the country, and regularly interacted with the Egyptian diaspora, I was sensitized to how information practices in the Egyptian context contrasted with how such activities were described in popular and academic literature emanating from the West. The international coverage of the 2011 Egypt Uprising represented for me the culmination of this disjunction, as pundits, correspondents, academics, and other observers discussed the emancipatory role of new information technologies by fitting citizens into a reductive narrative of democratization instead of exploring the indeterminate political outcomes, the lasting repercussions of authoritarian rule, and variable reactions of citizens to the post-Mubarak order. These oversights prompted me to explore the underlying premise that the perception and consumption of information are illustrative of specific social milieus with their own political and cultural circumstances. This idea informed my methodological approach as I sought to give space to citizens to articulate their experiences and perspectives. Yet my own background—as a “secular Muslim” scholar from abroad speaking Arabic with a heavy accent and hailing from an urbanized, middle-class, educated, and liberal family—shaped the types of citizens I could gain access to. My credentials and connections permitted me access to a relatively elite segment of cosmopolitan, educated professionals, privileging me to approach insiders from various movements and institutions. These

elites were able to provide me with invaluable insights into otherwise obscure facets of society as well as their own political positions and viewpoints (see **4.7.Sample**).

4.3 Interpretive framework

According to Creswell (2013), the interpretive framework of a study is its theoretical lens, shaped by the philosophical assumptions of the researcher about matters such as the nature of knowledge or the influence of values. Positivism, pragmatism, or postmodernism are examples of interpretive frameworks based on different assumptions. The interpretive framework used in this study is one that explores the understanding and meaning people project on the world they inhabit, namely social constructivism, which relies “as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation” (Creswell, 2013, pp. 24–25). For the present study, this framework allows the emphasis to rest on the narratives of Egyptian citizens regarding their milieu and their actions within it, especially with respect to the production, circulation, identification, and consumption of information. As Creswell explains, the variability of subjective experiences accumulated through the lens of social constructivism leads “the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrow the meanings into a few categories or ideas” (2013, p. 24). Furthermore, these subjective experiences are not treated as intrinsic or imprinted, but “are formed through interaction with others (hence social construction) and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals’ lives” (Creswell, 2013, p. 25). As such, the scope of research focuses “on the specific contexts in which people live and work in order to understand the historical and cultural settings of the participants” (Creswell, 2013, p. 25). According to Savolainen (2009b), social constructivism stresses “that while the mind constructs reality in its relationship to the world, this mental process is significantly informed by influences from societal conventions, history and interaction with significant others” (194). Tuominen, Talja and Savolainen note that while the constructivist framework treats the individual as the nexus of “knowledge and meanings,” it highlights how these structures are “influenced by language, history, and social and cultural factors such as domain and cultural environment” (in McKenzie, 2003, pp. 261–262). Constructivism stands in contrast to other frameworks such as positivism, which sees a singular and objective reality and seeks empirical findings of deterministic, cause-

and-effect relations within it; pragmatism, a practical and flexible framework oriented to specific instrumental outcomes of research; feminism, which explores identity and power by problematizing the situation of women and the institutions responsible (Creswell, 2013); or social constructionism, which unlike constructivism treats knowledge as “constructed through discourse and conversation rather than produced within individual minds” (McKenzie, 2003, p. 262). This last framework, while appropriate to the study, was dismissed due to the challenge of conducting linguistic analysis of data across multiple languages and dialects.

In order to study the production and consumption of information within a social constructivist framework I adopt certain methodologies from the work of Jonathan Potter (1996). In Potter’s field guide on the study on how claims are socially manufactured to appear *real* (i.e., as facts), he presents two methodological stances originally developed in the sociology of scientific knowledge: a focus on controversies and an approach of methodological relativism. (Controversies are discussed below in 4.4.2. Case studies.) Methodological relativism involves the researcher adopting an indifference to whether some set of claims participants encounter or reproduce are factually ‘true’ or ‘false’ (Potter, 1996, p. 40). By being epistemically neutral, the researcher affords equal attention to how truths are established as falsehoods, recognizing each as the product of social processes. By not “starting with a set of assumptions about what is true and false in any particular social setting and then trying to work out what led some people to get it wrong” (Potter, 1996, p. 40), the researcher avoids privileging any particular position, naturalizing certain beliefs while pathologizing others. This relativism is an important viewpoint for the present study of information sources and how they are consumed and processed. Taking on this relativistic position, the researcher becomes agnostic as to whether sources are actually *informative*, *misinformative*, or *uninformative*, and whether participants are genuinely *informed* or *misinformed*. The study instead gives balanced attention on the dynamics through which such determinations are made, and by extension, the social factors influencing information’s circulation, construction, and deconstruction.

By avoiding any normative preconceptions of information or information sources, the study focuses on the “perceived information environment” (Savolainen, 2008a) defined by participants - environments which are social constructs emerging from participants’ experiences and assessments of sources available to them. Social constructivism and employing methodological relativism allows for information to be seen as an emergent phenomenon, variously shaped by people’s perspectives, practices, and contexts.

4.4 Central questions

Using the interpretive framework above, this research pursues questions based on those raised in the literature review, exploring what Kraidy called the “black box” of Arab audiences (i.e., the dearth of knowledge on the practices of consumers):

*Voluminous theorizing and empirical research
notwithstanding, how audiences decode mediated messages
and how they act upon that decoding remains a black box.
(Kraidy, 2008, p. 99)*

This study peers inside this box, with the primary purpose of understanding how local conditions—of convergence and contention—are constituted in the views and actions of information consumers. It therefore asks the following questions:

1. What sources of information do citizens perceive as available to them? How are they classified, depicted and evaluated sources? What are these characteristics attributed to?
2. How do participants negotiate these sources and interpret their claims to become informed? How do they perceive the rest of the population behaving?
3. How are contextual conditions (cultural, historical, political, institutional, economic, etc.) constituted through these narratives?

As stated, convergence and contention are the two conditions of people’s informational milieu which form the backdrop to this investigation. Convergence refers to the connected and competing myriad of information sources now available to citizens and how they are negotiated (see **3.Literature Review**), whereas contention refers both to the

immediate but pervasive political conflict (see **2.Background**) and the broader historical and cultural legacy of mistrust among citizens (see **3.Literature Review**). At the moment, there is little scholarship on the activities of citizens as they consume information of a political nature in Egypt, where convergence and contention are rampant. Trying to answer the questions above can therefore make a valuable contribution to scholarship in both media and information studies. A secondary benefit of these questions is that they can provide insight into the mindsets of politically-engaged citizens during a turbulent political period (leading to Morsi's ouster), offering a revealing snapshot of Egypt's transitional process and following-up on Kraidy's call to analyze audiences "during major political events" (2008, p. 100).

4.5 Study design

4.5.1 Qualitative research

Answering these research questions requires recording participants' first-hand experiences, their perceptions and interpretations. Qualitative methods were therefore used because they afford participants more autonomy in dictating their own narratives. Creswell explains that in conducting qualitative research—whether an ethnographic study, grounded theory study, narrative study, or the like—the investigator “builds a complex, holistic picture; analyzes words; reports detailed views of participants; and conducts the study in a natural setting” (Creswell, 2013, p. 300). This is not to say that quantitative research (e.g., polls and surveys) are not valuable or needed, but that they are inadequate for articulating the perspectives of participants or exploring environmental influences. Qualitative methods, on the other hand, allow for “the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns or themes” (Creswell, 2013, p. 44). This inductive aspect to qualitative research is important because, unlike quantitative surveys, it provides a granular examination of the experiences and decisions of participants in their everyday lives; these attributes also give qualitative research its aptitude for theory-building, as inductive analysis of rich, exploratory data fosters the growth of empirically-grounded conceptual constructs.

Without this sensitivity it is difficult to understand the impact of local history or culture, leading to superficial analyses of Arab media and their audiences as well as a reliance on inadequate Western frameworks (see **3.Literature Review**). But qualitative methods are sensitive to the environment which participants inhabit (Creswell, 2013), allowing the researcher to unpack the otherwise “black box” of audience interpretation within its social and historical milieu. Savolainen, who used both qualitative and quantitative methods, admitted the value of the former for capturing how participants interact with their “perceived information environment”:

The emphasis on the qualitative research strategy is well founded, because the main interest of the study is on the ways in which people construct their everyday information practices to be meaningful. Construction of this kind may be approached by focusing on the ways in which people make their experiences and choices accountable to themselves (and the researcher) in the context of an interview (Savolainen, 2008a, p. 80)

By enabling a granular, exploratory investigation, qualitative methods serve “to develop theories when partial or inadequate theories exist for certain populations and samples or existing theories do not adequately capture the complexity of the problem we are examining” (Creswell, 2013, p. 48). In **3.Literature Review** several scholars expressed concern over the lack of indigenous, non-Western paradigms and the overreliance on Western theoretical frameworks. The application of qualitative methods for data gathering and analysis permits new data-driven, contextually-sensitive theory-building to partially redress this deficit.

4.5.2 Case studies

The case study design circumscribes the research within a particular system, event or phenomenon—i.e., a case—for a detailed and multifaceted descriptive exploration. This study uses current, publically-disputed political controversies in Egypt as cases for examination. Using on-going controversies complements the case study design, which Yin considers ideal for a “contemporary set of events, over which the investigator has little or no control” (Yin, 2003, p. 3). The utility of such a case study design is that it

complements the strengths of qualitative methods and a social constructivist framework by allowing a case to be examined from multiple perspectives “in a way that incorporates the views of the ‘actors’ in the case under study” (Tellis, 1997, para. 14). The resulting data, within the scope of a specific case, can provide detailed insight into how citizens consumed some sources while avoiding others or processed information regarding a particular controversy; these findings can then be contrasted with those of other controversies and other participants. Meanwhile, the bounded specificity of each case simultaneously allows the context to be reintroduced into the study; as Yin states, “you would use the case study method because you deliberately wanted to cover contextual conditions—believing that they might be highly pertinent to your phenomenon of study” (2003, p. 13). This understanding can be further bolstered by investigating multiple cases within the same study (Yin, 2003), looking at several controversies instead of just one, to provide more analytical purchase (increasing the pool of controversies for discussion also avoids restricting participants to cases they were unfamiliar with). By using case study design, an investigation protects itself from superficial generalization, since the approach “assumes that things may not be as they seem and privileges in-depth inquiry over coverage: understanding ‘the case’ rather than generalising to a population at large” (Stark & Torrance, 2004, p. 33).

The use of case studies can be seen in Savolainen’s study of environmental activists and unemployed persons, where participants were asked to recollect critical incidents when they needed information and described how they sought it (Savolainen, 2008a, 2009b). Savolainen explains that this strategy was employed for the exploration, “to draw an overall picture of the source preference criteria used in various situations of everyday problem solving” (2008a, pp. 121–122). A similar approach was applied to my study, where controversies are used to detail the information practices of participants and their perception of the quality of information from various sources. (The set of on-going political controversies used in the study are introduced in **2. Background**, listed Table 1, and included in Appendix 2). Given the popularity of such controversies, especially among the politically engaged citizens sampled, I did not face the challenge encountered by Savolainen who, despite intending to base his case studies on his participants’ roles as activists, noted that all his participants “found it difficult to recall individual problems

worth reporting as far as their current roles were concerned,” forcing the researcher to allow them “to choose another topic related to non-work problem solving” (Savolainen, 2008a, p. 147).

To be clear, the purpose of examining these cases was not to conduct a political analysis of the controversy itself or to understand what is *really taking place* (see above regarding methodological relativism). Rather, the purpose was to examine how participants became informed on the controversy; how they accepted certain claims and rejected others; which sources they consumed and which they avoided; and how these behaviors were contrasted with those of the general public.

Since this study set out to investigate people’s practices and views in the context of convergence and contention (see **2.Background** and **3.Literature Review**), case studies based on controversies were highly appropriate. Within a convergent information landscape, controversies circulate through state and independent newspapers, radio and television coverage, editorials and televised debates, blogs and Facebook posts, at coffeehouse and marketplace discussions, and even enter Friday-prayer sermons. Controversies are also manifestations of open contention, where competing factions clashed by marshalling their respective narratives. This thereby dovetails with the study’s social constructivist framework. According to Potter (1996), controversies represent situations where truth claims are contested, and therefore offer insight into how certain descriptions of reality are in mid-construction becoming “truth” or “fact”—i.e., they are moments when the social production of knowledge is witnessed in-progress. The second value of this approach is that controversies give license to researchers to question and investigate the positions participants hold since these positions are still openly disputed. As such, case studies based on controversies were also employed in the data collection to also illustrate the process through which information and misinformation were being simultaneously negotiated (i.e., contention). Controversies represent moments when citizens must themselves navigate a myriad of claims, exposing their processes of arriving at information; non-controversies, by contrast, can reveal little since a dominant narrative has already been established across sources and in the minds of participants. It

is for this reason the study explored several controversies in areas such as Egypt's security, economic, human rights, and legal affairs.

The case study demands a relatively dynamic research design, responding to evolving data, the availability of access, and the currency of cases analyzed, none of which can be fully anticipated at the outset (Yin, 2003). For this study, a list was developed of candidate cases by consulting with local acquaintances, participants, and media coverage to identify the most meaningful and effective controversies for study which participants were free to choose from or add to.

Table 1: List of controversies

<p>Al-Azhar poisoning (April 2013): A serious case of food poisoning broke out at Al-Azhar, the prestigious academy for Islamic religious learning. Over 500 students were hospitalized, and calls were made for the director's dismissal. What made this incident significant was that it came about during a confrontation between the Morsi government and the religious institute over the government's plan to issue certified Islamic Bonds (see below). Some suspected that the poisoning was orchestrated by the Muslim Brotherhood to oust opponents in Egypt's leading Islamic institution and replace them with more compliant officials.</p>
<p>Ethiopian dam (June 2013): Egypt relies on the Nile river for 95 per cent of its water, so when the construction of a dam in Ethiopia (formally announced in 2011) caught public attention under Morsi, there was fear that this could lead to a significant decrease in Egypt's water supply. Besides being perceived as an infringement on Egypt's national resources, the way the regime handled the issue became a point of contention and ridicule. This was not helped by a broadcast meeting where the political figures in attendance seemed to unaware that they were being televised, engaging in several impolitic statements.</p>
<p>IMF loan (August 2012 onwards): To increase the state's reserves, the Morsi government pursued a \$4.8 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The negotiation process was obscure to the general public, leaving citizens to fear conditions of the loan could include subsidy cuts and other austerity measures enacted without public consultation. The government's clandestine passage of tax-hikes—which were just as quickly withdrawn—only exacerbated uncertainty and mistrust.</p>
<p>Islamic bonds (June 2012 onwards): To raise capital, the Morsi government planned to issue bonds that adhered to Islamic tenets (i.e., non-interest based) to subsidize state projects. Skeptics feared that these Islamic Bonds would be issued for Egypt's national resources (e.g., the Suez Canal), paving the way for the country's treasures to fall under foreign ownership, especially wealthy Gulf states like Qatar, seen as a close ally of the Brotherhood.</p>

Table 1: List of controversies (continued)

<p>Islamist constitution (November 2012): The constitution passed by the Morsi government was written by an Islamist-dominated constitutional assembly. It was perceived by some as a means of unilaterally establishing conservative Islamic ideology into Egyptian governance, offending secular Egyptians. In November 2012, in a move to secure the passing of the bill against judicial interference, Morsi gave himself unchecked executive powers. After a general referendum, the constitution was successfully adopted for the next few months, only to be suspended after Morsi's removal on July 4, 2013.</p>
<p>Judicial authority (April 2013): As Egypt's judiciary and the Morsi government found itself increasingly at odds over the legality of various policies and court decisions, there came from Islamist parties a bill to curb the power of judges—the Judicial Authority Law. This galvanized the country, with many seeing it as an important step to reform Mubarak era appointees and the dynasties that had emerged within the profession, and others who saw the Islamist government infringing on the independence of the court system.</p>
<p>Killed revolutionaries (January 2011): Around 800 revolutionaries had been supposedly killed during the 2011 Uprising, and the question of culpability was still openly debated. Most accusations centered on the Mubarak government, blaming Egypt's security services, including Mubarak himself and his head of the notorious Interior Ministry. Others, however, accused Islamists, seeing them as benefiting from the escalating violence and maligning the regime.</p>
<p>Maspero massacre (October 2011): Eight months following the Egyptian Uprising, Coptic protesters marched on the state television Maspero building, in response to inflammatory coverage of their grievances over sectarian conflict. These protesters were violently attacked by military personnel. The media defended the actions of the officers, claiming they were being attacked, though videos spread online of soldiers using live ammunition on protesters and running through them with armored vehicles.</p>
<p>NGO trial (December 2011): At the end of 2011, the offices of several foreign non-governmental organizations (NGOs)—including Freedom House, International Republican Institute, International Center for Journalists, National Democratic Institute—were raided. Forty three workers were arrested, with the organizations charged for receiving up to \$50 million in illegal funds. Accusations were also made of foreign interference, though the charges were seen by many as politically motivated.</p>
<p>Opera firing (May 2013): Culture Minister Alaa Abdel Aziz, dismissed the Cairo Opera House director, Ines Abdel Dayem. This followed his firing of the heads of the General Book Authority and the Fine Arts Council. As the opera staff rallied behind the director and held demonstrations, the affair became a public issue. Though Minister Aziz was not himself a member of the Brotherhood, his actions were seen by some to represent an attack by the conservative Islamist government against the arts and culture, while others saw his actions as redressing corruption and misuse of public funds.</p>

Table 1: List of controversies (continued)

<p>Port Said Massacre (February 2012): A year following the Uprising, fans of a Cairo soccer club were attacked at a soccer game in the Suez city of Port Said, resulting in the killing of 79 and 1000 casualties. Around two dozen locals were held responsible and sentenced to death (but no security personnel); the appeal upheld 21 death sentences, leading to riots that caused further deaths, as well as having emergency laws implemented across Suez canal cities. Since the victims of the massacre had been among the revolutionaries, it was suspected that state security was responsible, but no security personnel were held accountable.</p>
<p>Prison break (January 2011): In the days immediately following the start of the Uprising, several attacks on Egyptian prisons and police headquarters across the country took place, killing over 50 officers and prisoners and freeing around 20,000 inmates. Many of the prisoners were political prisoners, including many senior members of the Muslim Brotherhood, such as the future president, Mohamed Morsi (held without charge). Speculations around the incidents led many to allege that the attacks were orchestrated by the Brotherhood, working with outside militias; others blamed the Mubarak regime, seeing a ploy to spread unrest and cow the civil uprising.</p>
<p>Sinai soldiers (June 2012; May 2013): Egypt's tumultuous Sinai peninsula witnessed two particularly noteworthy events during Morsi's tenure. In the summer of 2012, 16 soldiers were killed in an attack, with the assailants never ascertained. This crisis was seized upon by the newly elected president Morsi to forcefully retire several SCAF generals, with whom he had been engaged in a power struggle. Almost a year later, soldiers were once again attacked in Sinai, this time with 7 soldiers taken kidnapped. They were eventually released, though the circumstances of their release were undisclosed. Both incidents were subject to speculations, such as whether the Brotherhood had orchestrated these events to coincide with political interests.</p>

4.6 Stages

This project was conducted in three stages: a test study, a pilot study, and the field study. The test and pilot studies were conducted in southern Ontario (Canada) between January and March of 2013 in preparation for the fieldwork. The purpose of the test study was to serve as a trial-run for the methods of data collection and data handling, familiarizing the researcher with the security procedures and testing the effectiveness of the interview process. Data was therefore gathered employing the fieldwork's techniques and procedures in January and February 2013 on four Canadian participants' regarding a local controversy (the scandals surrounding Toronto mayor Rob Ford). The pilot study began collecting data in preparation for the fieldwork, and as such discussed the situation in Egypt with a participant with relevant expertise and insight; the purpose of the pilot was

to ensure the researcher would be able to commence fieldwork immediately on arrival, with background knowledge, identified controversies, local contacts, and potential participants already prepared. Since only one participant was successfully recruited and interviewed for the pilot stage, this participant met the field recruitment criteria, and the data collected from the participant complemented that later collected in Egypt, this interview was subsequently included in the fieldwork data. The field study was conducted in Cairo, Egypt between that last week of March and the second week of June 2013 (duration: 11 weeks). In each stage, there was a preparatory phase for gathering background information, familiarizing myself with potential controversies, and recruiting participants. Concurrent with the period of data collection was initial data processing (i.e., transcription and preliminary analysis), allowing the successive interviews to be responsive to any growing insight into local conditions and emerging patterns in research findings (Yin, 2003).

4.7 Sample

4.7.1 Criteria

Participants were sought out primarily for their political engagement and secondarily for their professional background. A participant's political engagement—regardless of its degree or orientation—was evidenced by his or her attention to political controversies; support of political figures, parties, or movements; and/or participation in political events such as demonstrations or rallies. In so far as was feasible, the sample aimed to capture the variation of Egypt's political landscape by including a range of political and ideological positions, as well as age brackets. By studying the everyday information practices of a group of ideologically motivated individuals, this sample was comparable to Savolainen's study of environmentalists.

Professional backgrounds served as a second criterion for selecting participants, whereby expert insights relevant to the study (e.g., regarding media sector or public opinion) might be drawn from local researchers, academics, officials, NGO workers, and journalists. These experts were expected to serve three functions: further the researcher's background knowledge on relevant topics, suggest controversies as case studies, comment on the

representation of controversies in the media or public perception of them, and act as intermediaries for recruiting participants in the study.

These two types of contributors were initially distinguished as *participants* (providing first-hand experiences as citizens) and *informants* (providing contextual knowledge as experts). Early in the course of my fieldwork this distinction was ultimately disregarded as an artificial and inconsistent division among participants, and all interviewees are subsequently referred to as participants.

4.7.2 Recruitment

Participants were recruited through a combination of referral sampling and convenience sampling, relying primarily on the former. Unlike standard referral sampling, where potential participants are simply suggested to the researcher who then approaches them himself, reverse referral sampling was used where the referee approaches potential participants on behalf of the researcher prior to direct contact with the researcher. Asking participants to act as intermediaries is common practice in Middle Eastern qualitative research because it establishes the trustworthiness of the researcher, whom otherwise tends to be the object of suspicion (Al-Makaty, Boyd, & Van Tubergen, 1997; Clark, 2006; Douai, 2010; Faris, 2010). In Clark's (2006) survey of researchers conducting fieldwork in the Middle East she found that they struggled "to overcome interviewees' suspicion and to build rapport and trust" (Clark, 2006, p. 419) and, as such, most (89%) relied on referrals to secure interviews; two-thirds of researchers surveyed began their recruitment by relying on their social networks and friends to establish contact with interviewees, and another third looked to colleagues and local academics. Following this same practice, I relied on personal contacts, then participants, to act as intermediaries. All potential participants were forwarded my contact information and a letter of information prior to their inclusion to ensure they offered their informed consent. On several occasions, potential participants simply passed on their contact information to the researcher (through an intermediary) so that I could contact them. After being fully informed regarding the study, if potential participants were still willing to contribute, they were asked to select a time and location convenient to them to conduct an interview.

A secondary means of recruitment used was convenience sampling, with certain persons directly solicited to participate in the study. This applied only to quasi-public figures (e.g., journalists, prominent activists, and academics) with publicly available contact information who were approached by the researcher via email or face-to-face (in public settings, e.g., at conferences). Candidates here, too, were briefly informed about the study, given a more detailed letter of information which included my contact information, and asked to contact me if they were interested and available to take part in the study.

4.7.3 Composition

Thirty-one people were ultimately sampled for this study. All but one of these participants was recruited in Egypt. The exception, from the Canadian pilot, presented data complementary to that collected in the field in Egypt and as such was subsequently compiled with the rest of the field data for analysis.

In comparison to the general population of Egypt, the sample consisted of relatively high socio-economic status individuals—possibly the unintended side-effect of the recruitment process. Since the final sample consisted of highly educated, economically secure, politically sophisticated, and urban-dwelling citizens, the study's results reflect the elite-end of Egypt's social spectrum. Yet this unrepresentative, cosmopolitan sample potentially reflects the opinion leaders and constituencies that exercise disproportionate social influence.

If my participants could be identified as an elite sample of Egyptians, they must be recognized however as members of a particular stratum of Egypt's elite. Zayed (2014) divides Egypt's middle class into three segments, with the top-end consisting of a small, insular, and extravagant class of entrepreneurs that enjoyed massive financial and political dividends under previous regimes. At the lower-end of the middle class is the largest segment, made up Egyptians whose education and employment situate them in the middle class but whose income and lifestyle approach impoverished Egyptians. They sit squarely among the 60 million Egyptians (85%) who live below the World Bank poverty line of \$5 a day (Ghanem, 2013). Between these two ends is the middle-tier of Egypt's middle class, consisting of a large segment of professionals which includes police

officers, professors, engineers, lawyers, bureaucrats, doctors, and journalists. Many from this segment enter the political realm, taking on positions in ministries or the parliament, or forming the vanguard of Egypt's political mobilization. Despite the prominence this class segment enjoys, it lacks any ideological unity, instead exhibiting very different political identities and goals. As a group, however, it exercises tremendous influence on social and political culture. This was ultimately the sample I accessed; while unrepresentative of the general Egyptian public, the participants were highly worthwhile for the insights they offered into the socio-political culture of Egypt. Nevertheless, it must be realized that the character of those recruited to participate in this study make generalizable results impossible, excluding as it does many substantial strands of Egyptian society, such as its rural populations, its urban-poor, its religiously conservative communities, and its semi-literate, to name a few.

Participants represented a political spectrum which included self-identified liberals, revolutionaries, socialists, Islamists, and Muslim Brothers.⁵ Some participants supported a political party (e.g., the Constitution Party or the Freedom and Justice Party) or a movement (the 2011 Uprising), while others espoused an independent political ideology (Marxist, Islamist, liberal, nationalist). Several participants gave no clear political identity, though they often expressed a distinct political leaning regardless (e.g., anti-Morsi, secular rule, progressive) over the course of being interviewed. The ages, gender, and occupations of participants also varied, from students to pensioners. Table 2 provides a basic summary of each participant without jeopardizing their anonymity. Here and

⁵ On political nomenclature: *Islamists* are not restricted to Muslim Brotherhood/Morsi supporters; it is a broad political spectrum of conservatives and moderates. Muslim Brotherhood supporters are distinguished from Brotherhood members. The term *liberal* refers to a loose, secular political identity antagonistic to Islamism but otherwise indistinct regarding competing ideologies (e.g., socialists, neoliberals, democrats, revolutionaries, and pro-military nationalists). The study uses the terms *secular* and *liberal* interchangeably as alternatives to *Islamist*, but is more specific where possible. *Revolutionary* refers to the political identity formed through participation in the 2011 Uprising, whether adopted by political neophytes or veteran activists (for more detail, see **2.Background**).

throughout the dissertation, participants are referred to by randomly assigned pseudonyms.

Table 2: List of participants

Abbas is in his late 20s but has been a political activist for years. He labelled himself a social democrat.
Abeer became politicized following the Uprising, befriending and joining revolutionary groups. In her 30s, she manages a business in the service sector.
Ahmed is a middle-aged liberal who heads a civil society organization. A member of the secular political parties prior to the Uprising, he supported and joined the Uprising.
Amira is a staunch supporter and member of the secular and nationalist Free Egyptians party. In her early 50s, she is strongly against the Muslim Brotherhood.
Enis is a retired professional. He was the most politically disengaged of participants, in contrast with most other participants.
Fouad is in his late 30s and has been a member of the Muslim Brotherhood for years.
Galal is a senior faculty member at a university.
Hala is in her 20s and recently returned to Egypt after living abroad. Despite this, due to her upbringing she enjoys a sophisticated and outspoken disposition to local politics.
Hassan is an independent journalist in his 30s.
Hisham is a veteran activist in his 40s who can recall Second Intifada protests in Tahrir a decade prior to 2011 Uprising. A Marxist, he joined the revolutionaries and is a member of one of the revolutionary coalitions.
Ingy is in her 30s and has been an active participant to several government reform initiatives. She joined the revolutionaries and subsequently supported Sabahi's leftist Popular Current Party. She refused to vote for Morsi in the final round of elections.
Kassem is a professor who sympathized with the Morsi government, though he did not identify with the Muslim Brotherhood.
Khaled is middle-aged and occupies a senior position in a political reform NGO. He was a member of the leftist Popular Current.
Lily is a recent university graduate who was involved in and inspired by the revolution. She initially supported El-Baradei's secular Constitution Party (which her family continues to support) but has since distanced herself from it for being overly conservative and elitist, presently gravitating to anarchist political thought.

Table 2: List of participants (continued)

Lotfy is a public intellectual and a life-long activist in his 60s. A staunch socialist, he strongly opposes Islamism and the Morsi government. He identified with and supported the revolutionaries, joining the demonstrations.
Medhat is a retired academic and an Islamist, though he opposes the Brotherhood's government.
Mohamed is a veteran journalist working for a liberal partisan newspaper.
Mona is a young female Islamist and member of The Egypt Party, founded by the popular televangelist Amr Khaled.
Naveen is an early-stage academic closely connected with Egypt's activist communities and the social media sphere.
Noha is a member of El-Baradei's liberal and reformist Constitution Party. In her youth she supported then President Nasser and she remains a committed Nasserist/Arab socialist. She remains politically active and an avid consumer of political news.
Osama is a legal expert in his 30s who supports Islamist politics and the Muslim Brotherhood government. He is suspicious of Egypt's liberals.
Sawsan , an experienced attorney, is a long-time activist for legal reform and women's rights. She admired Egypt's young revolutionaries and supports them.
Sherine is a computer engineer in her 20s who joined the revolutionaries and became politicized following the Uprising. She backed moderate Islamist Abdel Mounem Abou Fatouh for president. She is an active user of social media.
Sonya is in her 50s and is engaged in politics, though unaffiliated with any parties. She is strongly anti-Brotherhood and wished Egypt's military took control of the country.
Thoraya is a senior faculty member at a university. She identifies ideologically as a liberal.
Walid is a senior scholar and former state official during Mubarak's rule.
Yasmine is a retired government employee and an avid consumer of news.
Yasser is a long-time practitioner in state media. He defines his political identity as "Islamic" (but not Islamist) and "nationalist".
Yusef is a young professional who joined the revolutionaries in Tahrir, then pursued a career in independent media production. He describes his politics as "radical opposition".
Zeinab is the youngest of the participants, a young university student and ardent politico. She is involved in informal political movements but she is also interested in formal politics.
Ziad is in his late 30s and has been a member of the Muslim Brotherhood for years.

4.8 Data collection

4.8.1 Interviews

Primary data was collected from participants through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews employing open-ended questions. Some interviews were initially conducted over the phone before arranging an in-person meeting, though one participant was exclusively interviewed over the phone. The interviews (including pilot interview) were conducted from March to June 2013. Interviews were conducted in English and Arabic, depending on the participant's preference, with all face-to-face interviews recorded (with permission) and later transcribed. Where recording was not possible (e.g., interviews conducted over the phone), hand-written notes were used. Translations were done by the researcher, with language consultation whenever necessary.

Around 60 hours of interviews were conducted and recorded. Some participants, usually at their invitation, held more than one session. Interviews lasted on average one hour in length, the longest single session taking 4 hours and the shortest around 15 minutes (over the phone). Some sessions included more than one participant, as an intermediary who arranged the meeting was also present, producing several impromptu, quasi-*focus group* interviews. Locations varied according to the participant, who was always allowed to choose the site. Venues for interviews included cafés, social clubs, offices, restaurants, and private homes.

The semi-structured interviews used to systematically collect the relevant data to answer the research questions, permitted participants to elucidate their responses and the researcher the freedom to employ follow-up questions where necessary. Several controversies with which the researcher was already familiar were raised with participants and they were allowed to talk about any of them, or if they were unfamiliar with all the options, they were invited to discuss another controversy in the news that they had been following. Since participants could provide general background information on any range of topics and talk about any number of controversies, flexibility was necessary in posing questions and follow-up probes.

Besides general questions on the state of public discourse and their own background, participants were asked to discuss how they acquired and processed the information on the controversy, how they perceived the rest of the public responding, and their views of media coverage of the controversy.

4.8.2 Supplementary data collection

Field-notes were also taken throughout the 11 weeks of fieldwork. These loosely ethnographic recordings were based on first-hand accounts, summaries of relevant media content, observations of public events, and discussions with personal acquaintances. While this data was not directly used or presented, it offered important insights that contributed to my knowledge of contemporary controversies, my awareness of background political circumstances, and familiarity with the current the information landscape; this supplementary data allowed me to develop more informed lines of questioning prior or during interviews, as well as allowing me to contextualize topics raised by participants following the interviews.

4.9 Data analysis

Once all data was translated and transcribed, it was subjected to several rounds of manual thematic coding to systematically organize data across interviews to respond to the research questions. In the first cycle of coding, the transcribed data was categorized according to general themes developed through Descriptive Coding (Saldana, 2009), which organized the data into basic topics for the subsequent cycles of intra-thematic analysis. The subthemes were subsequently developed using a combination of Descriptive and Initial Coding for more granular sorting. Themes are organized on main subjects of discussion (e.g., broadcast media, public opinion, trust, information, conspiracies, polarization) while subthemes amalgamated particular activities, relationships, entities, or viewpoints regarding said issues (see Table 3 for examples of the themes and subthemes used). Segments of data were assigned to more than one code if deemed appropriate, permitting data to be duplicated across different subthemes. Analytical memos were used throughout the coding process to note connections across data or highlight significant content.

Table 3: Sample of themes and subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
Information [eventually joined with Trust]	Earned trust; identifying misinformation; culture of ignorance; tactics in handling information; information warfare; the pervasive uncertainty; connection between trust and power
Broadcast Media	Agendas and motivations in the media; media audiences; consumption patterns and preferences; the effects and impacts of media; external influences on media; internal dynamics within media; the ideal and influence of media; quality of media news
Social media	Applications of media; content of social media; representation of social media; users of new media
Controversies	Ethiopian dam; judicial authority law; Islamic bond; January prison Breaks; NGO trial; IMF loans; Killing revolutionaries; Hamas-Brotherhood connection; attack on soldiers in Sinai

For instance, once all the data referring to broadcast media was organized under the eponymous theme, more refined sub-themes were developed around specific topics relating to broadcast media that participants discussed, such as audiences, standards, performance, impacts, preferences, influences, and agendas (see Table 3).

Once the data were organized into these sub-themes, corresponding content from multiple participants was compared to note the various views expressed on a topic or the connection between topics. With data so coded, answers were sought after for questions emerging from themes (in the case of the theme *Broadcast media*): What assessments did participants make of broadcast media outlets? Did they vary according to different types of broadcasters? Did these assessments differ according to the participants' politics? Were views linked to the context of convergence or contention? What attitude did these audiences demonstrate towards sources? The case studies were used to substantiate the responses found for these questions. Since the cases varied across participants (i.e., people often discussed different controversies), cross-case analysis (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003) was used to observe patterns in how information was handled across different subject matter.

Savolainen noted the study of everyday information practices must focus “on the ways in which people make their experiences and choices accountable to themselves (and the researcher) in the context of an interview,” thereby avoiding the Scylla of naive empiricism (“belaboring the obvious and describing just the surface of everyday phenomena”) and the Charybdis of over-interpretation (“imbuing mundane practices with inappropriate complexity and significance”) (Savolainen, 2008a, p. 5). With this in mind, the study’s analysis grounded itself in the responses and explanations provided by the participants as a largely ethnographic portrait, allowing insightful discoveries to emerge through the views participants themselves expressed.

These approaches, along with iterative cycles of coding and continuously revisiting the study’s central questions led to the final structure of the dissertation, reflecting the new theoretical framework that emerged (see Table 4). Later rounds of analysis helped to develop the three chapters of the dissertation (Chapters 5, 6, and 7) that were dedicated to the study’s interest in the “perceived information environment” of participants, what I label as Egypt’s *information ecosystem*. This analysis also helped to develop the three chapters focused on information practices (Chapters 8, 9, and 10), which respectively represent Egypt’s *information culture*.

Table 4: Structure of arguments

Focus	Concept	Facets	Finding
Environment	Information Ecosystem	State information	Manipulation and dysfunction
		Broadcast media	Partisanship and responses
		Social media	Convergence and personalized trust
Practices	Information Culture	Characteristics	Doubtful and divisive attitudes
		Sources	Reliance on personalized sources
		Tactics	Complex processing of claims

4.10 Additional considerations

4.10.1 Methodological concerns

The design of this study allows it to contribute to both media studies and information studies. The use of controversies as the entry point to the larger information environment allows participants to steer the researcher to significant sources of information and to articulate their significance. By building case studies around an on-going controversy which is being routinely discussed and debated among Egyptians, the research design allows for a detailed exploration of the “social and historical context of action” (Creswell, 2013) wherein everyday knowledge is being actively constructed through the sources marshalled and the interpretations applied.

Reminiscent of Savolainen’s warning of “belaboring the obvious” in the study of everyday information practices, scholars warn that since case studies centre on the experiences of participants there is a danger of the research becoming “overly empiricist analysis – locked into the ‘here-and-now’ of participants’ perceptions” (Stark & Torrance, 2004, p. 35). To avoid this solipsistic lock-in, the methods must be applied “self-consciously to look beyond the immediate” (Stark & Torrance, 2004, p. 35), taking into consideration the potential influence of the historical context, constantly returning to the research questions, and recognizing the performativity of the interview process. This last consideration, the awareness of the interview as a performance, is a safe-guard against a positivistic view of the study’s data. Reflecting on the researcher-participant interaction is an important aspect to qualitative research because it rejects the treatment of participants as ideal witnesses who are candid and dispassionate (Creswell, 2013). Instead, participants are seen as acting according to any number of motivations (e.g., image-projection or propagandizing) or reacting to the researcher himself (e.g., perceived as an outsider or high-status individual). Douai’s (2010) personal experience and Clark’s (2006) survey of Middle East qualitative researchers show that participants are highly conscious of their participation in research while being skeptical of the value and integrity of the research process, leading to very reactive interactions.

4.10.1.1 Study limitations

Both in method and in sampling, this study cannot be considered representative. Case studies are naturally non-representative and particularistic (Stark & Torrance, 2004; Yin, 2003). The use of open-ended data collection methods similarly makes statistical generalizations inapplicable. Yet, depending on the quality of the research, case studies can “illuminate more general issues” (Stark & Torrance, 2004) and permit readers to identify with the cases in what Stake calls a form of “naturalistic generalization” (Stake, 1995, p. 86). Furthermore, employing multiple cases instead of a single case creates a form of non-experimental replication which bolsters the validity of findings (Yin, 2003). Practical limits also impeded the representativeness of the sample, despite efforts to include a diverse pool of participants. As mentioned, all interviewees were moderate-to-high status individuals based in the country’s capital. There was also an underrepresentation of Islamists. These biases reveal the shortcoming of referral sampling; in societies home to stark class or ideological divides, the recruitment technique limits the diversity of the final sample. Nevertheless, the final sample of participants was sufficient to present valuable insights into a politically significant class of citizens, and what diversity it did offer sufficiently illustrated the conflicting perspectives in Egypt’s contemporary political context and the information environment. The design elements of the study—its approach (case studies), method (qualitative) and sample (non-random)—sacrifice representativeness of findings for details and depth, as is appropriate for an exploratory study and preliminary theory building; this is, after all, the special strength of qualitative research (Creswell, 2013).

4.10.2 Ethical concerns

The risks posed by this study were minimal. The researcher was not required to undertake any risky behaviour (e.g., joining political protests); nor was the researcher soliciting what the Egyptian government would consider “sensitive information”. The risks this study potential exposed participants to ranged from mild inconvenience to moderate discomfort, but were no greater than those arising from the everyday activities of participants. As stated above, this study examined *open* controversies, and therefore avoided topics too taboo for public discussion. Participants were asked to share accounts

only in so far as they were comfortable. The questions were not intended to be highly personal nor sensitive.

Participants were recruited directly through informal social networks, rather than through formal channels where their autonomy to consent or disclose would have been limited. Informed consent was obtained by providing letters of information. Participants were also given the opportunity to withdraw and have their data removed from the study should they become concerned over what they disclosed in the interview.

The primary concern was securing the confidentiality of participants. The need for confidentiality was elevated beyond those adopted at the start of the study due to events subsequent to Morsi's ouster, which saw an intensified (and capricious) criminalization of various views. In the past, several unfortunate researchers had their work confiscated before departing the country (Abaza, 2010), though no other penalties were incurred. To protect the anonymity of participants for such an unlikely event, as mentioned above, all notes were anonymized. With these concerns, data was anonymized to insure that the identity of participants was protected. No information permitting deductive disclosure of participants' identities would be released or published. Digital data was secured on encrypted drives and, along with handwritten notes, kept in a physically secure location. Consent was taken orally to avoid documenting the participation of individuals, as well as in keeping with the culture of free, private discourse, where there is a suspicion or disinclination towards overly-official transactions (Clark, 2006).

A complete discussion of ethical concerns was included in the study's ethics applications, the approval for which is found in Appendix 3.

Chapter 5 - State Information

5.1 Introduction

When discussing the state's role with respect to Egypt's information ecosystem, all participants mentioned the familiar abuses (e.g., traditional censorship and propaganda) of an illiberal regime. There are two main attributes to this well-established narrative of the state: first, the state is seen as a monolithic entity, operating in a cohesive and coordinated fashion towards a single purpose (i.e., securing the regime); second, the state is portrayed as antagonistic to the circulation of information (by journalists, activists, scholars, or researchers), which it strives to control through repression or misdirection (for more on this, see **2.Background** and **3.Literature Review**). But several participants offered another perspective by describing and evaluating the state, through its various institutions and officials, as a creator and disseminator of *official information*. These participants tended to be familiar with how the institutions of the state operated, or failed to operate, in these informational capacities. Regardless of the state's performance, this view did not position the state as adversarial with respect to the circulation of information—just the opposite. These participants saw a fundamental importance to official information which situated the practices of the state, for good or for ill, at core of Egypt's information ecosystem. Given the prominence these participants gave to official information, the provocative insights they offered on state practices (and malpractices), and the contribution this focus on the state makes towards enriching our conception of a society's information ecosystem, this section compiles and explores these perspectives.

The state as discussed here is defined as the myriad of public institutions that serve in the administration of the country. This includes the presidency and both the upper and lower houses of parliament (the Consultative Council and the People's Assembly, respectively). Also included are the various ministries, agencies, committees, special units, and councils of the state's executive, legislative, and bureaucratic branches. All these facets of the state are essential sources of official information for internal and external consumption. Official information can take the shape of statistics, reports, speeches, data, meeting minutes, policy papers, proclamations, agreements, and legislation.

Five themes emerge from this series of discussions regarding official information and informational practices of the state. We begin with the contradiction of official information through two brief accounts which illustrate how participants were of two minds regarding official information, seeing it as (5.2) simultaneously essential *and yet* undependable. The unreliability of official information is delved into in the next two subsections which presents (5.3) the participants' accounts of its inaccessibility and (5.4) its disingenuousness. The next theme examines (5.5) the pretense of official information, where an information-averse regime nevertheless adopts a cosmetic pretense of soliciting information and expertise to garner legitimacy. The final theme presents the view that (5.6) the state is at the center of Egypt's information ecosystem and describes the downstream impacts official information.

5.2 Ambivalent value

Dissonant expectations surrounded official information. Participants expressing this dissonance felt on the one hand that the state ought to serve as the primary basis of much public knowledge, but on the other admitted they saw it as a discredited source of information.

Take for instance the view expressed by Ziad, a Muslim Brother, who felt that official documents were crucial to elucidating any controversy brought to the public's attention. Ziad illustrated this using the controversial sacking of the Cairo Opera House director by Morsi's Culture Minister (see Appendix 2: Opera firing). This triggered accusations that the dismissal was part of an Islamist agenda against the liberal arts, but Ziad rejected such speculations and accepted the government's narrative: the director was guilty of mismanaging public funds. He initially claimed to do so on the merit of government reports on the Opera's expenditures, as presented by the minister, exposing maleficence. Ziad described how the Culture Minister was invited onto liberal, anti-Morsi private channels to defend his decision, marshalling official information against mere supposition of government critics:

They invite the Culture Minister, asking him why he fired the director. They want to make a fuss, but they are taken

aback when the Minister brings documents in hand to explain that such-and-such happened. I trust the papers, not just someone telling stories. (Ziad)

Ziad felt that the staggering degree of contention in public discourse was due to rampant, ill-informed speculation. Official information, by contrast, promised definitive and decisive knowledge that undercut the spurious basis of these claims which dominated public perception. Yet Ziad saw that such official information was generally held in low regard, holding it back from making a vital contribution to matters under debate; he stated that “the problem with Egyptians is that we don’t trust documents”. Ziad attributed this distrust to the authoritarian legacy of the country, where regimes discredited official information in the eyes of the people by time-and-again manufacturing reports regarding matters such as election results, military operations, or economic plans to bolster their standing or cover-up their failures,:

Here in Egypt, people don’t care about documents. We lost confidence in official documents, official speeches, and official statistics since Mubarak, since Nasser, when they would say ‘99.9%!’ (Ziad)

Ziad’s own account of the Opera House controversy demonstrates this same lack of confidence. Despite claiming he put his faith in the Minister’s official information over “someone telling stories”, Ziad’s account subsequently revealed the role his first-hand experience played in confirming the information presented by the official documents. Ziad’s own experiences as a theatre-goer afforded the government’s reports more traction with him than they may have for other skeptical citizens:

It is different for me because I used to frequently go to the opera. I’d find a big production with one eight people in it, and a large empty theatre. And the tickets are only 5 pounds. How? All this for only 5 pounds? I was puzzled how a state could fund something like this. So when [Culture Minister] Alaa Abdel Aziz came around, even without the documents I saw it [the corruption] with my eyes. (Ziad)

Ziad's political orientation (supportive of the Morsi government and alarmed with corruption in Egypt) may have contributed to his willingness to accept the Minister's report. But his account overall demonstrates the weight official information *ought* to carry yet fails to, whether for others or himself. The state document supplemented his personal knowledge, not the other way around. (For more on first-hand experience, see **9.Sources.**)

Walid offered another account which seemed at first to demonstrate the credence and authority of official information. Walid, a scholar and former official, considered state institutions important sources of information. To keep himself informed regarding the government's controversial judicial reform law (see Appendix 2: Judicial authority), Walid sought out documents from the Consultative Consult (the Upper House of Parliament), the relevant ministries (e.g., the Ministry of Justice), and the president's office. As an intellectual, Walid considered it imperative to draw on information from these official sources; he proclaimed that "the formal institutions of the country, for an academic such as myself, are one of, if not the most, important source of information to know what is happening in the country." He compared this to average citizens who rely on the highly partisan "media channels that they are watching and listening to all the time throughout the day." Yet despite this clear distinction, Walid was not suggesting that the official sources were any less partisan or biased than the television stations followed by the public: "this problem [of bias] also applies to the formal institutions". Walid saw official information as invaluable as a primary source for understanding the issues facing the government, but he did not ascribe to it a superordinate degree of objectivity or credibility compared to non-official information from outside sources. Official information was important for its proximity to authorities but it was not itself authoritative.

5.3 Inaccessible

"We don't have transparency," Ingy bluntly stated as she recounted how little official information was made available to the public. A political reform activist, she gave as an example the People's Assembly (Egypt's lower house of parliament). A parliament is one of the institutional cornerstone of a rational and informed public sphere (Habermas,

1991) and the constitutional mandate of the Egyptian legislature to oversee, review, and discuss matters facing the state for public scrutiny nominally matches this ideal. But in 2012 the Supreme Constitutional Court invalidated the post-Uprising parliamentary elections and ordered the People's Assembly dissolved (see **2.Background**). The parliament's dissolution effectively ended it as an institutionalized source of official information, with the already spotty access it offered the public to parliamentary documents now evaporating entirely. Ingy reported that previously the information available through the Assembly, such as the minutes from sessions or committee hearings, was often incomplete, but now nothing was made available: "The People's Assembly website didn't have all the minutes [before] but now there's no website at all. They took it down." Ingy's account shows how a combination of political turmoil (with a dismissed parliament) and poor institutional practices (retaining publicly accessible documents) caused part of the state to fail as a transmitter of potentially invaluable information on contemporary controversies on legal and economic issues before the government.

The latter deficiency, the mismanagement of official information, was further elaborated upon by Yasmine, a retired civil servant and political liberal. She observed that accessing information was challenging even for officials and staff within the state, which she blamed on the dearth of information-handling policies in state agencies and poor enforcement. Without the guidance of well-defined codes of conduct, officials erred on the side of confidentiality:

There is no rule to follow that will tell you what to release and what not to release, what is secret and what is not secret. This is a culture in our society. There is also no clear distinction about what is classified information and what is non-classified information. So an employee, to be on the safe side, will treat everything as confidential.
(Yasmine)

Like Ingy, Yasmine noted that a culture of transparency was entirely absent from the government. In its place, she saw agencies jealously guarding official information out of reactionary national security concerns or a misplaced sense of proprietary ownership over

the material. State employees individually withheld official information also from a fear of sharing state information they might be later penalized for disclosing.

Ingy went further than faulting ambiguous records-management practices or an organization's culture. According to her, ministries and departments of state employed a disproportionate number of information officers with backgrounds in Egypt's security sector. This conditioned the gatekeepers of official information and administrators of institutional websites to be highly guarded, possessive, and defensive in a manner incompatible with government transparency. Whether it was due to a lack of proper information handling protocols, risk aversion, or a defensive mindset, participants shared the assessment that the government and its agencies were infused with a culture of secrecy.

A principle of non-disclosure was seen as so deeply entrenched in the operations of the state that Yasser, a veteran journalist, was cautious of what in official reports was *left out*. He reported that in official committees under the Mubarak government important facts would be presented and discussed *off-the-record*. In these committees, matters of public interest would be explored exclusively behind sealed doors, with the relevant details and data only selectively released to the general population; he stated that "because these were considered official meetings closed to the public for discussing certain issues, the real facts were not made public." Yasser claimed that knowledge of these state practices taking place gave him "insight onto the degree of information that is not publicized." Yasmine made a similar observation when describing how state officials discussed the same issues in different venues. In public settings, such as a televised interview or press conference, officials were opaque, imprecise, and secretive; but in a more exclusive setting surrounded by a knowledgeable audience (e.g., at an academic conference) Yasmine observed these same officials were more forthcoming, either becoming more comfortable or under greater compulsion to present clear, concise information.

If at one extreme there was the jealous protection of official information, at the other end was its reckless neglect and mishandling, though the ultimate result was the same—official information rendered inaccessible. Yasmine observed that in disorganized

bureaucracies that lacked coherent retention policies for any particular document, “you could find it in the garbage bin [because] no one is aware that it is important.” Yasmine considered such mistreatment of documents as also emblematic of the poor state of Egyptian knowledge culture: either state information was seen as too valuable to be shared or completely worthless and handled in a manner that made its inaccessible.

If official information could not be reliably accessed through official channels, unofficial channels became essential. Several participants observed that many of those working in the state relied on personal contacts at fellow institutions to acquire documents that through a formal request would otherwise never arrive or would arrive too late (more on this below).

5.4 Unreliable

While the above details problems in the state’s provision of official information, it nevertheless suggests the production of reports, statistics, and other forms of content were as consistent in Egypt as in any other modern state system. But participants expressed serious suspicions of the quality of these products, believing that much official information was manufactured and manipulated to serve the goals of key political actors or agencies. Official information was not perceived by participants as benignly and objectively produced as representations of the social reality, but rather consciously distorted data to serve the aims of the producer.

Yasmine offered a historical context for the simultaneous proliferation and perversion of official information. According to her telling, in the 1990s Mubarak’s NDP regime conceded to foreign and domestic pressure by permitting a limited participation of oppositional parties and some modest freedom to be openly critical of the government. Though the regime’s hold on power was unchanged, it now faced increased scrutiny which required the government to justify their management of the country. This prompted officials to systematically manufacture data and reports to pacify its critics, Yasmine recalled. Agencies continued issuing reports on matters of state to provide policy-makers and political interests a veneer of legitimacy and professionalism. Khaled, who works in a political reform organization, confirmed that a major reason for the

distrust of official information was that they tended to be manipulated toward political ends of institutions producing them; he admitted that civil society organizations and even the media were subject to the same suspicions as well, though to a lesser degree. Yasmine gave an example to illustrate this manufacture of official information dating back to the Mubarak era, when Egypt's foreign direct investment (FDI) nearly doubled over the span of a single year. Agencies began circulating an FDI amount of around 13 billion Egyptian pounds, which a year earlier had been around 7 billion. The participant recalled her incredulity on seeing the skyrocketing financial indicator:

Why had it suddenly doubled? You are living in society, you are witnessing the conditions, and you know there hasn't been a big change in opening [new] factories or whatever. (Yasmine)

The problem was not simply that the soaring number was incongruent with everyday observations, but that the calculation behind this twofold rise was itself inexplicable. Experts found the same FDI number repeated in reports across agencies but were unable to ascertain exactly how the number was arrived at in the first place. According to Yasmine, it was eventually discovered that the inflated FDI was due to the sudden inclusion of petroleum sector investments, which are typically excluded from the FDI. The objective seemed to be to overstate the economic outlook of the country, thereby improving the image of the regime and “avoiding criticism” for declining living-standards.

Other cases were shared of official information being inconsistently produced and suspected of manipulation. Ingy stated that “unemployment rates were miscalculated in various ways, all in official bodies. You can take these from different ministries and each give you a different figure.” Inappropriate methods such as manipulating sociological categories or altering the inclusion-exclusion criteria were used to produce misleading data; according to Ingy, “in the time of Mubarak, this was common practice.” In assessing Egypt's informal urban developments (*ashwaiyyat*), for instance, different branches would apply different definitions (e.g., unlicensed tenements versus the lack of basic amenities). These practices were so endemic, muddying much of the official

information researchers and experts relied upon, that they would invariably append caveats in their reports regarding the unreliability of the data the reports were based upon:

Every year when we were presenting our research on behalf of the government, we always, always had to include in it a comment cautioning that the numbers were unreliable. In everything. Always. This was established practice. (Ingy)

These practices were not expected to disappear with the removal of Mubarak from office and the arrival of Morsi's government. This was a justifiable assumption since the institutions responsible for such official information remained unchanged after the Uprising. When she heard the recently released unemployment figures for 2013, Yasmine quickly cautioned me against believing the official figure (13%), citing the inconsistent and self-serving data collection methods of the state mentioned above. As Yasser (a state media journalist) observed, "there is no neutral information. The information is not trusted at all, even in the national statistics."

5.5 Unused

If official information was commonly suspected of being propaganda under the pretense of professionalism, objectivity, and expertise, one might ask about the state's relationship with respect to experts who are themselves central figures to the circulation of official information (as producers, purveyors and consumers). Participants with insight into how the state functioned admitted that it rarely sought information from disinterested experts, with the effect that much official information was never produced in the first place.

Investigative committees, for instance, are important forums where experts share their knowledge and advise the state on appropriate courses of action. Yet participants observed that to the detriment of informed governance, such committees were hardly made use of in the Egyptian parliament. Insiders spoke of various proposed programmes to gather social data for government officials, such as establishing a unit to conduct public opinion polls (which are not permitted in Egypt). The response to such a proposal was that it was "refused and forbidden", which one participant deemed illustrative that "the culture of information is not there" in the state.

The accounts of participants suggested that the role of experts and professionals in the state was similar to that of much official information itself, in that they both created the illusion of informed and rational governance. Take for instance the practice of consulting experts on policy matters. One participant had been a member on several official committees during Mubarak's rule. He described his role and that of fellow experts as a cover for the ruling NDP and the small cadre of political and financial powerbrokers around President Mubarak's son and heir apparent, Gamal Mubarak. The participant explained the ineffectual part played by experts such as himself:

When we would clash with NDP people they would say we were just there for show, like a flower on the jacket, to give the impression that there were brains in the NDP when all the decision-making actually came from the inner circle. The committees within the NDP were made up of able, expert, and informed people. These committees would review legislation put forward according to their speciality. These were advisory boards, just brainstorming, that actually had no decision making power nor were they even taken seriously.

Ingy gave a similar testimony during Morsi's rule, demonstrating that the persistent perception that the state continued to approach knowledge to be largely cosmetic in matters of policy making. This was demonstrated to Ingy when the Islamist-dominated upper house of parliament was debating the issuance of Islamic bonds (Appendix 2: Islamic bonds):

I have a friend of mine who is an expert in economic issues. When they [the government] were discussing the Islamic Bonds law, they invited him to the Consultative Council to listen to his opinion about the law. It was a very good meeting. After that, they didn't apply anything about what he said. They agreed with what he said during the meeting, but they didn't apply anything! [...] These people [experts] have no impact on the decision-making.

Yasmine raised similar concerns regarding the Morsi government. She complained that the sources the state was basing its decision upon were disconcertingly obscure, fostering

distrust of its policies and platforms. Yasmine was disconcerted by the unknown entities serving as the government's advisors:

We don't know who are the economic experts the Brotherhood are consulting. We don't know what sorts of experts are helping them. We don't know. Sometimes when you know an expert, you know his attitude, his ideology, if he is against or with social justice, and to what extent. We don't know anything about the consultations they are getting. From who and what sort of consultations?

This presents an interesting contrast between the known-experts under the Mubarak regime who have no policy impact versus the unknown-experts who were guiding the Morsi regime. But in either case the role of expertise and knowledge in governance persist in being negligible, subsumed by the interests of political actors.

5.6 Contagion

The state's failure to function as a reliable information system had large-scale implications for public knowledge in Egypt. The government and its agencies were not simply one among many potential sources of information, after all; a wider community of knowledge functionaries—journalists, writers, analysts, academics, activists, and politicians—depended on official information since the state was the only feasible producer of the data required for their own respective analyses. But as the sections above suggest, official information was not adequately created (if created at all), managed, or disseminated. These weaknesses undermined Egypt's entire information ecosystem.

Yasmine observed the intractable confusion that resulted:

Anything that comes from government is doubtful. [...] You don't have any trust in the government and you have nothing concrete to fill its place. It is very confusing for ordinary citizens, and very unreliable for researchers, but this is what we are facing in Egypt.

Yasser observed that the lack of trustworthy official information “makes anyone working in academic fields arrive at incorrect results.” Mona, a young Islamist and member of the Egypt Party, recalled her professor, a distinguished scholar of economics and prominent

member of Egypt's financial sector, confessing to her "I'm confused. I don't understand what's happening in Egypt" in reaction to the paucity of information available regarding matters in economics and finances. Yasmine added that the main problem confronting researchers in Egypt "is that they don't have real or objective sources of information". She stated this deficiency held back knowledge production by adding to a greater burden to researchers, who were now tasked with independently conducting basic level research.

Researchers know they must be objective, impartial, and so on, but they don't have that source of information to get data from. This is the real problem. So they have to analyze by themselves, the political situation, the discussions in the parliament, and so on.

The lack of reliable official information permeated all the fields, including law, sociology, and economics, as commented upon by Ingy. She found only through insider access could one muster the required information, circumventing the institutional barriers limiting access to outsiders; even then, Ingy remarked, the quality of official information remained dubious:

There are lot of matters where you cannot do an accurate analysis because you don't have the data. You can do it if you are inside institutions in the government, like the Information and Decision Support Centre [a quasi-government research institute]. But even the reports released by the IDSC are played with. Or if you are in parliament, when the People's Assembly was still working [one] had the appropriate data at hand [to] make proper analyses.

People with "insider" access themselves became go-to sources. Noha, a Nasserist activist and member of the liberal Constitution Party, trusted a news source such as Yasser Rizk, editor of *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, because of his contacts in the government and military: "he gets leaked news—this is how you live in Egypt." Noha, as others, observed how secrecy pervaded state operations. Insufficient information made leaks essential. Consider the reactions to the Morsi government's application for a loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (see Appendix 2: IMF loan). Several participants spoke of the lack

of details surrounding the proposed loan. Despite Egypt's economic doldrums, the prospect of the loan raised concerns, such as how the loan would be invested or whether it came with onerous conditions. Given Egypt's history of borrowing international loans at the cost of painful socio-economic restructuring policies, these questions were not unfounded. One venue where the relevant details ought to be publicized was the parliament. But, as already mentioned, there were no minutes from the dissolved People's Assembly to examine either the loan's conditions or the Morsi government's corresponding measures. Ingy complained about how little information was being made available regarding the loan:

I don't know the exact details about the loan. Nothing is clear and publicized. As far as I know, no one has publicized the details of the loan. [...] [I]t is supposed to be presented to parliament so it shouldn't to be a secret [...] Unfortunately, we don't have a means of spreading to items presented in parliament to be clearly publicized for everyone to read. It's not there. This is a big problem.
(Ingy)

The lack of official information to shed light on the IMF agreement reminded Yasmine of government practices under Hosni Mubarak. She recalled how the parliament led by Atef Sedki presented an economic restructuring programme in accordance with the loan. Then, as now, “that agreement with the IMF never came to parliament” Yasmine remembered, “Nobody ever discussed the conditions that Egypt needed to get the loan. All of a sudden the parliament was informed that Egypt has signed and everything was okay. But it never came to parliament.” Hisham, a Marxist activist, pointed to the IMF controversy as an example of the government's secretive practices. Without official information providing definitive details on the government's plans for the loan, the public and the media are left to speculate. “It is the most bizarre media case you can think of,” said Hisham, “a media debate on something unknown, something that didn't happen.” The Morsi government's attempts to fend off these speculations without presenting facts only exacerbated matters, according to Hisham: “If you are denying the leaks and but not telling me what is actually taking place, I'm going to believe the leaks—I've got nothing else to go on.” This case was a model state secrecy, magnifying distrust and suspicion: “international

organizations that cover-up, government that covers-up, and media talking about unsubstantiated things—for a whole year!” (Hisham) Only when the loan put before the upper house of parliament (still in session) did some information emerge, but even then Hisham was found it incomplete: “They [the government] didn’t show all the details of the loan, just the ones that needed parliamentary approval.” Rather than earning Hisham’s confidence in government and its plans or dissuading suspicions, the scanty disclosure only highlighted the government’s recalcitrance while vindicating the speculations: “It was through this disclosure that we confirmed some of the facts in the leaks.”

Hisham’s recounting almost suggests that the media was able to counteract the lack of official information, but the media also suffered from the state’s practices. Several participants who were highly critical of the misinformation propagated by the media did not blame the irresponsible coverage on media professionals but the omissions, misperceptions, and misinformation that originated in the state. This sympathetic view of the media saw it as functioning without the proper informational grounding. For example, Khaled accused both public and private media of misrepresenting state’s prosecution of several foreign NGOs, speculating that the organizations were vehicles for international espionage and foreign interference when, technically, the case was a dispute over operating licenses (Appendix 2: NGO trial). Despite its role in propagating this misrepresentation, Khaled did not hold the media itself fully accountable given that they themselves lack crucial official information: “I cannot say the media is the reason. The media doesn’t have full information, so they work with the data that they have.” The state had spearheaded the case against the NGOs (under SCAF) by fanning nationalistic fears of foreign interference but gave few concrete details. Abbas, a revolutionary and experienced political activist, gave this insight into the coverage of the controversy, reiterating Khaled’s assessment of the media’s representation:

It is all about defaming the work of the organizations. The media played a really good role in defaming the work of the organizations. State media and independent [read: private] media. Independent media don’t understand. State media has bad intentions. Independent media has a lack of

*information or understanding of what NGOs are doing.
(Abbas)*

Even inadvertently, media can be swept upon by the misinformation disseminated by the state.

Many felt that the conditions of official information under Mubarak's regime were reproduced under the newly elected government of President Morsi, which faced additional suspicions from those who saw his Brotherhood as a clandestine organization pursuing its own hidden agendas. Hence, the lack of official information from the government on various public controversies served to heighten distrust and confusion among participants. As Hisham saw it, however, while the Morsi government was transgressing the tenets of liberal governance through this secrecy, it was also inevitable for the government to do so. In liberal democracies, governments simultaneously "inform and misinform at the same time" to manufacture consent from their citizens, according to Hisham. In Egypt, however, previous regimes permanently sabotaged this balance by relying primarily on misinformation, leaving Morsi and his government in a position where they "can't play the game of Western democracies because the environment" of nurtured mistrust and antagonism would not allow it. In such a situation, the Morsi government inevitably resorted to silence and secrecy: "here they just don't tell you anything at all; they don't play that [liberal democracy] game. The problem is that it will not work with the Egyptian people" (Hisham).

Another reason Hisham saw the Morsi government unable to play the "manufacturing consent" strategy, deploying both information and misinformation, was because he, his party, and his government lacked the standing to garner consent of the governed. Many, as seen above, were highly suspicious of state officials and constantly suspected them of either being as ignorant as the rest of the general public or withholding the truth from the public. An example of the former suspicion can be seen in Mona, who simply stated:

I don't like politicians these days because they are totally confused. Nobody is able now to give you a good analysis of the Egyptian situation from the political perspective. No one is able to do this. (Mona)

An example of the latter suspicion, that state officials are withholding information, can be heard in the views of Abeer, a newly politicized revolutionary. Abeer felt the facts behind issues such as the prosecution of foreign NGOs or the prison break (Appendix 2: Prison break) were kept from the general public, “but I think politicians know a lot.” Abeer asserted that:

They won't speak now. Some of them speak every now and then. High ranking officers in the police and the regime will never speak now. They know what is going on. (Abeer)

One of the purposes of this section is to illustrate how the structures and practices rooted in Egypt's authoritarian past still inform the views of the post-Uprising society and continue to constitute its information ecosystem. We saw this earlier in Ziad's accounts around the Cairo Opera House controversy, but this was raised by many others as well. Kassem, a professor sympathetic to the newly elected Islamist officials, saw the legacy of an untrustworthy state tainting Morsi's government:

I think this is the essence of the problem in Egypt, that there are no institutions in Egypt that have enough social capital to earn the trust or prove themselves trustworthy to the majority of Egyptians. Now, again, that's not entirely unexpected. How could there be any institutions that are deemed trustworthy by the major of the people after 50 years of authoritarian rule?(Kassem)

As the liberal professor Thoraya put it, for Egyptians, “if the government is telling them something is happening, it's not. Or sometimes the government tells the truth, but nobody believes it.” A distrust of government and its proclamations has already been inculcated into Egyptians, becoming an aspect of how information is approached, processed, evaluated, and internalized. Thoraya gave a formative story to this effect, recalling a cholera epidemic during her youth during Nasser's era:

They called it “Summer Diarrhea.” Because part of authoritarian media is not just about politics; you don't want people to think there are diseases, or that the government can't handle, or that people are dying. So they control everything. So it simply called the summer diarrhea

but everyone knew it was cholera. So I remember growing up as a child and knowing that there was a way that you would process information to understand. Another thing is that Egyptians: if the government is telling them something is happening, it's not. Or sometimes the government tells the truth, but nobody believes it. (Thoraya)

Thoraya saw such formative experiences under the authoritarian state carried over by the populace under the present government: “It is impossible to have an entire country growing up in a culture of distrust and fear, and then suddenly [expect] they’re supposed to believe everything they hear.” Ziad repeated this sentiment: “This is a problem that the government is facing now and any future government: the Egyptian citizen is adamant that any fact they receive is untrue.” With this skepticism inculcated into people’s general approach to information, it can expand beyond simply the state to other institutions and organization. Thoraya observed described this as an emerging *culture of distrust*: “It’s all this kind of warped ways of processing information, but built upon a culture of distrust. Distrusting your government, and therefore you distrust your media.”

The views of the media, scholarship, and citizenry are traced back to the state and its informational practices. Official information was seen as failing to contribute to political discourse in the face of pressing social issues, and thereby retarding both public knowledge and public trust. The inability of the state to produce and circulate reliable facts and lucid claims had far-reaching consequences for Egypt’s information ecosystem. The lack of credible information presented on numerous topics limited the ability of experts, organizations, media outlets, and the general public to develop a substantive understanding of issues or conditions facing the country. Numerous participants perceived the Egyptian public as highly cognizant of the various problems and challenges facing the new democratic country, but this awareness was described as “superficial”, “shallow”, or “undetailed” without official information to provision the hard data necessary for an informed public debate to take place.

5.7 Discussion

Participants offered scathing assessments regarding the production, dissemination, and consumption of information by state bodies and officials. These failures they reported were seen to have the grave consequences for the wider knowledge community and public discourse at large, where misinformation, uncertainty, speculation, and mistrust became intractable fixtures. The origins of these failures varied, but what was consistent throughout these accounts was the centrality of the state in the general circulation of information, whether state officials appreciated it or not, and whether they abused this position or not. Given the authoritarian character of regimes in countries such as Egypt, it is unsurprising that most analyses of state activities vis-à-vis information overlook this integral productive role, and instead focus on the state's hostile influence over other information producers and providers, with this influence often characterized as restrictions imposed on the freedom of expression and or the spread of propaganda to control public discourse. While this approach to the state is justified and important, it pays little attention to the state *as* an information system—responsible for creating and disseminating information for both internal and external use—the precise nature of its malfunctions and its specific impacts through the eyes of political society.

The desultory attention given to the informational role of the state is perhaps best exemplified in the *Arab Human Development Report (AHDR)*. The AHDRs—a series of regional reports authored by Arab scholars and issued between 2002 to 2009 from the United Nations Development Programme—are prominent and often controversial appraisals on the Arab world, influencing researchers and policy-makers internationally (Armbrust, 2012a; Bayat, 2010; Hopkins & Eddin, 2006). Each edition examines a specific development target—women's rights, economic opportunities, security, personal freedoms, and good governance—making it “arguably the most significant manifesto for change in the Arab Middle East” (Bayat, 2010, p. 3). The discussion here will focus on the 2003 edition of the AHDR which analyzed the state of knowledge in the Arab world and the region's shortcomings in fostering a “knowledge society.”

Despite the report's length at over 200 pages there is relatively little reference to the role of the state as a creator or disseminator of information. In keeping with the monolithic-

antagonistic vision of the state (as presented in the introduction) the report adopts the goal of separating the realm of politics from the realm of knowledge production, thereby charging the state with the role of defending this separation through the enforcement of policies that protect information and culture producers' freedom from political interference. According to the report, the Arab world suffers from incursion of political interests in the production of knowledge, with ruling powers exercising their influence to foster knowledge that supports their positions and suppress knowledge that contradict them:

Official institutions sponsored by political authorities produce "party" or institutional knowledge and employ cultural workers and frameworks that legitimise their power. (UNDP, 2003, p. 149)

The AHDR offers several important insights in the state of knowledge in countries such as Egypt—though a feature of these reports is addressing the conditions of the Arab world generally rather than country-by-country. Certainly the role of political interference in the manipulation and omission of official information was present throughout the participants' accounts, along with calls for increased transparency and disclosure.

5.7.1 The state at the centre

Yet the discussions with participants also offer counterpoints to the report's conceptualization, diagnosis, and expectation of the state in the domestic circuits of information. For instance, the report treats the state as a single body of authority which manages institutions and agencies through an administrative apparatus employing political, financial, legislative, and social coercion. But the vision of the state presented by participants did not give the impression a unified apparatus exerting its force from on high; rather they saw the state as the base of an information ecosystem, responsible for the nitty-gritty of creating, provisioning, and employing official information. Despite being highly critical of the state's conduct in these informational capacities, the pivotal position of the state as society's central information system was not itself challenged. In other words, while the Egyptian state was seen as failing to serve as the information

foundation of society, the structural role it occupied was never in itself rejected. The state's supreme import in this regard (for better or worse) was acknowledged by El-Mikawy and Ghoneim's (2005) study of Egypt's knowledge-base—as constructed through state, quasi-state, and private institutions—where the authors observe that “there is a governmental dominance of the supply of information” (2005, p. 5). El-Mikawy and Ghoneim go further than the AHDR's diagnosis of the Arab information environment and in so doing anticipate much participant feedback in their examination of the forces responsible for the quality and transmission of official information, including the supply-demand pressures and formal and informal societal rules, all of which “are often influenced by political and cultural contexts” (El-Mikawy & Ghoneim, 2005, p. 3).

The “rudimentary” sketch El-Mikawy and Ghoneim offer of Egypt's information ecosystem outlines the creation, dissemination, and up-stream processing of information across government, quasi-government, and private institutions in Egypt. The primary level would include the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS) and the ministries of government. Besides producing and publishing official data, CAPMAS is also the licensing body for researchers intending to conduct field surveys, giving it the power to deny or edit research tools. The secondary knowledge sites include quasi-government bodies mentioned in participants' responses such as Specialized National Councils, the Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC), and the Parliament, which are intended to address issues of concern to policy-makers. All these institutions alternatively suffered from a lack of resources (in the case of the parliamentary councils), bloated and inefficient bureaucracy (as in the massive department CAPMAS), or limited circulation (all). Putting these state-based information practices at the heart of Egypt's information ecosystem recognizes the centrality of the state in knowledge creation, surpassing the limited scope of the AHDR while responding to the report's call for “a fresh look at the knowledge map and those who interfere in it” (UNDP, 2003, p. 150). El-Mikawy and Ghoneim also manage to reflect the views of participants presented above. Similar to the interviews presented above, El-Mikawy and Ghoneim's study was based on interviews with information professionals and state insiders, including academics, ministry advisors, journalists, and members of parliament. It is therefore unsurprising that many comments shared by participants in the aftermath of

the revolution resonated with observations made by El-Mikawy and Ghoneim, though made a decade earlier.

While the AHDR emphasized the need to devolve knowledge production to a liberalized civil society sector to protect it from political influence, El-Mikawy and Ghoneim's analysis matched the views of participants in noting that knowledge production at universities, think tanks, and the media was dependent on the quality of information offered by the state. The authors echoed participants in demanding that the state operate better as an information system rather than withdraw entirely. The study also supported the accounts of participants when describing the difficulty in accessing official information unless one was an insider, and observed that in the absence of a culture of transparency and information sharing researchers often relied on informal contacts to gain access to crucial data. These impediments to access were attributed by participants to a confluence of professional risk-aversion and security concerns, which El-Mikawy and Ghoneim confirm in the quote below, as well as the recourse to informal workarounds when institutionally sanctioned access is unavailable:

[W]hat remains are informal channels of information collection and knowledge dissemination, e.g. personal connections and interviews. Due to the lack of a freedom of information act, many reports are not available to the public (whether journalists or researchers). Thus one has to build a network of personal friends who replace a freedom of information act. (El-Mikawy & Ghoneim, 2005, p. 23)

The other crucial issue commonly mentioned was the unreliability of data due to the variable methods employed in information gathering and processing. As illustrated in the example of manufactured FDI figures, El-Mikawy and Ghoneim observe that inconsistent, opaque methods applied in official information in order to generate specific “facts”:

The methodologies used in collecting data are still in many cases not updated and lacks full transparency. Hence analysis depending on data must take such issue in

consideration, and in many cases such methodologies are politicized to reveal certain figures. (El-Mikawy & Ghoneim, 2005, p. 9)

5.7.2 Bureaucratic propaganda

Given the centrality of official information for most any understanding of the conditions in Egypt, these underhanded practices deserve more detailed theoretical and empirical analysis than the monopolistic-antagonistic model of the state permits. One useful concept to exploring official information in this regard is Altheide and Johnson's notion of *bureaucratic propaganda*, which is defined as:

Any report produced by an organization for evaluation and other practical purposes that is targeted for individuals, committees, or publics who are unaware of its promotive character and the editing processes that shaped the report. (Altheide & Johnson, 1980, p. 5)

Altheide and Johnson identify the struggle of organizations and agencies to rely on the official information they produce as a means of achieving goals or purposes among a targeted audience. What is significant here is how the authors see data, reports and other documents as resources to be exploited by a goal-driven institution seeking to cultivate a particular perception of itself, much in the same way a regime uses mass media in traditional propaganda. Institutions establish their legitimacy through the construction of "factual" claims about society, relying on the obscurity of their methodologies to marshal official information according to their own designs. Through this lens, the historical account offered by Yasmine of a regime satiating its critics with questionable but superficially modern and professional information can be reinterpreted as a formative stage of Egypt's modern bureaucratic propaganda apparatus. Similarly, the state's superficial recruitment of experts as commented upon by participants also extends the same dramaturgical character of bureaucratic propaganda, affording state institutions the appearance of a rational and authoritative body by means of the elaborate but artificial *performance* of knowledge creation and consumption. Conversely, as noted in the AHDR, experts who do enjoy some measure of influence in the state do so "not so much by the weight of scholarship or independent thinking, but to the extent that he or she

infiltrates power circles” (UNDP, 2003, p. 148); hence, the state is more amenable to social capital than knowledge capital. Those experts offering informed insight but lacking personal influence, meanwhile, become “like a flower in the jacket” of the regime, garnering it the illusion of rational and legitimate governance.

Further aligning with the observations of El-Mikawy and Ghoneim and participants, Altheide and Johnson attribute as a key feature of bureaucratic propaganda the withholding of methods used to produce the data presented, with insiders having privileged insight into the conscious construction of official information while the target audience, the outsiders, accept on face-value the seeming objectivity of the “hard facts”. Bureaucratic propaganda is a useful concept for reflecting on the strategic mobilization of official information, describing the techniques underlying their utility, and the various interests they ultimately serve; in so doing, the model complements various insights from participants on how the state operated in the primary production of information.

Not all inconsistencies in official information were attributed to intentional manipulation, however, reflecting instead the discrepancies across institutions producing information, as suggested by Ingy. El-Mikawy and Ghoneim observed that much of the data published by Egypt’s official social research centre, CAPMAS, differed from that of the Central Bank of Egypt (CBE) “mainly due either to the usage of different methodologies or different sources” (El-Mikawy & Ghoneim, 2005, p. 8). Foreign trade information, for instance, is calculated by CAPMAS based on customs whereas the CBE relies on bank records, which corroborates Ingy’s example of how informal-housing surveys were variously assessed. This pattern in official information across such disparate topics is itself suggestive of just how wide-spread these discrepancies in information creation are.

5.7.3 Ruling ignorance

Despite the qualms over the accessibility and quality of official information, equal consternation was expressed over the complete vacuum of official information where it was deemed appropriate. For all the state and quasi-state institutions available for the production of information, which El-Mikawy and Ghoneim concede have improved in recent history, there remained a tendency to forestall the creation or provision of certain

forms of information. Participants spoke of the reluctance of the state to expand and invest in research units or hold committee hearings, for instance. In an earlier study El-Mikawy *et al.* (2000) confirmed how underutilized such informational resources are within the legislature, which the authors blamed on political culture:

The weak to non-existent resort to fact-finding committees, reconnaissance committees or to public hearings is partially a matter of lack of skill and competence in dealing with multiple opinions. (El-Mikawy et al., 2000, p. 24)

These failures in information production were attributed to two facets of Egypt's political culture. The first is the risk adverse mindset, which was also used to explain the restraints imposed on information dissemination. El-Mikawy and Ghoneim explained risk-aversion as a powerful driver among officials with the leverage to nurture or abort official information production, as the "elite becomes less inclined to collect too much information on the impact or result of economic reform, lest information brings it under more fire and criticism" (El-Mikawy & Ghoneim, 2005, p. 20). Even among civil staff, as mentioned by Yasmine, these same deterrents can be strongly felt; Dorman (2007) noted that perceptions of disincentives and risks to the production of information is so deeply embedded in the state that in some cases government employees are unwilling to include their names in urban development reports for fear of jeopardizing their careers, and sometimes deferred documentation to third-party foreign consultants to avoid any personal culpability. Whether by omission or substitution, however, the creation of official information is annulled. This form of inaction, pre-emptively aborting the creation of information, is something that is not reflected in the dichotomy the AHDR presents on how the state influences knowledge (supporting affirmative and suppressing negative information) as expressed in the following passage:

Since a ruling power works to foster knowledge patterns compatible with its orientation and goals, it inevitably resists or even suppresses other patterns that contradict its general direction. (UNDP, 2003, p. 147)

The AHDR, by overlooking the capacity of the state to be a creator of information, focuses on what the state *imposes* upon down-stream producers of knowledge and

neglects the agency the state exercises at the heart of the knowledge production environment.

The second aspect to political culture is the state's propensity for non-rational decision-making, which was also raised in the testimonies from participants. There is a reluctance to produce official information, even for internal consumption, because officials see the utility of information as itself dubious. In an earlier paper which (in part) examined the practices in parliament when confronting economic reform legislation, El-Mikawy *et al.* observed that parliamentarians exhibited a "tradition of opinion without information" (2000, p. 24), with their survey responses to questions on public sentiment, parliamentary deliberations, and the character of government exhibiting political correctness, personal ignorance, or both. Adding to this was the discovery that instead of turning to expert researchers for primary data, parliamentarians relied predominantly on the media (foremost television, followed by radio, newspapers, then the internet) for knowledge during policy debated (El-Mikawy et al., 2000). (For more on the media see **2.Background, 3.Literature Review, and 6.Broadcast Media**). The authors conclude that official information plays a limited role in the parliament discussions (though this observation is likely applicable to other branches of the state) given its "legacy of being an opinion forum with a weak information/knowledge [sic]" which is seen as "a serious institutional impediment" (El-Mikawy et al., 2000, p. 27). With so little drive within government to solicit information, the faculties for information production go under-used. To remedy this, the authors prescribe that a "system would include ways of learning about reality from various sources, ways of making divergent information part of daily work without being perceived as politically threatening or as disloyalty to the system" (El-Mikawy et al., 2000, p. 27).

Participants' perceptions saw these malfunctioning and self-serving state practices, both historical and contemporary, as discrediting official information and cultivating a popular counterpoint to the state's "culture of secrecy" observed by Yasmine—what El-Mikawy and Ghoneim refer to as a "culture of mistrust". The authors give the example of a governmental report from Central Auditing Authority which was suspected of being biased towards certain iron and steel industry interests. While the report itself revealed no

such bias, discourse in the People's Assembly and the media reinforced public distrust, "damaging the public's general perceptions about transparency and accuracy of information provision in Egypt" (El-Mikawy & Ghoneim, 2005, pp. 26–7). The perception of political connections and personal influence distorts the production of official information, thus not only exacerbating suspicions of both the information itself and the parties responsible, but ultimately discouraging the production of official information.

Intertwined personal relations among the leadership of organizations providing information leaves the public—in a culture of mistrust—wondering if the checks and balances effect of this multiplicity of providers truly kicks in or rather tacit alliances among them prevail. This sheds doubt on the credibility of supply and thus reduces demand for it. (El-Mikawy & Ghoneim, 2005, p. 25)

El-Mikawy and Ghoneim also offered factors behind state practices not raised in interviews. Many participants castigated the Morsi government for failing to explain its positions or rationales, filling the vacuum with speculations and suspicion. But such omissions may be blamed partly on the relative novelty of instituting such disclosure processes; El-Mikawy and Ghoneim suggest that many mechanisms of disclosure were relatively recent developments in the Egyptian state, noting for instance that the position of ministry spokespersons was only developed in 2004 and was "still limited and often dominated by security concerns and lack of mutual trust on the part of the spokesmen and the public" (El-Mikawy & Ghoneim, 2005, p. 20). So while participants expressed frustration with the opacity behind state decision making, El-Mikawy and Ghoneim argued that the venues for public scrutiny were historically underdeveloped, with "no rigorous tradition of presenting data and responding to penetrating questions in public" (2005, p. 20). This insight corroborates comments from certain participants as to the lack of consistent, formal, and established practices in the creation and provision of information. Much of the state's dysfunctional information practices can thereby be understood as a mosaic of haphazard and deliberate processes. As mentioned here and at the outset, the monolithic-antagonistic approach to the state fosters an over-emphasis on direct manipulation by state elite, thereby ignoring much of its haphazard character.

While the feedback from participants occasionally supported the AHDR's view of a regime exerting control over the circulation of information, other accounts simultaneously caution against overstating the degree to which direct influence is responsible for information's creation and dissemination. The AHDR holds that official institutions, due to political backing, "produce 'party' or institutional knowledge and employ cultural workers and frameworks that legitimise their power" (UNDP, 2003, p. 149). Yet this overstates the degree of conscious management taking place, with several theoretical consequences.

5.7.4 Governance through neglect

First, emphasizing a regime's selective and self-interested promotion or suppression of information overlooks how the Egyptian state rules as much through *passive neglect* as it does through *active interference*. This neglect was embodied in the examples given by government insiders who reported on the influence of institutional gate-keepers and risk-adverse staff who acted according to their own initiatives in the absence of clear codes of information handling. These interviews reveal a degree of agency inherent with state institutions that can operate somewhat independently from regime-level machinations, with organization-level factors held responsible for the management of knowledge. This may potentially set the external goals of elites against those of specific institutions, complicating the dynamics of power operating within the Egyptian state in what is known as the *principal-agent problem*, which "stipulates that in cases when the interests of principal (the owner) and agent (the organization that is to carry out the owner's will) do not coincide, the agent is tempted to leverage its informational advantage to dodge the principal's interest in favor of its own needs" (Saleh, 2010, p. 12). Empirical studies have shown that behind Egypt's seemingly sophisticated and coordinated state apparatus there "is little to suggest that the bureaucracy is a cohesive, united, or effective actor in Egyptian politics," Springborg argued, instead highlighting "its fragmentation, to penetration by informal networks, and to inefficiency" (1988, p. 148). This is not to suggest that neglect does not itself constitute a mechanism of authoritarian rule, as suggested in Dorman's (2007) dissertation work. Resonating with the views expressed by Ingy regarding the poor quality of government information on informal housing, Dorman

observed that in the conduct of his own study of Cairo's informal housing he made "limited use" of official documents from the People's Assembly and the cabinet's Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC) since they "lacked detail and were hypothetical in tone", and that he relied instead on "consultancy studies by western firms—which were far more accessible and useful than Egyptian government papers" (2007, p. 67). This passing reference in Dorman's methodology discussion to the quality of knowledge production is more significant than he appreciates, as it indirectly supports his central thesis that Egypt's authoritarian order operated according to "a logic of neglectful rule" (i.e., inaction and avoidance) vis-à-vis the society at large, allowing society to tend to itself for the regime's political stability. The very failure of finding meaningful state information—matching the sentiments expressed by participants—is itself symptomatic of the type of rule Dorman dissects, the "politics of neglect". The insights of participants into the indifference with which information was handled by the state may confirm this analysis.

5.8 Conclusion

The AHDR 2003 spends little time actually exploring the nature of a state's dysfunction, largely restricted to general criticisms regarding the politicization of scientific and technical knowledge production. This produces the impression of the state's practices as more conscious and coordinated than the one portrayed by participants. While participants at times substantiated the report's insights, at other times they challenged them; more significantly, the diagnoses of participants also represented contrasting expectations of the state in Egypt's information ecosystem and the consequences it carried for contemporary political contention.

Though only a minor number of the population directly access such information from the state, the state's apparatuses of documentation are the basis of much public knowledge, feeding into research centers, universities, civil society, and the mass media. This is especially true in a country such as Egypt where few independent institutions exist to conduct unfettered, systematic primary research into domestic matters (Watch, 2005). As such, researchers, academics, journalists, activists, and officials must rely on the state as the primary source for much information on economic, social, and political matters. As a

result, any shortcoming on the part of state institutions to create, record, archive, retain, share, and disseminate information has repercussions for general public knowledge. Misinformation, even by omission, is thereby spread either directly from the state or indirectly through secondary purveyors of information. The views expressed by these participants suggest how central a government is as a production and access site of information. The state's institutional failures to provide reliable official information may also play a role in exacerbating the transitional period's political instability and conflict, where competing claims went unresolved and spurious speculations were rampant (see **8.Characteristics**). The link between the state's institutional practices and the deficit of reliable information in public discourse was made repeatedly by the interviewees in this section. Some shared personal insight into how the state operated, and found it falling far short of the democratic political ideals of transparency and disclosure. Some described a system inculcated with a *culture of secrecy*, where information was treated according to the logics of information warfare rather than a public good. Others described the downstream effects of poor state practices on opinion leaders and citizens themselves.

In the next two chapters, we examine how mass media and social media are seen to function in the information ecosystem which, as this section reveals, has very shaky foundations. In the later chapters, we will move beyond the scope of the state and its culture of secrecy to examine the complementary culture that reacts against it: an information culture rife with distrust and uncertainty.

Chapter 6 - Broadcast Media

6.1 Introduction

As established in the **2.Background** and **3.Literature Review**, Egypt's media became increasingly engaged in political issues during the transitional period, reproducing the competing political factions during Morsi's presidency. At the moment, there is little scholarship on how citizens actually negotiated Egypt's supposedly partisan media, or even their awareness of said partisanship. Are Egyptians, who have been historically subjected to a servile media system, tolerant of media agendas? What kinds of standards do citizens measure their media against? This section sets out to answer these questions, exploring how participants characterized this partisanship and whether they react with approval or disapproval. The research findings are organized under two headings: participants' characterization of media and their appraisal of them.

The first section presents the participants' descriptions of the media landscape in Egypt, its two antagonistic agendas and their dialectical intransigence. The partisanship of media in Egypt is a universally shared perception among participants, though the characterization of its agendas is interestingly varied. After examining participants' perceptions of media, the second section explores participants' evaluations of media. This section demonstrates the varied expectations of "good" media, with competing notions of success and failure of contemporary media performance. In discussion, the implications of these findings are further analyzed.

6.2 Identifying media agendas

Participants unanimously perceived two dueling media agendas dominating the media landscape, with two clear sides having emerged by the spring of 2013. On the one hand, there was the pro-Muslim Brotherhood agenda, variously alluded to by participants through the terms "Brotherhood", "pro-Morsi", "Islamist", "state-supporting", or "the regime". On the other hand there was the anti-Brotherhood agenda; anti-Brotherhood refers to media outlets that participants alternatively described as "liberal", "opposition", "revolutionary", or, most generally (but inaccurately) "private". Irrespective of how

either agenda was labeled, Egypt's media landscape was unanimously seen by participants as dominated by these two antagonistic agendas. This categorical opposition of anti-Brotherhood and pro-Brotherhood was used unanimously by participants to describe the media in Egypt—though, as we will see later, with varying degrees of reproach. Despite this basic dichotomy, the analysis below suggests that a more granular classification of media agendas (e.g., pro-regime, anti-regime, pro-Revolution, anti-Revolution, ambivalent) is entirely justified. Nevertheless, I adhere to the pro-/anti-Brotherhood agenda categories for three reasons: (1) it most closely represents the dominant poles participants used to characterize their immediate mass media environment; (2) acknowledging this internal variability instead of essentializing further categories fosters an appreciation for the heterogeneous and fluid character of media in Egypt, which the current configuration (pro-/anti-Brotherhood) offers a time-sensitive snapshot of; and (3) general consolidation into pro- and anti-Brotherhood agendas highlights how polarized media discourse was in the lead-up to Morsi's ouster, as confirmed by other observers (see **2.Background**).

6.2.1 Pro- Brotherhood agenda

According to participants, pro-Brotherhood media encompassed state-run media, private Islamic media, and even foreign media such as the Qatar-based Al-Jazeera network.

As described in the **2.Background**, state-run media are no stranger to political agendas; the state media's support of a pro-Brotherhood agenda was just the latest in a series of realignments that had less to do with ideology than who occupied the government. Over the course of Egypt's political transition—from Mubarak to SCAF to Morsi—state media was perceived as consistently following a pro-regime line, regardless of the regime itself. In fact, both during Mubarak and military rule, state media took their cue from the regimes with a hardline against the Brotherhood as well as anti-government activists. Participants recalled state television broadcasting bucolic stock footage of the banks of the Nile while Tahrir Square was exploding with anti-regime dissent, while the front page headlines from state newspapers announced unrest in Bahrain instead of the unrest a few blocks from the press headquarters. But when the new Islamist government came to power, the state media suddenly changed their tone of their coverage of the Muslim

Brotherhood from highly critical to supportive. Participants described this rapid about-face as shamelessly exposing the state media's pliant subservience to any government in office—a notable but unsurprising discovery to all participants. This perception was countered somewhat by journalists and scholars I spoke with who suggested that the pro-Brotherhood agenda had not been wholeheartedly adopted by state-media practitioners: both state and private journalists described some professionals dissenting, especially as the Morsi government's popularity declined, while one scholar saw the Egyptian Uprising infusing a new spirit of resistance. Such qualifications suggest friction between state media journalists and the turn-around in editorial policies—especially with new government appointed administrators recently taking office. Yet none of the media consumers I spoke with felt state-run media had at any point rehabilitated their role as regime-booster, whether the regime was headed by Mubarak, SCAF, or Morsi. For simplicity's sake, one can consider the state media as provisionally adopting a pro-Brotherhood agenda, though it is more accurately guided by a *pro-regime* agenda.

But the pro-Brotherhood agenda was not restricted to the servile state media, nor were they even exclusively Egyptian. Similar to the transformation of state media, participants witnessed the Qatari network Al-Jazeera undergoing realignment with the Brotherhood's political ascent, though from the opposite direction. With the exception of one Brotherhood supporter, Osama, most participants (including journalists and revolutionaries) viewed the station as supporting a pro-Brotherhood agenda. These participants saw Al-Jazeera transformed (or rather exposed) from the oppositional station it was conceived as under Mubarak to an Islamist propaganda machine.

Several participants saw this allegiance as corroborated by the large loans the Qatari government—which also funds the network—sent to the Morsi government. Noha, a member of the liberal Constitution Party and a life-long political activist, echoed the perception of many regarding Al-Jazeera: “first it supported the revolution; afterwards, it stopped talking to anyone against the Islamists.” Hassan, an independent journalist, corroborated this assessment, that “now that Al-Jazeera is perceived—and rightly so—for supporting the Brotherhood project, they come under attack.” Osama, the Brotherhood-supporter, disagreed, still considering the network “in some ways” one of the few

balanced media outlets currently available. For him, the shrill pro-Brotherhood media backing Morsi were the private Islamist channels.

The Islamic stations such as *Al-Nass (The People)*, *El-Hafez (The Protector)*, and the Brotherhood's own *Misr25 (Egypt25)* were unanimously seen as propaganda supporting the Brotherhood. Egypt's private media market was composed of both secularly and religiously themed networks, and Islamic stations were seen as boosters of the Brotherhood, referred to as the "the MB channels" (Hala). Hala, a politically astute young woman, referred to these religious channels as "ideological channels" due to their self-evident themes and agenda: "They are private but they have an ideology."

These outlets were not seen as very competent propagandists, however. Given the sample of participants—urban, privileged, politically sophisticated, and progressive—it is unsurprising that none of the participants spoke of these Islamist channels as worthwhile sources of information. Despite their popularity among certain segments of the population, these channels elicited very strong and negative reactions among participants. Yusef, a young revolutionary and independent media producer, dismissed the Islamist channels wholesale as "really bad at media," adding that they "are not even good at the manipulation game. Maybe Al-Jazeera has more experience in that field, but here their channels really suck!" Others commented that, regardless of their production quality, Islamists in general and the Brotherhood in particular had a robust media system. Besides inheriting state media, the Brotherhood had their own channel, *Misr25*, and their party paper, *Hurrayah wal-'Adalla (Freedom and Justice)*, as well as a strong online presence. Irrespective of the channel or format, however, revolutionaries and liberals alike expressed a visceral distaste against these religious stations. Ahmed, a long-time liberal political activist, for instance, described his strong reaction to the Salafi station, *Al-Hafez*—"I cannot stand more than 2 minutes in front of it"—while Thoraya, a liberal professor, confessed such stations held no personal appeal: "I'll turn the station to see what channel *Misr25* is saying. But it's not saying anything I want to listen to, so I just move on." Others, however, found the pro-Brotherhood media useful for offsetting the anti-Brotherhood media (next sub-section); the Brotherhood-supporter Osama gave the examples of his colleagues to this effect:

I know few people going to Misr25, listen, and then go to Lamis al-Hadidy [presenter on anti-Brotherhood station, CBC], because he is trying to mix two facts to come up with their own. (Osama)

6.2.2 Anti-Brotherhood agenda

Compared to the pro-Brotherhood media, analyzing what would eventually be characterized as the anti-Brotherhood media—the privately-owned secular, “liberal” channels and newspapers—are somewhat more complicated. Though these outlets would become dogmatically oppositional to the regime under the Brotherhood, their position beyond this is less well defined. Many participants recalled that the secular private media’s editorial slant shifted over the course of the Uprising (reminiscent to state-run media) from initially discrediting the protests to gradually championing the Uprising—especially following Mubarak’s removal from office. Most participants, especially Islamists and revolutionaries, were wary of the liberal media’s shifting alliances; it would be more appropriate to envision them as following an anti-Brotherhood agenda rather than a genuinely anti-regime or liberal one.

The perception that the anti-Brotherhood media was fundamentally hypocritical and disingenuous was shared by Morsi supporters and revolutionaries alike. They found it hypocritical for Mubarak regime apologists—such as the hosts of the CBC public affairs shows *Ett’kalem (Talk)* and *Be’hodoo (Calmly)*, hosted by Lamis El-Hadidy and Emad Adeeb respectively—to now attack Morsi ostensibly on behalf of the public. As one Muslim Brother, Fouad, put it:

Now they act as if they defend the revolution and attack anyone they present as being “counter-revolutionary”. So they will attack ministers, or the prime minister or the president as if that announcer is defending the state. [...] Is someone who previously protected Mubarak going to be protecting Egypt?(Fouad)

To participants expressing the critical sentiments above, activists and Islamists alike, the anti-Brotherhood media opposition to the Morsi government and his supporters served as camouflage for these old regime associates, commonly referred to as *feloul* (remnants).

Ziad, another Brother, recalled the private channel ONTV programmes defending its own owner, telecommunication mogul (and founder of a nationalist, anti-Islamist party) Naguib Sawiris, charged at the time with tax evasion.

As mentioned, Brotherhood supporters were not alone in their suspicion of oppositional media. Revolutionaries were hostile to *feloul* (remnants) superficially aligning themselves to the revolution's principles. As Sherine, a revolutionary and moderate Islamist, put it: "For me, feloul like Lamis El-Hadidy or Emad Adeeb or the other feloul guys are no better than the Brotherhood. They are now against injustice because it is coming from the Brotherhood. They were okay with it when it came from another regime." Sherine was incensed that TV host El-Hadidy would denounce the assaults on women protestors by Islamists on one episode but on another episode accuse a young Islamist woman caught on camera stripped and beaten by soldiers of doing a striptease for the officers. Others did not confine accusations of hypocrisy to feloul media personalities. For instance, respected journalist and presenter on the private station *Al-Qahira Wal-Nas (Cairo and the People)* Ibrahim Eissa was an outspoken dissident against Mubarak, and therefore not feloul. Yet another young revolutionary recalled Eissa, the supposed human rights advocate, criticising violent suppression against secular demonstration but cheering when victims were Islamist demonstrators, leading her to ask: "what kind of human rights is that?" The young but experienced political activist and revolutionary, Abbas, observed that:

[M]ost of the people who are against the Brotherhood now in the media, they were pro-Mubarak and pro-SCAF because those who were in [private] TV were close to Mubarak and defending him, and then close to SCAF by extension. When the Muslim Brotherhood came they didn't change their skins. (Abbas)

But he was quick to point out that it was necessary to avoid categorizing all anti-Brotherhood voices as feloul—Eissa was no Hadidy, Abbas noted—though such a conflation was being propagated to dismiss criticisms of the Brotherhood: "Those who are circulating that everybody who are opposing the Brotherhood now was pro-Mubarak are the Islamists." But the anti-Brotherhood agenda, often at odds with the ideals of revolutionaries, led one veteran dissident activist to distinguish "revolutionary media"

from the anti-Brotherhood media, “the satellite channels, which are anti-Brotherhood, not [for] the revolution.” Sherine, a revolutionary and heavy social media user, made a similar distinction regarding the private channel ONTV, whose anti-Brotherhood agenda sacrificed their credibility: “Even though I am [also] against the MB, but I see them [ONTV] as biased. They twist stories or spread – not lies but twisted stories.” Yasser, an veteran journalist, confided the same impression, describing the anti-Brotherhood media's political affiliations as dubious: “Without a doubt when you turn to CBC or El-Nahar or ONTV, you will see all these channels are attacking Islamism, [even] before Morsi was around. [But] in the end, whether directly or indirectly, they support the old regime.”

An older generation of liberals, to the distaste of their revolutionary children, were far more tolerant of connections to the old regime. These Egyptians, while supporting the revolution and taking pride in the role their children played, recalled the difficulty of being openly oppositional under Mubarak's reign. An unaffiliated, retired liberal Yasmine saw this as “the big difference” between her generation and Egyptian youth:

Because we lived under Mubarak's reign and we know how difficult it was to oppose. We might be jailed or lose our job. Not every one of us is a hero. Some of us would just cope and do his job. So most of the people were doing their jobs, to cope and live. (Yasmine)

Having lived longer under the previous regime, Yasmine argued that she and her cohort were willing to accept that media people like Lamis El-Hadidy had turned a new leaf: “we are more tolerant of people who have now changed their attitudes. They are becoming more open and know how to criticize unless it was so flagrant or they were corrupted or anything like that.”

Regardless of the attitudes towards anti-Brotherhood media, even revolutionaries and Brotherhood-supporters were as likely as liberals to watch the programming on these secular private stations. Some were attracted to the production value, the more professional style, the discussion panels, or the guests. Brothers mentioned regularly watching liberal networks such as Al-Hayat and Al-Nahar, and even sometimes CBC if a knowledgeable guest was being interviewed. Unlike with the pro-Brotherhood media,

there seemed an ability to “tune-out” the biases of programmes, presenters, and writers at times to glean some kernels of meaningful information. (For more on how mass media sources are negotiated and other and information practices, see **7.Social Media** and **10.Tactics**).

6.2.3 Missing middle

These two media agendas—pro- and anti-Brotherhood—were the dominant and almost exclusive orientations participants described, situating the media into the two main camps locked in political warfare. For instance, Ingy, a reform activist, saw the conflict manipulating Egyptians’ lack of political sophistication. Ingy observed that knowledge of “political terminology is still very limited” among Egyptians, allowing the pro-Brotherhood to conflate notions of *secularism* and *atheism* to stigmatize the opposition. Meanwhile, anti-Brotherhood media resorted to misreporting “scandals” regarding Muslim Brotherhood leaders “only to mobilize public opinion against the other side. Both of them are doing this all the time.” In her assessment, the media sector was just another manifestation of the schism cutting across all of Egyptian society. Thoraya, a scholar, shared the view that media reflected, and was in fact an extension of, the political polarization gripping the country.

What is significant in several accounts from participants is the palpable vacuum created between these antagonistic agendas (the next section will examine participants’ reactions to the polarized media in more detail). Thoraya and Ingy concurred that the polarization was so thorough as to leave no middle-ground media, with the latter adding that “since there is no middle-ground we must agree there is no impartial media in Egypt.” This was also reiterated by Ahmed, who observed the media being instrumentalized by both factions: “I think it is a tool, especially by the pro-Morsi camp: a tool to destroy the opposition. And the reaction from the opposition media, also it’s a tool. So the media instead of being a tool to learn the facts, it is a tool to increase the gap [between the two sides].” This exacerbated split can be seen in how the polarized media landscape imposed a forced-choice on audience. Thoraya stated that absence of any middle ground left her to choose between pro- and anti-Brotherhood channels. Having a liberal disposition, she found the Islamist channels unattractive, leaving her to watch ONTV and CBC despite

their anti-Morsi bias. When asked whether her political disposition dictated her viewing, the media scholar replied: “I have no choice. There is not one single middle-of-the-road station in Egypt right now.”

Another participant held a different rationale which approached the polarization as a bottom-up (from populace to media) instead of a top-down (from media to populace) phenomenon. Kassem, a professor, considered the politicization of media and its corresponding sacrifice of common ground or non-partisan principles as commercially driven. In his view, Egyptian media outlets were economically dependent on specific political constituencies for their viewership or readership: “Different kinds of media, different newspapers, specializing and catering to particular segments of Egyptian society. I think that tendency has only gotten more exacerbated following the revolution. [...] So people don’t talk to each other, they talk just to their constituents.”

6.3 Appraisals of politicized media

The responses to the partisan media landscape in Egypt can be placed into three basic categories. At one end, citizens were content with the system. A moderated response of conditional acceptance came from the second group who generally approved of the politicized media but saw a need for some reforms, especially for more informed and professional media practitioners. Yet this group saw such reform taking place in due time, in contrast with the last group who found the media landscape as systematically broken. This third group disapproved of the current media environment and saw the need for a genuinely public-oriented media model. This spectrum of responses—approval, conditional acceptance, and rejection—demonstrate competing standards and expectations of how contemporary media serve or not serve the public’s interest.

6.3.1 Approval

The first group and to some extent the second consist of participants who were generally comfortable with the status quo of media in Egypt. As expected, there was a general disdain for state-run media though many still read state papers such as Al-Ahram or Al-Akhbar as a matter of course. As for private media, most participants, whether Islamist or liberal, did not celebrate any particular private outlet or suite of outlets. Instead, people

who approved of the current media landscape applauded the diversity of media, which stood in stark contrast to the earlier situation. Thoraya claimed that,

[T]he media is performing at the best it ever has. I've never seen media like this in my lifetime. [...] I think a kind a diversity we never had before and on a whole, because a lot of this is partisan media or clearly with one side of the political spectrum, but nonetheless that is a diversity in itself (Thoraya)

This diversity was represented in the variety of personalities, channels, papers, topics, and arguments available to audiences. Some even saw the voices of the general public now included in call-in shows and man-on-the-street segments.

Even the language the media used came closer to everyday vernacular; given the longstanding tradition, practiced by writer and presenters, of using the formal Modern Standard Arabic, this transition was described by Thoraya as “not a small thing. It’s a big thing.” As an example Noha, a member of a liberal political party and lifelong Nasserist, presented an article from the new secular paper, *Tahrir (Freedom)*, entitled “To hell with your nationalism!” She pointed to this as a refreshing contrast to the formality and artifice of state media, with the journalist here “writing exactly the way he’s thinking: he wants to swear, so he swears; he wants to express himself, he did! [...] This is what gives it credibility. You can trust these ideas because you hear it in the streets.”

This response also supports a second, unsurprising point: that insofar as the partisanship in media resonated with the partisanship of the participant, the current condition of media was celebrated. Staunch liberals saw anti-Brotherhood media as valiantly defying an increasingly authoritarian Morsi government. Sawsan, a legal expert and human rights activist, praised private newspapers and satellite stations for “doing a great job. Very courageous! They’re all threatened, to be either shut-down or prosecuted. All of them! But they’re still hanging on and doing their best to defend the victims and present the other point of view.” Sawsan described several of the media personalities from the anti-Brotherhood media—satirist Bassem Yousef, newspaper editor Magdy El-Galad, and TV host Lamis El-Hadidy—being legally prosecuted by the government and its supporters.

She considered their struggle as one over freedom of expression. Mohamed, a reporter for a liberal party paper, put it in even more confrontational terms. For Mohamed, Egypt needed the outspoken and partisan media to galvanize political awareness against the Brotherhood, who he considered to be deceptive and conniving. In this conflict, neutrality was equivalent to unpatriotic complacency. As he put it:

The independent media is now really in a state of war against the state, on behalf of the citizens and to reclaim what the Brotherhood stole [the state institutions]. There is no room for objectivity. This is the thought of all journalists. I am glad that we aren't objective. Why be objective? (Mohamed)

Needless to say, this heroic portrayal of the oppositional media was exclusively heard from liberal participants highly critical of the Brotherhood. Amidst this battle, a journalist like Mohamed was willing to tolerate what he recognized as unprofessional news coverage, mixing opinions and facts. In a similar strain Noha saw it as understandable that the media sacrifice balance and neutral coverage in this “war against the state.” For instance, seeing the Egyptian army as the only force to oppose the Brotherhood, the liberal Noha excused the anti-Brotherhood media for overlooking military’s abuse of demonstrators. What was significant for her and others who mentioned this issue of pro-military bias in the media was that this sympathetic coverage was not coerced by the army but willfully adopted by media owned and operated by liberals, thereby vindicating the bias.

Others took a more pragmatic approach, not celebrating the anti-Brotherhood media per se but seeing it as useful for challenging the state. Hisham was a veteran activist who opposed the Mubarak regime long before joining the revolution, and like the other revolutionaries was wary of *feloul*. As such, he found the anti-Brotherhood media as morally questionable. Nevertheless, he saw media offering a necessary platform of revolutionaries to spread their own oppositional message to a wider audience. Discussing the Adeeb brothers, popular TV public affairs hosts, Hisham said: “Amr Adeeb is on Orbit. He used to be close with Gamal Mubarak. His brother, Emad, does a programme called *Be-hedooh* [on CBC]. They are both tiresome [...] and yet you need Orbit [...] and

you need ONTV”. These liberal private stations, politically suspect though they were, served an important function in opposing the state: “My concern is that there is no monopoly on political power from one faction. I can sacrifice in some things, but for one faction to hold Egypt again—no way.”

6.3.2 Conditional acceptance

Some participants did not entirely accept the current state of media and went into some detail regarding its shortcomings and articulating their expectations for media. While some participants expressed an interest in toning down the polarization in media, and others the need for more transparency within the media, there was a common demand for what participants called “professionalism”. But the lack of “professionalism” people described was the inability of media practitioners to expertly, fairly, incisively, and factually handle the topics they covered. In fact, the only media personality held up as an exception to this—whether by Islamists, liberals, or revolutionaries—was Yusri Fouada. Fouada is a former Al-Jazeera bureau chief who now hosts a public affairs show on ONTV. Otherwise, audiences, academics, or media practitioners all described writers and TV personalities as profoundly uninformed about the issues they discussed. Mohamed, despite approving of the instrumental function it served, reproached his colleagues for conflating facts and commentary. The retired researcher, Yasmine, observed that even in televised interviews with knowledgeable guests, presenters were too ignorant to properly exploit their guest’s expertise. Yusef, a revolutionary turned media practitioner, castigated public affairs hosts for their ignorance, noting it as detrimental the media’s watchdog function:

Most of them [the hosts] are too lazy to do their homework. And sadly, when they are facing a really bad government official, instead of holding him accountable they end up giving them immunity and letting them get away with things, which is really detrimental. It brings the opposite effect. (Yusef)

Many participants insisted that Egyptian media was sacrificing its responsibility of providing information and accountability in order to spread opinions. Yusef used the

metaphor of the journalist as the “prosecutor for the people,” arguing that media persons ought to be as thoroughly prepared as lawyers presenting a case on behalf of the public rather than an employer. In marked contrast with the sycophancy of current hosts and reporters—which “becomes a shoulder patting event” and “completing each other’s words in a very sickening, boring way”—Yusef demanded that practitioners should “always be the devil’s advocate regardless of your opinion. Your opinion [as host] is always the opposite opinion [of your guest].”

Thoraya saw uninformed media practitioners leading to incompetent coverage of serious issues, and ultimately resulting in poor public discourse on matters such as Morsi’s bid for a loan from the International Monetary Fund (Appendix 2: IMF loan).

I have a problem and this is where the low professionalism comes in. People are covering an IMF story when they have no economic background and don’t know anything about the IMF. I think that’s where the problem is, where the low skills are. We don’t have enough specialized journalists, I think, or the training is not going into it. So it’s very confusing to read some of this [material]. The people writing don’t really know anything about Egypt’s economy. (Thoraya)

From another perspective, lack of professionalism was represented in the absence of fact-checking mechanisms. Sherine saw commercial media pursuing sensationalistic “scoops” to attract audiences at the expense of proper vetting: “They just say a piece of news without spending enough time to verify it [...] they just want breaking news and a hit.”

Nevertheless, people who made these judgments about current Egyptian media generally accepted it as a step towards a better state of public discourse. Khaled, Thoraya, and Sherine—a member of a reform think tank, a liberal professor, and a young social media-savvy revolutionary—all expected processes of *natural selection* to winnow out the less competent and credible sources. These participants conceptualized Egypt’s contemporary media landscape as a “marketplace of ideas” currently rife with low quality sources that consumer rationality would eventually discard in favor of higher quality alternatives. From this viewpoint, no matter how prejudiced contemporary media was, it would be

vindicated by a diversity that was in itself beneficial and secondarily allowed an ameliorative mechanism that could improve the general quality and orientation of media over time. This mechanism was the market, which even in its errors was preferable to the state-controlled media system; Sherine, for instance, described the commercial logics incentivizing the dissemination of misinformation as distinct from misinformation precipitating from special interests or the state: “now, we have some news agencies that are not governed by the government, they are owned by normal people in the private sector.” This created opportunities for redressing current defects, which Khaled wholly anticipated, though noting that “this takes time.” With this lens, one can see Egypt's contentious media in a growth stage, better than it was and bound to be even better in the future by virtue of the dynamics already in place. Implicit in these viewpoints is the importance of variety and plurality. From this perspective, the diversity of media—regardless of partisanship—seemed to be the genuine virtue of Egyptian media.

An extension of this newfound diversity was the unprecedented degree of autonomy it afforded the public, who were seen as historically hostages to a centralized, state-run media system which controlled public discourse and collective consciousness through framing, misrepresenting, falsifying, and omitting choice content. Legal activist Sawsan observed that Egyptians today “just have to take the remote control and change the channel. It is easy. It is the diversity of resources [...]. All of this has created an environment that where you cannot sustain lies for long. It will be outted, eventually.” Constitution Party member and old Nasserist Noha, who recalled Sadat and Nasser's monopoly over public discourse, was equally jubilant about the accessibility and diversity of media: “There is no such thing as 'mobilizing' media anymore. There is no such thing as 'I don't read'.” Sherine, the young revolutionary, observed that though Egyptians “still have biased media,” this was a vast improvement because citizens could no longer be isolated from counter-messages: “even those people who only listen to the channels of the pro-Islamist, they have to in some way or other be aware of the other channels, stumble into something, or talk with people who say ‘we saw yesterday Bassem Yousef's show...’ So people will hear it even if they don't want to.”

6.3.3 Rejection

The final group stood in marked contrast to the first two by being highly critical of the contemporary media landscape and seeing its faults as endemic. For these persons, the agendas of media were not balanced by diversity, nor did partisan media serve the public interest. This group saw a systematic failure in how media operate in Egypt, and the current media diversity did not act as an antidote for the absence of proper media.

These participants saw the anti-Brotherhood and pro-Brotherhood media agendas as representing a conflict amongst Egypt's political and economic elite. This elite conflict focused on elite concerns, ignoring the majority of countrymen suffering from poverty, collapsing public infrastructure, violence, and exploitation. One young revolutionary and political radical, Lily, saw liberal media focusing on "first world issues", such as constitutional or policy debates, geo-political affairs, or confrontations between state branches, which were far removed from the concerns of most citizens, who were left to turn to Islamist media to address their concern: "The [liberal] media speaks another language totally detached from everything. So which media ends up speaking to people? The religious media talking in God's name and giving cathartic answers." Osama, an Islamist, saw this mass base following for Islamic media as evidence of the religious sensibilities of common Egyptians and their rejection of the cosmopolitan culture imposed by liberals; but Lily simply saw another mediated political faction more successful at attracting their audience. Whether private or state, Islamist or liberal, those who rejected Egypt's media partisanship did not see any media serving the public's collective interest. For Fouad, the Brother, this was the tradition of media in Egypt: "Egyptian media stopped serving the Egyptian people a long time ago. It was all the president, the president, the president." Ziad added that those media personalities persisted in popularity even after the fall of Mubarak due to a collective amnesia that effaced their questionable histories and allegiances:

Now, regarding the television channels: here in Egypt people forget many things. There are people from the channels that were originally part of the old order.

According to this line of thinking, the new diversified media sector has merely shifted from an autocratic system to a plutocratic one.

Mona, a young Islamist in the Egypt Party, saw the polarized media underlining problems and controversies without offering any substantive solutions. Mona distinguished between anti-Brotherhood voices like Amr Adeeb or Lamis El-Hadidy who “just fight” to attract viewership with a “very analytical person” like Ibrahim Eissa who carefully examined social problems; but in either case she found that the measure of accountability these critics brought to Morsi government never went beyond cataloguing problems, faults and blame. According to Mona, no one in the media was exploring constructive possibilities, thereby only exacerbating the confusion and hopelessness and further destabilizing Egypt’s transitional process.

The essential problem many ‘rejecters’ saw in the partisanship of Egyptian media was that it only represented the positions and interests of Egypt’s class of political and commercial elite and the ongoing conflict amongst them for dominance. This mediated power struggle led to an elite-dominated public discourse played out for citizens to mobilize a base through their media holdings to the exclusion of views, concerns, and interests of the majority of Egyptians. As the independent journalist Hassan observed,

I think there is awareness here if you are watching ONTV, you are watching [Naguib] Sawiris’s channel; if you are watching El-Hafez, you’re watching a Salifi channel; if you’re watching Misr25 you are watching the Brotherhood channel. That’s why independent media is so needed. It is such a partisan, elite fight. (Hassan)

The missing middle between the media’s political poles was where rejecters saw most Egyptians residing, affiliated with neither end of political spectrum. Hassan continued:

What is missing is what we can call the “Voice of the Revolution” or the “Voice of Ordinary People.” So there is a large disconnect between the ordinary people and the political classes are talking about, and that is reflected on the airwaves as well. (Hassan)

In the accounts of rejecters, like Hassan and Lily (a revolutionary and political radical), concerns regarding media elitism and partisanship are closely intertwined as mass mediated discourses are perceived to reflect the power-struggle among prevailing, established interest-groups rather than the diverse concerns of the larger, disenfranchised population. A university student and avid politico, Zeinab, lambasted the media for consistently leaving out the views of most citizens in the interest of representing the image and concern of powerful Egyptians:

You are talking about people in power, but what about the people? [...] The media are working on the diplomats and politicians, they are no good anymore. They are old, thinking about how they are going to improve their image before they die. What about creating a good image of the country, which is your legacy. They are focusing on the politicians. Why not focus on the people, what they think, their points of view? Go down to streets, see what they want.

This perspective upsets the traditional distinction between state-run and private media in the Middle East, with the former constructed as serving special interests (i.e., the regime) to the antithesis of the latter which, outside of direct state control, is free serve the public interests. Lily dismissed this state-versus-private media dichotomy entirely as all media served consolidated elite interests, whether to pacify citizens or laborers:

When my mother says 'state-media...the state-media', this makes me laugh. All the media are one media. Government or non-government, they are all sons-of-bitches. They put out these images..., if not for the government, for the businessmen. For instance, you'll find all the channels denigrate the workers of some factory. Why? Because the owner of the channel is a shareholder in the factory. (Lily)

Lily found anti-labour rhetoric just as pervasive in religious programmes, which according to her promulgated the idea that “civil disobedience is a sin,” including strikes, walkout, pickets, and boycotts. The message Lily perceived coming from religious media was: “‘You are poor because God ordained it’. And that means you will never revolt, because that is your lot.”

The agenda-riddled media was reflective of a quarreling elite, whether aligned with Islamists, liberals, feloul, or the Army. These media exclusively addressed their own political constituency, alienating the larger public, according to Yusef, the media activist:

It is like a closed vicious circle where you are talking to people who listen to you and enjoy you because you are relaying what they have in their mind, being that opinionated. But you're losing the whole other side that is not on your ground and that don't agree with you. You are never going to reach them because you are so biased.
(Yusef)

Other participants agreed that the polemic character of Egyptian media alienated common Egyptians. Galal, a senior academic, observed that “different political ideologies with their own groups have their own media that they belong to. This media is feeding them what they would like to watch and listen to.” Kassem, another academic, concurred, noting that “what’s happened is that everyone has just been working on mobilizing their own supporters instead of trying to engage in some common activity.” Rejecters saw this partisan system as discouraging media practitioners from engaging in credible or objective reporting, favoring only the sensational and scandalous. The resulting stream frenzied controversies, according to Galal, turn the mediated political contest into a sport or drama played out for a rapt but dispassionate Egyptian audience; while Islamists and liberals watched their respective channels, “the people who don’t belong to or aren’t active in any of the groups, they are those who are really enjoying TV to the max, watching the spectacle.” As the young university student and ardent politico Zeinab put it, “a good media doesn’t set everything on fire,” yet this was what she and others saw Egyptian media currently doing. And those not taking any glee in the fireworks display simply tuned out. Many participants, who tended to be highly engaged with political events, described their peers and associates as frustrated with the incendiary sensationalistic and conjecture-filled content, leading to general apathy. For example, the retired academic, Medhat, admitted that he “gets bored from the discussions and the political opinions.” The political aficionado Yasmine described her husband, a retiree, as “overdosing” on the talk shows that constantly argued politics. Yasmine blamed the contentious nature of Egyptian media for this disengagement:

You have your Muslim Brotherhood channels, and they are preaching something very different. And you have channels preaching something [else]. ONTV in one track, al-Hayat in another, and CBC...everything is going in a different track and you will get confused. (Yasmine)

Besides the exclusionary aspects of partisan media and the apathy it fostered there was also concern about the political culture of distrust, suspicion and conspiracy thinking it nurtured, undermining the capacity to reconcile opposing political positions. For example, Kassem considered how the media and audience segmentation “reinforces these kinds of paranoid tendencies because you only tend to hear one side.” Many of the views shared by participants, whether pro-Brotherhood or anti-Brotherhood, manifested this paranoia in the form of conspiracy theories of their opponent’s secret pacts, hidden agendas, and foreign collaborators.

Compared with the sentiments of conditional approvers described above, rejecters did not expect the flaws that they identified to be ameliorated by the system already in place—the faults were intrinsic to the system. From their perspective ownership structures and market rationalities only reinforce this exclusionary, incendiary, and irresponsible media production. The state media journalist, Yasser, described both state and private media equally susceptible to political and financial pressure, having experienced it firsthand working at a state newspaper. This influence resulted in the censoring, manipulating, or falsifying of information available to the public, stunting public awareness:

The awareness of the people is thereby left only at a general level: awareness that Egypt is being robbed and neglected—that something is wrong, but the details are unknown since all media is permeated by agendas. [...] They know there is no transparency, that there is dictatorship—people are aware of this. But they don’t have the details of the issues. (Yasser)

It was for this reason that rejecters saw the need for a new financial model to support genuine independent media. Hassan, the freelance journalist, presented the "listener supported" system sustaining the activist video cooperative Mosireen (Determined) and

proposed by Egypt Independent staff (before it was closed down by the new administrators at Al-Masry Al-Youm). As Hassan stated:

The problem is—and this is the problem with political parties as well—it is hard to represent the poorest and most marginalized of our society when you have this kind of ownership structure. They don't benefit from covering these issues, and these are the issues we need to tackle the most. And this is majority of people in Egypt. (Hassan)

An alternative to independently-supported media was to reform the state media according to the model of state-funded public broadcasting existing in countries like Canada, Sweden, and England. With the state media currently concentrated in Cairo, Galal looked to the Eastern European model and advocated for more local public broadcasting. For Galal, public awareness was the responsibility of public media, and once again the market model for media could not be expected to fulfill this role. This contrasted another media scholar, Thoraya, who saw commercial media as taking the lead for providing the transparency and accountability necessary for a democratic transition: “I never heard that state media plays that role. Who’s going to inform the citizens? It’s not going to be the government.”

Rejecters were concerned about the voices and issues being left out from public discourse, and considered this omission a reflection of Egypt’s transitional process itself being hijacked by entrenched political and economic interests. Media partisanship was unequivocally present for the activists, scholars, revolutionaries, Islamists, journalists, and liberals interviewed, yet they articulated a range of responses based on specific experiences and beliefs which represent a narrow microcosm of the Egyptian polity reacting to an unprecedented time of political and media contention. In the following discussion, I will draw on implications from the findings above for the study of Arab media, asking how we can better analytically approach the interconnection of media and politics in a country like Egypt which continues to be driven by its authoritarian legacies and revolutionary aspirations.

6.4 Discussion

For all the changes Egyptian media has undergone in recent years, its partisan character is hardly new. “It's no secret to say,” wrote Ahmed Magdy Youssef following the removal of Morsi from office, “that Egypt's media landscape has never been non-partisan” (2013, para. 6). As seen both in the historical record and throughout the responses of participants, political agendas are established facets of the media. Even so, the specific antagonism between two inimical agendas—for and against the Islamist regime—in the lead-up to June 30, 2013 was in itself somewhat novel, though the putative forces behind them (the Brotherhood, feloul, or a state apparatus) are familiar. Furthermore, despite citizens being eminently aware of this media polarization, it was greeted by a spectrum of reactions from positive to negative.

6.4.1 Post-Uprising changes

There exists little research into this media environment, and even less on how citizens negotiate it. The surfeit of scholarly attention given to the early mobilization period of the revolution and the role played by media (especially online) has tapered in the equally dramatic and contentious transitional phase that followed. Matar (2012) suggested that the complex narrative of the transitional period was incapable of sustaining the fitful and ahistorical interest of many observers. The successful campaign to de-legitimize Egypt's first elected president certainly confused many casual onlookers unfamiliar with the degree of contention that continued grappling the country after Mubarak's regime fell. Prescient of such complexity, in the summer of 2011 Lynch was already calling for a shift of focus from immediate expectations of “toppling dictators” and “establishing democracy” towards the more drawn-out transformation in public discourse and communication (Lynch, 2011). In a similar vein, Sakr was observing a persistent battle over the ethos of journalism persisting in the aftermath of the revolution (Sakr, 2013). Meanwhile, the Egyptian public exhibited a widespread and active engagement in domestic and political issues like never before, which my participants all testified to, but this also led to divisive tones and positions. The responses of participants suggested that Egypt's partisan media, on the one hand, exacerbated antagonism between factions of politically-engaged citizens while, on the other hand, alienated and disappointed those

without pre-formed affiliations or antipathies. For people such as Medhat—and many participants talked about knowing fellow Egyptians like him—the partisanship and sensationalism of media was off-putting, with no issue ever elucidated clearly or rationally in the endless parade of controversies.

Despite this antagonism and alienation, some participants found this transformation of the media and its public a positive one. For this group, Egypt had moved from a monolithic media landscape to one with new venues of contention. Liberals especially celebrated this change. Such responses—characteristic of those who approved fully or partially of the Egyptian media’s performance—implicitly draw on a specific comparative framework, comparing the current system to what Rugh classified as the monopolized “revolutionary media” of an autocratic regime. By contrast, the responses of those highly critical of the current media, the political culture this media fostered, or the interests the media represented drew on a different normative framework; media that were not authoritarian did not automatically translate to “good media”. It is not enough for rejecters that media not be state-controlled: besides the interests of the owners steering commercial media, regimes could still exert influence through informal channels on private enterprises. Aside from these general suspicions of political agendas, even those articulating conditional approval of the media expressed fears that the apolitical rationalities of commercial media—who according to Sherine “just want breaking news and a hit”—were subverting the quality of information vital to the newly enfranchised polity. Such concerns point to the continued need to understand the economic and political infrastructure of media to understand its capacities to perform in the public interest (Rugh, 2004).

6.4.2 Beyond state-versus-market media

Under certain conditions, the state-media/private-media dichotomy can be a useful heuristic. But when this binary is taken to an extreme, it can obscure the interpenetration with political agendas or overstate the divisions between the political and financial elites. Recall Lily’s dismissive response to her mother’s targeted criticisms of state-run media; for the revolutionaries, state-run and private media were equally complicit in undermining the wider scope of the revolution in the interest of pursuing very narrowly

defined political and economic agendas. The state-versus-independent binary, espoused by many participants as well as several Arab media scholars, reflects “how the concept of media power has tended toward the optimistic, focusing on high hopes rather than on fears about the media's influence on the political arena” (Hafez, 2008a, p. 1) in the Middle East. This optimism tapers scrutiny of the beneficial, deleterious, and benign consequences of the new media developments. The feedback from participants here demonstrates this more nuanced range of perceptions, with private media and satellite television in particular seeing to make ambivalent impacts. On the one hand, private media have introduced some oppositional voices into public discourse. On the other hand, these voices represent a limited range of perspectives and dubious credibility; they are perceived by some as locking the country into intransigent political conflict, and sacrificing a broader public mandate as well as professional standards of news and information dissemination.

Several researchers have offered frameworks for examining the agendas of media institutions. For example, in their analysis of the Qatar-based network Al-Jazeera, Powers and Gilboa (2007) proposed treating the station as a non-state actor to examine the pan-Arab network's political impact. Noting the network's influence and relative autonomy, the authors apply the notion of *public diplomacy* to explain Al-Jazeera's guiding values and orientations, and its image cultivation in response to official criticism. The authors argued that some news media institutions should be viewed as “nonstate actors pursuing self-adopted political agendas” (Powers & Gilboa, 2007, p. 75). Such an approach fits with how participants themselves negotiated their local media environment, when media was seen as inseparable from the surrounding conflict. The researchers Ingy and Thoraya both observed that it was impossible to detach the media from the contentious political swirling about it—it fact, media were actors alongside political parties, civil society organizations, and branches of the state.

Egypt's legacy of state-dominated media is largely responsible for the state-versus-independent media dichotomy. Looking to studies of media in Arab states where media have historically operated outside of a state monopoly can offer a more useful analytical framework for examining the contemporary media environment. For instance, Lebanon's

media sector has long stood in marked contrast to the closed media spaces of the rest of the Middle East, but in the absence of centralized censorship and control Lebanese media grew around numerous contending political agendas. Studies of Lebanese media reveal that outlets manifested partisanship in their news agendas and news framing (Dajani, 2006; Kraidy, 2000; Notzold, 2008). The research describes a media environment rife with political agendas which undermine the media's capacity to serve the public interest, closely paralleling the responses of participants on the partisanship in Egyptian media and its detrimental social and political ramifications. As Dajani notes, a “wrong visualization” of media ideals predicated on freedom from censorship or state-control “leads to private interests that both override and overwhelm social responsibility” in the media sector (Dajani, 2006, p. 61); a sentiment consistent with the criticisms from citizens regarding Egypt's anti-Brotherhood and pro-Brotherhood media landscape. As in Lebanon, the quality of public discourse suffers while the single spectrum polarization (compared with Lebanon's multi-polar politics) erodes opportunities for a “middle-ground” media as a platform for shared political visions to develop.

6.4.3 Media principles

Mabrouk and Hausheer (2014) reported that contrary to the glimmering opportunities observed by Sakr (2013), the period following the Uprising “has not resulted in a corresponding rise in ethics or standards, and the media has become increasingly divisive and partisan” (Mabrouk & Hausheer, 2014, p. 1). Responses in this study confirm this observation in the lead-up to Morsi's removal; but it also reveals that Egyptians were highly conscious of the media's polarizing character in this time. Besides shedding light on the under-studied subject of Arab audiences (Amin, 2008), this also reveals how contentious the very “ethics or standards” for media are in Egypt. It is crucial to consider the standards of media as emerging from the intersection of internal and external factors. As Hafez (2008b) observes in his discussion of journalistic ethics, media standards must be approached as cooperatively constructed through institutions, audiences, social contexts, media owners, and the journalists themselves. There remains a need to examine how citizens of various walks perceive the media that surround them amidst this turbulent political period. Not everyone disapproved of the partisan media—some as we saw

lauded the polarization—and criticisms themselves varied in degree of seriousness (such as whether media practitioners were simply unprofessional or systematically misrepresentative). What is interesting, however, is those that those most critical of media did not advocate for objectivity or neutrality—common precepts for Western journalism—but rather argued for a media to represent the concerns of the majority of Egyptians or adhere more closely to professional practices to secure the quality of information they disseminated. While ideologically and commercially motivated media were generally accepted, this acceptance met its limit when these motivations overrode basic journalistic standards and allowed media producers to indulge in propaganda, speculation, and sensationalism. Between *politicized* media that sacrificed quality information for profit or partisanship, and *neutral* media that was either naively idealistic or politically complacent, one could place *principled* media as instantiation of citizens' expectations—broadcasters who adopted a political stance but still adhered to codes of professionalism, balance, and representativeness in content.⁶

6.5 Conclusion

The goal of this chapter was to elucidate how the mass media was perceived and appraised during Egypt's transitional period. The findings demonstrate a population highly cognizant of a profoundly polarized media, and reactions that ranged between approval and disapproval. As discussed, these appraisals were predicated on the normative frameworks and the personal backgrounds of participants. Besides shedding light on the contentious dynamics of Egypt's turbulent political transition, the ambivalent role of media, and the conflicting responses of the public, this chapter offers several future lines of inquiry on media amidst contentious politics. Two forthcoming subjects I will examine are the role of social media and information practices of citizens during this intense period of contestation.

This chapter specifically examined the perceptions of mass media; for all the attention paid to social media since the Arab Spring, mass media (and satellite television in

⁶ My thanks to Dr. Jacquelyn Burkell for this observation

particular) remain the most pervasive and popular source of news across the country (Hamdy, 2013a). But having articulated the perceptions of mass media—its partisanship and the associated strengths and weaknesses—the next step is to explore how social media is situated within this landscape (see **7.Social Media**). Social media, after all, represent one facet of a larger shift in Arab media ushered in by satellite television and private presses (Lynch, 2011). In exploring the interplay of social and mass media, I will investigate how social media circumvents or reproduces the contentious politics interpenetrating mass media, what alternative systems of credibility and authentication it offers, whether social media attenuates or exacerbates political fragmentation, and the degree to which social media admits alternative viewpoints in the partisan discourse.

The second line of research, which spans the last two parts of the dissertation, will examine how citizens negotiate knowledge and certainty given the widespread perception of manipulated and manipulative information sources. For instance, how does one arrive at the facts when mistrust is an endemic aspect of the local culture? Tsftati and Cappella's (2005) review of the literature on media consumption finds people's skepticism has a surprisingly weak effect on their consumption of newspapers or television news, suggesting that the need for credible informational needs are subordinate to needs for cognition, diversion, entertainment, and basic environmental awareness. In the findings described in this paper, citizens described some of their tactics for coping with a landscape with few reliable outlets and little transparency. The cultivation and negotiation of trust, truth, facts, misinformation, credibility, and certainty become manifestations of the public contention in which citizens are immersed.

Chapter 7 - Social Media

7.1 Introduction

The context outlined in the previous chapters of polarized media organizations (**2.Background** and **6.Broadcast Media**) and secretive officials and agencies (**5.State Information**), left us to ask: what role was played by social media? Did social media—a distinct communication system of interactive and networked online platforms (e.g., YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook) enable users to consume and contribute content—*supplanting* the problematic mass media in supplying people with information?

The accounts of participants regarding social media revealed that its usage functionally complemented broadcast media rather than operating as its informational alternative. As explored in **3.Literature Review**, the media landscape in Egypt is better understood as one of *convergence*, with all types of media operating responsively and interdependently in content, function, and structure. The dynamics of convergence, along with a climate of contention, made social media both a microcosm and a constituent of Egypt's information ecosystem. This chapter explores how this convergence was instantiated in the content and credibility of information available to participants through social media. It then explores how the identity of consumers was constructed around social media before a discussion relating the findings to the literature.

7.2 Prelude to convergence

Throughout the narratives of participants, social media was referred to as a distinct platform for information with respect to the rest of the information landscape. Nevertheless, the extent of this distinction must not be overstated, as the statements of the revolutionary, Sherine, might initially suggest.

Sherine's account of social media superficially supported the hypothesis of supplanting traditional media. Prior to the Uprising, the young engineer was minimally interested in public affairs, following domestic issues off-and-on through newspapers and television. But since joining the revolutionaries in Tahrir Square, her maturing political engagement

led her to replace her consumption of broadcast media (even online) with social media sources: “for news, I don’t rely on TV anymore, or the websites of the newspapers.” Sherine claimed to give up reading newspapers “because their news is either outdated or taken out of context or not verified enough.” The superior quality of information available through social media, according to Sherine, was evidenced by the fact that broadcasters increasingly “take their news from what we write on social media and they make an event or news out of it.”

In the mismanagement and underdevelopment of public broadcasting, argued Galal (the university professor), satellite networks and social media effectively filled in the information void. The latter in particular was “very appealing, especially for the youth, because they can bypass any taboos, the sense of belonging, new exchanges of ideas, and the formation of many groups.” Yasser, an experienced journalist at state media, concurred with this assessment. But Galal saw growth of both social and broadcast media as interconnected, stating that “the two platforms right now are somehow complementing each other.” A closer look at the accounts of Sherine and heavy social media users in fact revealed a more complex dynamic than one media platform being swapped for another. Sherine herself, despite repudiating traditional media, still made the necessary exception in the interest of being fully informed. She turned to television news “when there is some interview and I need to hear what some well-known politician is saying [and] I want to hear it in the full context.” But the convergence of information sources—the complementarity Galal referred to—was more fundamental than switching from one to the other at any given moment. Social media informational uses were interwoven with broadcast media, both *mediating* and *remediating* it.

7.3 The circulation of content

7.3.1 Mediating the media

From the outset, the division between social and broadcast media was undercut by the type of content that predominated online. Participants remarked that much of the information circulating in social media originated in broadcast media. Long-time activist and Marxist activist Hisham observed that “most of the content in Twitter is [from]

newspapers.” Another revolutionary, the secular democrat Abbas, stated that “I’m not opening the *Al-Masry Al-Youm* website, but the stories [from the newspaper] that my eyes fall upon are on Twitter.”

What social media offered was selective exposure to mainstream content, with heavy social media users describing Twitter as the channel through which they accessed mass media news stories. In this way, social media can be seen as a mediating layer between mainstream content and online consumers. The state journalist, Yasser, saw social media providing a layer of filtration and selection to the content his newspaper produced. In this manner, stories were sorted according to the values and concerns of a community of readers. The young political activist and organizer, Abbas, described the online community as “circulating the most important breaking news through Twitter.” This collective process of discriminating news according to common interests, according to Abbas, was emblematic of the political consciousness that emerged from the Uprising: “Twitter brought this sense to the revolution, this spontaneous collective, pushing the news, and deciding what is important and what isn’t. If it is important, everyone will share it. That’s why it becomes important.” As such, while the source of the content might have been the familiar institutions of broadcast media, the information was now selectively rearranged and presented not according to editorial policies but a community of engaged like-minded users.

Re-circulating news according to self-defined interests was more than just a personally tailored selection of information; it potentially defused the threat of the agenda-setting from formal sources. According to Abbas, the collective behaviour of users, who each independently choose whether or not to share content, immunized the information propagated through social media from being directed or coordinated by any special interests. This, he argued, made social media a reliable source of information, in contrast to hierarchically managed sources: “It is very spontaneous, that’s why it’s trusted. And it is too big to be directed by anybody.”

7.3.2 Supplementing the media

Besides re-weighing mass media content according to personal/collective priorities, social media also enabled information from non-mainstream or independent contributors to circulate. Abbas distinguished between media platforms by describing the content of mass media as representing the “mainstream point-of-view” and content native to social media as providing the “anti-mainstream” point-of-view, potentially delving deeper beneath the surface of a story and exposing “the things behind the things.” He gave the example of the controversial trial against foreign NGO workers (Appendix 2: NGO trial). Newspapers and television shows at the time presented a mainstream view of unlicensed organizations and foreign interference, but Abbas arrived to an anti-mainstream position through social media, where a source indicated that the charges against the NGOs were actually part of a dispute between the Egyptian military and the US government over armament negotiations:

“I’m getting this from my sources, because a friend on Twitter shared a piece on an American blog talking about the crisis of armament in the US, where manufacturers are fighting with the American organizations to keep the Egyptian aid to keep their factories working.” (Abbas)

Yasser, the state-newspaper journalist, corroborated the “anti-mainstream” description of social media by attesting to stories and news circulating online that would not be picked up by outlets like his own. Hassan, a freelance reporter, also saw Twitter, Facebook and YouTube publicizing reports on events that were initially overlooked or ignored by broadcast media. Several participants—Hassan included—gave the example of police brutality accounts disseminated by activists and online journalists but avoided or censored in the media and official reports (Appendix 2: Maspero massacre). Usually, the kind of content that social media provided better than mainstream media were first-hand accounts: events that were documents on cell-phones or reported by eye-witnesses who became online contributors. Social media provided information that seemed unmediated, unpolished, and uncensored—raw texts and images that spoke for themselves. The image of security forces dumping dead bodies onto garbage heaps did not just present what mainstream media avoided, but it presented it in a manner that was qualitatively different:

raw and immediate. For these reasons, social media was portrayed as an ideal resource through which users discovered highly pertinent information regarding contained and discernible controversies (see next section and **9.Sources**).

This capacity to supplement information was not as effective for more complex controversies, such as economic policy or issues of poverty, where several participants admitted that social media was a less useful resource. For example, in discussing the IMF loan debate (Appendix 2: IMF loan), Sherine admitted that “for such topics social media are not as beneficial as they are for more day-to-day events because this is more scientific and we need expert opinions.” She nevertheless found some relevant articles through social media, just as Abbas described above regarding the NGO case. Sherine admitted, however, that what was circulating more prominently online with respect to the IMF debate were videos “about the stand of the MB [Muslim Brotherhood] before and after” winning elections, highlighting their reversal on the issue of international loans. This polemical bent to the kind of information available through social media was even more strongly remarked upon by Ingy, the reform activist. According to her, controversies discussed on social media mostly devolved into diatribes with little meaningful information regarding complex yet important controversies, in contrast to the more reliable reportage it offered regarding contained, tangible events:

“There is some data, and I follow Twitter to know what is happening at an accident, something in the streets. In these situations, it will give me some facts. But a problem like unemployment or poverty, any of these broader issues, I don’t think so. It’ll be opinions and incorrect facts.” (Ingy)

This suggests that as a source of information, social media was seen to excel for accessing certain types of content and was less reliable for other types; in other words, within the information ecosystem, social media demonstrated the trade-offs of *specialization*.

But if social media fell short as an information source with respect to certain types of controversies because it tended to publicize opinions and biases in the place of objective facts, this questionable content simultaneously presented a different and unique

opportunity to the information consumers, namely access to public opinions. Public opinions were another type of information that social media made available to citizens that tended to be excluded from official or professional sources. The pro-Brotherhood Osama, for instance, used Facebook because it captured both sides surrounding a controversy reported in the media; but whereas newspapers and television stations invariably reflected one side or the other of the debate, according to Osama, Facebook offered its own balanced coverage by representing both parties at the same time. The young revolutionary, Yusef, echoed Osama's reaction; the young revolutionary and independent media producer stated that he went to Facebook and Twitter when a news story broke because he would "like getting opinions from different people, how they react to it." Again, we see in this fashion how qualitatively the content of social media complemented that of mass media through its respective strengths and weaknesses, selectively provisioning what was otherwise lacking.

7.3.3 Misinformation online

The utility of opinions aside, the concern over misinformation spreading through social media was prevalent among participants. Even Abbas, who we saw describing the news filtered through social media as more reliable, took pains to distinguish *more reliable* from *more credible*; when asked if information filtered through social media networks was more trustworthy, Abbas replied: "No, not trustworthy, but we will see it." Social media was hardly a sanctuary from misinformation. When describing the consumption of information through social media, Sherine noted that there was "value to read tweets and news from people that are not famous and not well-known, but you have to take it with some doubts, with a grain of salt—you have to verify."

Participants described online sources under pressure for immediate publication, just as in mass media, leading to the same sacrifices in quality. Social media contributors, even in the absence of managerial or market pressures, fell victim to the same pernicious pace of news cycles. Hassan, himself a journalist, observed as much regarding social media contributions: "it is so immediate that there is no fact-checking." While this made Twitter useful for learning about breaking news—such as a tweet he received in the middle of the interview alerting him to the kidnapping of soldiers in Sinai (Appendix 2: Sinai

soldiers)—he asserted that “you still don’t know. A lot of things you hear on Twitter are complete bullshit. There are a lot of rumor mills and you learn to sift through it.” The fact that the tweet he received was first reported in a private newspaper made no difference to Hassan: “it needs to be confirmed by someone.”

In another parallel with broadcast media, Hisham observed that sensationalism was the norm for social media content:

“Rarely you’ll get Nawara [Negm, famous blogger and Brotherhood opponent] sending out an apology for spreading false news about some MB saying something or taking it back because Twitter is 80% sensationalist”

Interestingly, Hisham gave the same estimate for news from broadcast media, stating that “80% of the time the news turns out to be sensationalistic.” The accusation of sensationalism and gossip online were similarly expressed by Thoraya, the professor:

“I just cannot read through something where the sources are not clear. [...] You have sensationalism, you have huge rumour mills, Facebook being one of them. And Twitter.”

Unreliable, sensationalized information could still be valuable to consumers. Both Ingy and Hassan noted that social media was helpful for exposing them to news, however doubtful said news’ veracity. Hisham argued that most reports had some grounding in reality—that they were “never nothing; maybe only 5% there is no basis at all”—and therefore were still worth consuming. Hisham gave examples of several private newspapers such as *Al-Masry Al-Youm* and *Al-Badeel* which he would follow through social media: “you have to follow to see the news [...though] you can’t believe them right away.” Hassan, who observed that “there are some people on there [on Twitter] who are more credible than others,” including many journalists like himself and activists who all varied in their trustworthiness; but Hassan followed them all regardless of their degree of credibility, to be alerted to the news, however unreliable the initial reports might be. If a report of kidnapped soldiers broke on the private English outlet *Egypt Independent*, he would read the initial report, however tentatively, and subsequently seek its confirmation; “if an activist on the ground during a protest says five people are dead, I would not

believe it initially,” and Hassan would again seek out confirmation. Ingy, ever skeptical, used Facebook as a weathervane for events, but would follow up on the sources a post linked to (though more often than not finding them unfounded):

“Actually, I take the information from the Facebook at first. Then I try to search Google for things that appear on Facebook, the news, and so on. I think most of the news is not accurate, even Facebook [links to] unknown media outlets.

Ingy gave the example of the Ethiopian dam controversy (Appendix 2: Ethiopian dam). According to several Facebook posts she read, the Ethiopian government was pressing charges in response to incendiary statements made by Egyptian political figures: “But then I looked it up and saw that it wasn’t true. They never made a complaint. And they [online contributors] give you links to the weirdest websites.”

Once again, however, it is interesting to note that non-credible news available through social media was still of interest to some consumers. Yusef, for instance, admitted that consuming demonstrably non-credible sources could be worthwhile, choosing sometimes to continue following them:

“There are some pages that I’ve realized over time that they tend to fabricate news or quickly post things without verifying them. So that’s it: either un-‘Like’ them or I just listen to them to know the rumours but I don’t take them seriously.” (Yusef)

Non-credible sources can offer important insights, according to participants, whether to acquaint someone with opposing viewpoints, to indicate the gravity of an issue (as signalled by efforts to “spin” a controversy), or to derive some gratification in frivolous gossip. Several participants who opposed the Muslim Brotherhood, for instance, followed the organization’s semi-official online outlets like *ikhwanweb.com* and *ikhwanonline.com* for such reasons. Many social media sources that people did not trust were nevertheless useful for alerting them about *potential* news, pending their own independent confirmation.

Despite such resourcefulness, the fact remains that social media sources were no more trustworthy than traditional sources, and were seen as very much part-and-parcel of the lapses in Egypt's information ecosystem. Social media functioned as an access-point allowing a continuous flow of information from a myriad of sources, irrespective of their quality of output. But while social media did not necessarily substitute reliable information for the unreliable information from broadcasters or officials, the online platforms offered consumers the means to cope with this state of affairs; social media afforded users mechanisms to compensate for the prevalence of misinformation, both online and offline. Given the concerns over the credibility of information, the next section explores how veracity and trust were established through social media.

7.4 The assessment of credibility

7.4.1 Verifying the news

The vetting of information was an inescapable necessity for consumers, Sherine argued, which in Egypt one could not be absolved of simply by selecting “good” sources; this was because, while “there are some that are better than others, we don't have a reliable source of news—that's why we rely on ourselves to try to verify” (Sherine). Social media provided a means for conducting the fact-checking that broadcast media and online contributors could not be relied upon to carry out. Verification was described as an exhausting, continuous activity in Egypt's contentious environment, where facts were as commonly contested as political opinions. Sherine stated that for politically-engaged citizens faced with the onslaught of innumerable political controversies, “you have to do a lot of work, even as an ordinary citizen, to verify that news is correct” (Sherine). Hisham, who above admitted that most stories online were sensationalized or exaggerated, stated: “I like to verify and find out what's true.” Hisham explained that verification was not only a necessity but was a core practice for activists in Egypt: “I get my news then I do my fact-checking. Actually, a lot of activists do fact-checking.” People's approaches to verification varied—“Everyone has his own way of verifying” (Sherine)—but social media excelled as a means through which that vetting was carried out.

Social media and the social network it undergirded allowed most users to confirm stories they initially discovered from secondary sources (e.g., newspaper reports of an event) by seeking out and consulting primary sources (principal actors, by-standers, or participants to the event in question). Sherine, for instance, described her strategy of using social media to verify information as follows: “You look for someone near to the place where the event happened. Or you try to read the news from more than one agency and go to the website of the party involved to see if they have an official statement.” This capacity was one of the reasons why social media, as previously mentioned, was distinctly suited for learning about contained, episodic controversies (e.g., a demonstration or a clash with security forces) rather than more complex and abstract controversies (e.g., a legislative reform project). Once alerted through social or mass media sources to a dramatic event taking place, Sherine explained the reaction below among her Twitter community:

So when we see a piece of news about something happening, we start to ask each other ‘Do you know someone in-person who lives there? Can you make a call and make sure this is really happening? Because we don’t know this person who is posting this news.’ So we try to verify internally that this is something that is actually happening or someone is making it up. (Sherine)

Hisham gave the example that if sectarian violence in a remote region is being reported in newspapers, he would begin mobilizing his social network for verification:

Several newspapers you have to follow to see the news. Then we ask the kids in the region, because all the newspapers are sensationalist so you can’t believe them right away. (Hisham)

In a similar vein, Abbas illustrated the argument by way of a hypothetical example of the news media of reporting a fight breaking-out at the downtown Sheraton Hotel between members of opposing political factions: “I’m there, so I tweet that I’m there and that it is not political but just two people settling a bill.” As a civilian with no vested interest in embellishing the story, simply witnessing developments first-hand, Abbas would be considered a trustworthy source for his online community. This immediacy, as already

mentioned, was what made social media a valuable resource, supplementing with trusted accounts the undependable reporting from mass media or unknown online sources. It was for reasons like this that another revolutionary, Yusef, went to “Twitter and Facebook to first make sure of the piece of news because there is a lot of news that turns out to be false after a day or a few hours” (Yusef).

Another structural element in social media for establishing credibility was its two-way communication, which allowed a reader to approach contributors and request further information to support their stories. Ingy recalled during the debate over Egypt’s water dependency on the Nile (Appendix 2: Ethiopian Dam) that someone on Facebook suggested that the country had alternative sources of fresh water it could turn to: “This is a very strange thing to suggest, as I had previously done some research into the Nile. So I asked, ‘Where did you get this information?’ No reply. You find a lot of strange things said and there are no rules.” Ingy’s ability to directly challenge a source’s dubious claims, demonstrating that they were unsubstantiated, was a fact-checking affordance of social media.

In a sense, one could consider the practices of verification and vetting, the traditional role expected of media professionals, had been *outsourced* to the public as Egyptian media became increasingly partisan and sensationalistic. Hassan observed how domestic media failed in this regard:

With traditional media, in most cases, [though] sometimes not, by the time you get an article out it has been vetted in some way. So if it is Reuters or AP [Associated Press] you tend to think this is credible. Then again, like I said, the papers here like El-Dostour and Youm7....Youm7 is just terrible. [...] They’ll put anything up.

With formal media failing to ensure appropriate controls over the quality of information it published, social media was seen to enable politically-engaged users to step-in and fulfill a core component in the processing of information within this media landscape; again, this reflects convergence and complementarity of information sources rather than displacement.

7.4.2 Substantiating claims

Whereas the previous section described how citizens took on the role of vetting information using the mechanisms of social media, social media platforms also imposed certain expectations on content producers that could heighten the credibility of their reports. According to Yusef, social media platforms conditioned contributors to source and substantiate the information they posted online, which was otherwise an uncommon practice in Egypt’s communication culture. Yusef remarked that traditionally “the majority of the people would not double-check the writer’s sources, so he is not really encouraged to write it that much [...]. As a consequence, they [writers] don’t actually do enough research and sourcing, because it is not crucial for their credibility.” The structure and genre of social media contributions—providing links directly to source material, immediate access to contributors, the potential interactivity with audiences, the ability to see collective responses of other users, the seamless integration of multimedia interfaces, the publically available archive of contributors—all promoted sourcing practices among contributors. This was an important factor in how information was constituted online, and Yusef’s example, once again, demonstrated how often online information would trace back to mass media outlets: “Someone says ‘this is from SkyNews’, ‘Al-Arabiyya’, ‘Al-Sharq Al-Awsat’, or ‘ONTV’; they said so-and-so. You can easily trace the news.”

As stated earlier, substantiated claims over social media often followed the idiom of “seeing is believing”. Several participants used the example of documented acts of police brutality (e.g., officers brutalizing civilians or disposing of bodies in the trash) disseminated by activists and online journalists. Yusef described the effectiveness of such social media content as their unmediated immediacy, without a presenter, commentator, or pundit to frame the event for the viewer:

The guy being dragged, dead, by the police and thrown into the garbage. [...] There is no medium, there is no one telling you what to think. It is just there. And this is the power of YouTube, the power of new media. (Yusef)

Social media content, then, was often expected to “speak for itself” through a more elaborate package of information enabled by the features of the online environment and the expectations of online audiences which traditional sources could not or did not fulfill.

7.4.3 Personalized trust

Finally, social media permitted consumers to establish trust with sources on a more intimate level, as individuals instead of institutions, and receive content directly from them. Naveen, a media scholar, described social media facilitating forms and degrees of personalized trust largely incompatible with mass media consumption. Trust, according to her, could be cultivated around individuals online, given the architecture of Twitter and Facebook, as well as the supplementary data available on individual contributors, such as their personal profiles and their records of contributions. This was how Yusef explained his choice of following a specific person on Twitter and Facebook:

“I trust his motives because I’ve known him for years and followed him. I know he doesn’t have ulterior motives so if he’s upset about this law it is worth considering.” (Yusef)

Thoraya, the professor, used Twitter to follow journalists she either knew or decided were credible. “I don’t necessarily know them in person,” she stated, “but I think they wouldn’t or tweet rumours, and that’s important to me.” Blurring the social media-mass media division, journalists were very prominent contributors to Egypt’s relatively small Twitter-sphere (compared with Facebook). Hence social media allowed audiences to cultivate a personalized trust with a broadcast media practitioner, allowing many journalists to raise their profile, thereby serving “to promote themselves, which I think is a great thing to do on Twitter, and it promotes their newspapers” (Thoraya). Activists were also a large component on Twitter, and while Thoraya followed several, she did so with more incredulity: “I actually don’t think they’re that credible because they always exaggerate stuff out of proportion.” When seeking information regarding any controversy, Hisham turned directly to his stable of personal sources over Twitter: “first thing is Twitter, with specific people”. Sherine gave a similar account when describing the people she followed online for news: specific activists who she had come to trust as reliable and unbiased. She based her judgement of them as reliable news sources “either

because of their past performance” or having a personal familiarity with them which established for her that “he wouldn’t be biased, wouldn’t be exaggerating.” This was also asserted by the activist, Abbas, who considered information vetting an imperative for anyone interested in politics, and the internet was vital to this vetting of facts and sources. Like the professor, this activist saw establishing the credibility of sources as crucial:

“For me, as somebody who is interested in political issues, for every single piece of information I need to know who is saying it and why. If I don’t know who is speaking on this point of view, I have to go to the internet to know this man and what he said previously and how I can classify him.”

The name and background of a source was important, but so was the source’s record as an information provider. Online, this record of performance was readily available, with a contributor’s history in disseminating information laid bare on their Twitter account or Facebook page. Sherine testified to this effect: “Sometimes when someone posts something you aren’t sure is real or not, you go back to his timeline to see what he said in the previous days and if he is the type of person to exaggerate [...] you go to the history of this person.” This was also useful for identifying expert sources to provide insights into more open-ended and complex controversies (in contrast with more contained controversies). Sherine observed that “you turn to social media to read articles from experts,” experts who had not only established their knowledge-base but also their trustworthiness. Social media offered a means of finding sources with the relevant expertise to provide meaningful and reliable information on the controversy and how it was being framed. In a case of a controversial arrest of protestors, for instance, she recounted listening to lawyers who had been involved in arrest cases since the Uprising, representing defendants *pro bono*—“I know a couple so that I know what they are saying is mostly true.” Regarding a discussion over whether or not the Morsi government ought to pursue an IMF loan (Appendix 2: IMF loan), she again described having established a pool of trustworthy and expert sources she would turn towards:

“We have some names of economy experts and they are not biased, they will not say a certain opinion because this is what serves their needs or it’s closer to the party they

support. So we turn to those, and they tend to write articles with very specific points about what is good about the loan, what is bad, and what are our other alternatives.”
(Sherine)

Social media allowed users to find alternative sources who they themselves vetted for their knowledge and trustworthiness to provide credible information regarding controversies within their field of expertise.

7.5 The segmentation of consumers

7.5.1 Internal divisions

Despite these means of establishing veracity through social media, participants did not think all social media users were equally skilled at sorting through online claims. Sherine noted that some users “of course just believe whatever they read, but the people who have been there for years know they shouldn’t believe whatever they see.” One can thereby see how social media promoted different classes of consumers according to their consumption practices. Sherine, here, suggested that this is done based on experience, with veteran users demonstrating more savviness in their consumption. Other hierarchies were evidenced throughout the interviews, however.

For example, all social media users admitted that Twitter was more elite and exclusive than Facebook. The micro-blogging site was described as being made up of an exclusive group of committed activists, academics, government officials, and journalists, leading Thoraya to liken Twitter to “a pool for the intelligentsia of Egypt”. This made its content more informative and easier to navigate compared to Facebook, which was described by Naveen as “too popular”. Zeinab, the young politico and revolutionary, complained that Facebook was populated by people sharing personal opinions, cracking jokes, having long-winded conversations, and Naveen described the experience on Facebook “like I’m just walking into the streets”. This distinction was felt to coincide with a class and ideological division between Twitter and Facebook. “The people of the poor class are mainly using Facebook,” said Abbas, “not Twitter. That is why the ideas on Facebook are less progressive than on Twitter. [...] When you find somebody with very conservative ideas or supporting the government on Twitter, we say to him, ‘Get back to Facebook!’”

7.5.2 External divisions

Where a divide was most palpable, however, was not among social media users but between users and non-users. Throughout the data, most participants contrasted themselves against the majority of Egyptians who received information from outside social media. Participants saw themselves as demographically and socio-economically privileged, allowing them to negotiate convergent media in a fashion not possible (or agreeable) to the general public. The public was often seen as left to follow their political biases when consuming information from mass media. This was the concern raised by Kassem, a professor and active user, who saw the privileged and adept social media users representing an elite-flight from direct mass media consumption. This exodus of privileged citizens, Kassem argued, removed pressure for a more moderate, professional, and neutral media to develop in Egypt. Though social media may demonstrate a compensatory mechanism to mass media, according to Kassem it also risked exacerbating the partisanship and sensationalism in mass media.

Numerous domestic channels had started broadcasting short segments on trending content on YouTube or Twitter, as Sherine noted at the start of the chapter. Essentially, being on social media could make something inherently newsworthy. The short-lived youth-run satellite station, 25TV, developed a programme called *Hashtag* which presented topics and material trending on social media. Yusef, who was familiar with the show, described it as presenting “whatever was trending on the internet to the TV for people who don’t access the internet like the most popular YouTube videos, the newest websites, the newest Facebook pages, Tweets from all the activists and other people, or blogs.” Given social media’s relatively small and fractured user-base, *Hashtag* and other traditional media served to make the online content more widely available to the Egyptian public, potentially resolving what Thoraya described as the massive socio-economic segmentation between mass media and social media audiences, and by extension the ever growing social polarization this segmentation exacerbated.

7.6 Discussion

After the Uprising, both mass media and social media experienced new levels of growth. In mass media, new satellite channels were appearing, and even the profession of journalism was undergoing transformation. In social media, the revolution raised the prominence and boosted the popularity of social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, supposedly competing with traditional media as sources of information. Yet both platforms were connected to one another, functionally and structurally, exhibiting convergence of media. But the convergence exhibited is not a seamless integration of old and new media, nor even a coherent one. Rather, the convergence demonstrated an interpenetration of social media and mass media within Egypt's contentious politics. As with broadcast media, social media was interwoven with the local conditions in Egypt, and this chapter explored its ambivalent yet essential role in contemporary social conflict, polarization, and mistrust. In the previous chapter, **6. Broadcast Media**, we found that the Egyptian broadcast media was often perceived to be a problematic source of information, lacking expertise, impartiality, or professionalism. This chapter sought to complement that work by extending the scope to include social media. In so doing, social media was found to functionally complement features of the rest of the information milieu, on the one hand allowing consumers to redress the milieu's problematic features (mediating and supplementing mass media content or allowing for news to be vetted and personally trusted sources to be followed) and on the other hand reproducing them (polarizing social and political segments of the population or spreading misinformation). Whether through the circulation of content, the assertion of credibility, or the representation of users, the significance of social media was intertwined with the media industry, whether by supplementing, mediating, or compensating for it.

People accessed information that was personally meaningful after it was filtered through an online community, irrespective of its original outlet (ONTV or Al-Masry Al-Youm) or medium (newspapers or television) or original prominence (front-page headline, a passing reference in a column). The fact that social media relied heavily on broadcast media for its content was previously established through the comprehensive study of on the Arab blogosphere (Etling et al., 2009) which found a high proportion of links from

social media posts were directed to international and domestic broadcast media. But what participants drew attention to was the autonomous sharing practices that evaluated news according to collective interests rather than editorial priorities. This networked structure, besides personalizing one's stream of mainstream news, also did away with traditional media's gate-keeping mechanism, opening the range of news stories available to online audiences, as Fahmy (2010) observed in her study of news stories published on Egyptian blogs. Hamdy and Gomaa's (2012) comparison of how the Uprising was framed in broadcast media and social media demonstrates a contrast in mainstream and non-mainstream coverage of controversies, but also demonstrates the polarization that this dichotomy manifests (see **3.Literature Review**). Yet by filtering and rearranging broadcast content in this manner, as well as complementing it with alternative content, these intermediating processes served to counter-act—to some degree—the editorial biases of broadcast media (see **6.Broadcast Media**), even they were reshaped or replaced with online biases.

This is a central aspect of the participatory culture that diffuses convergent media with professional and amateur contributors, as noted by Jenkins (2006). Social media was commonly portrayed by participants as what Hafez called an “independent-alternative” platform for genuinely alternative news, disseminating the information mainstream media—state-owned or privately-owned—shied away from (Fahmy, 2010; Hafez, 2001). Social media could also disseminate information native to social media that redressed the absences of opinion polls, balanced perspectives, or more risqué content. While in the context of information and news gathering such subjective contributions may be seen as problematic, scholars such as Kraidy (2008, 2010) and Lynch (2003, 2005) have remarked that in the shortage of outlets for public opinions to be openly collected and communicated (e.g., on-air call-ins, letters to the editor, or public polls), there is a value to new media platforms in allowing for private sentiments to be openly expressed, exposing citizens to different viewpoints.

Around every controversy, the Egyptians I spoke with expressed frustration at the uncertainty and the lack of transparency surrounding the cases, as well as suspicion of the actors associated (see **8.Characteristics**). The content and capacities of social media, as

exemplified here, appended to those of mass media, suggested there was always something taking place behind the scenes; the positive interpretation of this was that social media offered more transparency and accountability than a pliant broadcast media alone could provide. It was in this vein that attorney and legal reform activist Sawsan characterized social media as an antidote to the propaganda that had long permeated Egypt's media. But in the unstable and reactionary political climate following the Uprising, this media convergence simultaneously perpetuated a culture of distrust, ambiguity, and factionalism, thereby intensifying the public contention permeating the transitional process (see **2.Background**). Social media provided a layer of content valorization to the news, circulating it according to collective tastes. Of course, there is also the finer grain fragmentation taking place through social media's personalized information environment. While the filtering and personalization of information described in this paper were crucial for orientating politically engaged citizens in a period of intense uncertainty and misinformation, it also served to potentially fragment the knowledge cultures in a time when consensus was desperately needed. These networks operated as *filter bubbles* (Pariser, 2011), limiting and personalizing the information available to users according to group-specific interests and biases, insulating users from alternative perspectives and opinions of outsiders, and perhaps radicalizing online communities against them. Yet many found social media as a means to access various viewpoints, even from partisan sources they vehemently opposed. Several participants stated that the expression of public opinions was the facet of social media content that most differentiated it from mass media.

The earlier chapters called into question the objectivity, expertise, professionalism, and trustworthiness of media practitioners in Egypt (**6.Broadcast Media**; see also **2.Background** and **3.Literature Review**). This mistrust is evident in the common expression "newspaper-speak" (*kalam garayed*) to refer to falsehoods, as pointed out by one participant. Alterman (1998) anticipated that the wealth of information available through new outlets would lead citizens to become increasingly critical of the credibility of sources across sources. Social media seemed to contribute to this more critical engagement with sources, though in an ambivalent fashion. Social media was described

by participants not as necessarily providing more credible information than mass media—in fact, misinformation seems the norm rather than the exception.

But as anticipated by Alterman (1998), there was indeed a pressure to discriminate information's trustworthiness on social media, but it was clear that participants did not think all users had developed the skill to "sift through it". This skepticism was hard-won, emerging from familiarity with the quality of content circulating online, which genuinely paralleled the sensationalism published in mass media (see **6.Broadcast Media**). What was found was that social media, as with mass media, was rife with misinformation or misleading information. There is no sense that social media enjoyed higher medium credibility than newspapers or television, which is in keeping with other research (Hamdy, 2013a, 2013b). Furthermore, the supposition put forward by Wanta and Hu (1994) correlating an audience's reliance on a source with the source's perceived credibility was undercut by the responses from participants, as they revealed more complex selection processes. The fact that a source's lack of credibility did not lead consumers to avoid it demonstrates that the significance of information credibility is moderated by other drives and goals in information consumption, as observed by Tsfaty and Cappella (2005). Even non-credible sources can offer important insights, according to participants, whether to acquaint someone with opposing viewpoints, to indicate the gravity of an issue, or derive some gratification in frivolous gossip.

Instead of offering better information, users leveraged the structural and genre elements of Twitter and Facebook (histories, links, profiles, timelines, commentary, and correspondences) to evaluate the credibility of an online source. This corroborated findings of Etling et al. (2009) of a *show me* culture native to social media, where the claims of contributors were highly substantiated through interactive online features. It also allowed users to connect with people who may offer first-hand accounts of events being reported, or trace news back to its native source (e.g., a newspaper article, a television interview, a YouTube video) to be seen in full context and assessed according to its original documentation. In sum, social media offered a range of practices for those adept and interested to establish the truth behind stories they came across through online and offline channels. It also fostered a more intimate, personalized trust with sources,

who may be journalists, activists, or other citizens, whom people could turn to for reliable information.

It must be recognized that many journalists themselves were a large and important demographic of social media users, especially on Twitter, ready to both share and consume content in an effort to keep themselves and their institutions relevant, efficient, and current information sources. This fusion of social media and broadcast media in the Egyptian context was noted by Sakr (2012) and Aouragh and Alexander (2011), who discussed the movement of professionals and amateurs back-and-forth between the two media platforms, relying on both realms according to their respective strengths in order to perform successfully in the other. The heavy presence and reliance of media practitioners on social media not only blurs its material distinction from mass media, but it also cautions us against overstating it as the realm of “amateurs” (pace Jenkins, 2006).

Yusef, however, considered it “sad” that social media remained the go-to source for proper information and verification, without an equally credible and reliable equivalent available through mass media. The alternative interpretation presented here is that social media in Egypt function as an intermediating layer—available to those with the ability and access—modifying and supplementing broadcast media’s deficiencies in content and credibility.

The ongoing debate over the political significance of social media, whether to challenge or entrench dominant interest groups, is hardly resolved by the equivocal testimonies participants offered. Their reports oscillated between the views professed by social media “optimists” (e.g., Feenberg, 2006; 2013; Shirky, 2011) and “skeptics” (e.g., Dean 2005; 2010; Gladwell, 2011; Morozov, 2011). In this popular debate about social media, the former group claims online technologies emancipate citizens by undermining the narratives imposed by top-down structures (e.g., capitalist, technocratic, etc.), while the latter group sees the same technologies only increasing people’s vulnerability to manipulation and demobilization. My participants variously portrayed social media as exerting a positive, neutral, or negative influence over the domestic circulation of information (and over domestic politics, by extension). This reality makes any definitive

judgement of social media within this context impossible, particularly in relation to the aforementioned debates framing social media as either potentially liberatory or inherently undermined by capitalist forms of domination. Yet such contradictions and ambiguities ought to be embraced; they reveal the platforms' ambivalent effects within the larger circuits of information that participants negotiated. Documenting this complexity, as articulated by the citizens who experienced it, must take priority over any reductive and ideological evaluation of an artificially isolated platform or medium. Furthermore, it is apparent throughout the accounts of participants that social media, good or bad, must be understood for its convergence within a larger information ecosystem, wherein its perceived utility and value take shape; on this point, at least, there seemed to be genuine consensus.

Chapter 8 - Characteristics of Information Consumers

8.1 Introduction

Everyday information practices are commonly considered mundane, perfunctory, and unreflexive activities (Savolainen, 2008a). This would suggest that the accounts of actors regarding their news consumption would be deceptively bland and matter-of-fact, leaving it to the researcher to ascribe characteristics to their behaviours, such as whether they tend to monitor or avoid information, exhibit high self-efficacy, or demonstrate a need-for-closure (Baker, 2005; Nahl, 2005; Savolainen, 2009b). Yet the participants of this study challenged the assumption of unconscious and atomistic information practices by explicitly epitomizing the consumption and processing of information as reflections of local political, cultural, and societal conditions. Participants made a direct connection between their context and how information is gathered, interpreted, and appraised which—following some analytical synthesis—culminated in five distinct but interconnected characteristics among information consumers: skeptical, suspicious, biased, inventive, and elitist.

Skepticism (or uncertainty), suspicion (mistrust), and bias (partiality) are strongly associated with the conditions of unreliable and prejudiced information providers described in the previous chapters, but these characteristics are elaborated here within the narratives citizens themselves constructed rather than as responses to particular news sources. Inventiveness, referring to the reliance on one's personal ingenuity to fill the gaps in one's knowledge, can similarly be seen as a reaction to inadequate information, but it also represents a national ethos of "making do". The final characteristic of elitism has less to do with how citizens consume information than how citizens position their practices in regard to the rest of the population in a highly stratified society. While each characteristic was a matter of some debate among participants, all five remained consistent reference points in the portrayal of how Egyptians negotiated information. The characteristics framed the accounts participants gave of their habits and perceptions as consumers as well their accounts of those around them. Specifically exploring these characteristics serves three goals: first, it develops a set of salient though intangible

aspects of people's information practices that might otherwise be given ancillary attention (Savolainen, 2007); second, by investigating these characteristics the influence of people's context is thrown into relief; and third, the characteristics presented here establish the foundation for the subsequent chapters exploring the particular sources and tactics employed by participants in the pursuit for information.

In short, self-ascribed consumer characteristics establish the social nature of information activities, which in the case of Egypt reflect intense political conflict, disreputable institutions, peculiar national myths, and severe socio-economic disparity. The implications of these findings are further explored in the concluding discussion, where it is argued that these characteristics collectively represent a local *information culture* that has taken shape in Egypt—an information culture which in turn undergirds and unifies the informational activities examined in later chapters.

8.2 Skeptical

Skepticism was the most immediately conspicuous trait attested to in interviews, with participants evincing a widespread and wide-ranging experience with uncertainty. Uncertainty is commonly considered a pivotal but temporary cognitive state which drives the search for information (T. D. Anderson, 2010; Kamal & Burkell, 2011), but here participants treated uncertainty as a more pervasive condition leading to one's skepticism towards sources, a sensitivity to omissions or incomplete information, bemusement at contradictory reports, or a disbelief that conclusive knowledge was possible. Such positions are amalgamated here as a skeptical character which was poignantly expressed by Enis, an older Egyptian and political cynic:

*“You see the events [covered in the news] but what is it?
What does it mean? Nobody is able to see through it. Yes,
you know that events happened. [...] So what? Who's doing
it? Why?”(Enis)*

Despite so many unanswered questions circulating around a story or news topic, skepticism ought to be distinguished from ignorance since participants were reacting to a superabundance of information (however chaotic and unintelligible) rather than a scarcity

of information. Yasmine, a retired government employee, noted this distinction when describing the current situation Egyptians faced:

As they say, a little information is dangerous, but extensive and incomplete information is lethal. So there is extensive information, but it's not classified, verified, or processed. So you are lost, you are confused.

The rapid growth of Egypt's media sector was therefore a driving force behind people's skeptical demeanour. Walid, a scholar and former official, saw citizens faced with "an information overload [with] too many and different news sources and lots of talk shows with 'experts' commenting" upon countless issues. Participants repeatedly remarked on the tumultuous legion of pundits on Egypt's talk-show circuits blurring out any coherent narrative of social or political affairs. Ultimately, citizens were exposed to a cacophony of claims and counterclaims, where "you hear something and the opposite" (Yasmine) on a regular basis. According to the young revolutionary and media practitioner, Yusef, "it is really chaos" for most Egyptians contending with "a flood of information" without knowing "who's right and who's telling the truth."

In the case of Enis, the resulting skepticism took a cynical tone, concluding as he did that "nobody understands anything" and "if you sat and listened to [all the claims] for 24 hours the result equals zero, a big zero." Yasmine gave a similar account of her retired husband: "he finds himself lost [in] the extensive talk all the time, the contradictions, and we aren't able to verify [the claims]". People like Enis and Yasmine's husband were "overwhelmed by news and discussions, so they just turn-off the TV. They withdraw" (Yasmine). Thoraya, the liberal and scholar, offered a generational explanation to this reaction, as older Egyptians raised under a more authoritarian conditions of the early republic "grew up on 'everything-is-great' news, either with state media or very controlled independent newspapers," and as a consequence they "are not sophisticated enough" to handle ambivalent reporting they currently witnessed.

But skepticism was exhibited among younger citizens and more sophisticated seniors. Such individuals evinced a high tolerance for uncertainty as they persisted in informing themselves on current affairs. Some of them even accepted uncertainty as an interminable

condition, admitting that “there is no way to know the truth, at least not now—maybe never” (Abeer). Echoing Enis’s sentiments, Abeer, the revolutionary, claimed that beyond basic facts in cases such as the prison breaks (i.e., that the prisons were attacked and the prisoners were released) “we may never know” the answers to the more fundamental questions, such as whether it an “inside job” by the state or were outsiders like Hamas responsible. Yasmine, a former civil servant and liberal, had similar questions around the Port Said Massacre (Appendix 2: Port Said massacre) and the food-poisoning at Al-Azhar University (Appendix 2: Al-Azhar poisoning): “Was it premeditated? Is it intended? Did it just happen like that? And this is the one thing we are sure of: you will never find out the truth.” Between the contradictory coverage in media and the lack of credible reports from officials, many topics were seen to be perpetually shrouded in uncertainty which no amount of information seeking could alter.

Here, even if you spend more time researching, there is no guarantee you will reach the truth or the right information. It depends in each case, each subject, and who owns this information. (Yasmine)

Unlike Enis and Yasmine’s husband, the skepticism expressed by these participants did not render the pursuit of information futile, but rather it defined how information on a topic was approached and processed. Those interested in following issues covered in public discourse exercised a tolerance for uncertainty which allowed them to face and anticipate contradictions, inconsistencies, errors, and omissions in information; or, phrased differently, people’s skepticism made misinformation palatable. Consider Yasmine’s efforts to learn about the first eighteen days of the Uprising. Since she did not personally witness the events in Tahrir Square and mistrusted the interim government’s fact-finding committees, she was left without “any solid sources of information to form a solid opinion” except for the “contradictory facts and evidence [...] all coming through media.” Ingy (political reform activist) exhibited a similar skepticism by broaching “everything that is said and written” as incomplete and dubious:

You can be sure that the truth, the whole truth, isn’t anywhere among what is said. No one has all the facts.

There always something missing, something hidden by someone. This happens in lot of things. (Ingy)

Ingy's statement also reveals that skepticism was partly rooted in the belief that facts were intentionally withheld from the public. This view was reiterated by others who alluded to undisclosed "secret documents" (Yasmine) or the caginess of state officials (Abeer), and it represented a second basis of skepticism not as the outcome of information overload but the alleged control by special interests over what is knowable. For instance, the moderate Islamist and revolutionary Sherine was convinced that any evidence incriminating the state during the Uprising would likely have been destroyed by officials: "we will never have solid information because that happened three years ago and they wiped all the evidence and everything is gone." Besides the fear of erasure and cover-ups, uncertainty also circulated around the facts made available to the public as intentionally disseminated to serve specific political goals. "Stories will come out but probably for a purpose", as Abeer had remarked when commenting on the testimonies of prison guards and leaked documents from the Interior Ministry regarding the prison breaks. Sherine attributed this brand of skepticism to a history of officials who "released [information] at a certain time and it might not be true, it might be twisted so that some message is passed on." The severity of Sherine's skepticism made her look upon the hopes of people like Yasmine for concrete information to definitively resolve her uncertainty (e.g., regarding the events of the Uprising) as naïve, failing to appreciate the capacity for information to be suppressed and manipulated.

Naïve or not, uncertainty did not translate to agnosticism. For example, Yasmine and Mohamed (a political liberal and journalist) admitted that many unknowns still surrounded the prison break—the "truth is yet to be unearthed" (Mohamed)—but both expected the Brotherhood's role behind the attacks would be exposed (Appendix 2: Prison break). Similarly, in the case of kidnapped soldiers (Appendix 2: Sinai soldiers) where the facts were again admittedly equivocal, Mohamed and Naveen (a young academic) were convinced that a secret deal was struck between the government and the kidnapers for the release of the hostages. Naveen could not "trust there was no pact if there was no blood-shed," and finding any other story simply "too stupid" to be believed.

Skepticism, then, was offered a canvas for people's expectations rather than a site of epistemic ambivalence.

So far people's skepticism has been largely approached as a manifestation of ambiguity and uncertainty, but we have seen their skepticism often converging with another prominent characteristic—suspicion—in the interpretation and assessment of information (or its absence). It is the intense mistrustfulness exhibited by participants that we now turn to in the next section

8.3 Suspicious

Suspicion (doubt or mistrust) was another preeminent characteristic expressed by participants. The mistrust participants expressed was severe, impugning not just the competency of various information sources but their motives and intentions. Such vehement suspicion was described by many as the result of a history of exposure to propaganda and misinformation. Abeer explained that “people are used to being lied to [and] this explains how they don't trust everybody now—it is due to bad experiences [from] before.” Participants recited instances of lies disseminated from the media, intellectuals, and the regime from the time of Gamel Abdel Nasser up to the present: cholera epidemics dubbed as outbreaks of “summer diarrhea”; radio broadcasts in 1967 falsely claiming military victory over Israel; the cover-up of transportation accidents responsible for the death of hundreds; or the misrepresentation of protestors as foreign agitators. According to Abeer, many Egyptians “believe they are still being lied to: some think the Muslim Brotherhood are liars, some others think the army is lying, others think [opposition figures like] Baradei are liars.” In Yusef's opinion Egyptians had learned the cost of credulity and were developing the mindset one “cannot trust any piece of information someone shoves in your hand.”

Consider Yasser's assessment of Egypt's cacophony of pundits, who the journalist perceived as actively crowding-out any genuine facts as part of misinformation campaigns (compared to the more innocent confusion they were ascribed in the previous section):

What happens is that the truth is revealed? You have 5, 6, 7, 10 experts falsifying information to manipulate the Egyptian public. So we end up in a situation where when you want information, you end up looking at illusions.

The media was a common target of mistrust. Abeer listened to reports from the media with a great deal of suspicion, bluntly stating that she did not “trust the media” because “they can fabricate some kind of documents and proofs to prove the involvement of certain people.” Hisham, the experienced political activist, asserted that Egyptians “by definition are suspicious of media,” even of the media that aligned with their political bias and they themselves consumed. As a case in point, Osama, despite being a Brotherhood supporter, was as wary of the Brotherhood’s party newspaper as he was of oppositional media: “You would have to be mentally handicapped to do otherwise. You read with a critical mind, you don’t believe right away.” Osama remarked that “we are in the middle of huge, lying media, [whether] pro- or anti-Morsi.” For many, their suspicion of media was traced to connections with the previous regime. Sherine considered the liberal media a special source of suspicion, since “some TV anchors or people working on TV shows, I know quite well that they supported Mubarak and they used to be anti-revolution or kissed his ass.” Having witnessed herself popular television presenters such as Emad Adeeb and Lamis al-Hadidy or journalists like Sayed Ali celebrate Mubarak’s rule and justify his regime’s misconduct, “I don’t trust them anymore. Maybe sometimes they are right, but I have a problem with trusting them because I have seen them lie before.” Ziad, a Brother, felt that the ownership of private channels by former affiliates of Mubarak similarly steered their coverage, whose liberal agenda meant defending their owners against charges of corruption while circulating misinformation or misleading information about the Brotherhood’s members or their ties to terrorist activities.

The root of people’s suspicions was the political polarization gripping the country, believed to subvert truth and fact for political gain. Ingy saw both pro- and anti-Morsi forces equally deserving of her mistrust. On the one hand, she accused the Brotherhood of “lying too much,” to the point of releasing blatant contradictions and even smearing their secular opponents as atheists. But Ingy was equally suspicious of the information disseminated by the opposition, such as the unsubstantiated accusations that the

president's family was squandering national funds for personal expenses. Sherine concurred, citing other examples where the opponents circulated misinformation about the government renting out the Suez Canal to Qatar or circulating a forged resignation letter from a former Morsi staffer to score quick political points against the government. Both liberal and Islamist factions were misinforming the public to rally support: "You end up seeing things like this a lot, with the intent of steering public opinion in particular directions. And of course, you see this from both sides" (Ingy).

At its most extreme, people's mistrust swerved into conspiracy thinking—a prominent mindset in the region (Gray, 2010). Many liberals like Amira, Sonya, and Noha accused the Brotherhood of secretly conspiring to establish an Islamic caliphate, colluding with Hamas, Hezbollah, Qatar, America, Iran and/or Israel to achieve their goal. Meanwhile, Osama saw liberals (along with the media) clandestinely pursuing an anti-religious agenda, though "they cannot dare to say this" openly:

This is something you cannot understand unless you have the key: whatever is against Islam, the liberals support. They make unified unit against this [government] because it is an Islamic project. They cannot dare to say this, and for this made a cloak. They claim to be against the Brotherhood.

Some participants were critical of such inflated suspicions as reactionary responses. For instance, Sherine and Hisham found the speculations that a secret Hamas-Brotherhood plot lay behind the prison break distracted people from the fact that many of those incarcerated (including President Morsi) had been wrongfully detained. In another example of the citizenry's extreme suspicion, Muslim Brother Fouad recalled that after TV presenter Amr Ellissy's interview with Morsi where "the president came out looking good [i.e., prepared and thoughtful]" people suddenly suspected the established reporter's allegiances: "now they say that Amr Ellissy is now with the Brotherhood." In Ziad's view, anyone "trying to reform any corruption or fault in the country is accused of being a Brotherhood sleeper agent." But others saw Brotherhood supporters fueling equally excessive suspicion. For instance, though Sherine shared the mistrust Islamists had for oppositional media, she also saw their mistrust as a form of denial, noting that Morsi-

supporters “are not just blaming the media for showing people what has happened, they accuse the media of making up stories, or that they film from a certain angle that would show violence but actually that’s not happening.” Abbas, the experienced revolutionary, also observed how such lines of suspicion as part of a tactic to defuse criticisms against Morsi: “Those who are circulating that everybody [in the media] now opposing Muslim Brotherhood were pro- Mubarak are the Islamists.”

One correlate to rampant mistrust was the increased sense of personal responsibility in acquiring and evaluating information, as evidenced in several statements. The pro-military Sonya observed that “we no longer trust anyone, so we get our information from many sources [and] it is up to your intelligence and your education to judge.” Walid concluded that the county’s defective information environment “suggests that you depend on yourself.” “When transparency is lacking,” Sherine stated, “you only have the media to listen to and use your own logic.” Not everyone was equally up to this task, however. Galal, a professor, found the assessment of foreign observers making sweeping statements of the general savviness of Egyptian audiences “do not click with what we see: People in many cases they believe what is presented, regardless of the source.” In Galal’s assessment there was “no critical thinking whatsoever; they [Egyptians] don’t question information.” Abbas agreed, observing that most consumers turned to an accessible and familiar source and automatically aligned their “point of view with the point-of-view of the TV channel they are watching.” With this in mind, along with the several previous examples of mistrust shaped by political polarization, as well as the partisanship in the media discussed in earlier chapters, the next section turns now to the biased character of information consumers.

8.4 Biased

While the partisan nature of the media was explored elsewhere (**6.Broadcast Media**), here we see how a reciprocal partisanship was attested to among audiences. People allowed their information consumption to be guided by ideological or partisan affinities. On the one hand, citizens trusted what is familiar, like the liberal and anti-Islamist Yasmine who admitted that “most of time I trust people who share my attitudes”. The activist Yusef, meanwhile, sympathized with grassroots, civilian-led initiatives: “it takes

more effort to think [critically] about an initiative than to think it about someone who's bad or a politician." In the conflict between the government and the judiciary (**Appendix 2: Judiciary authority**), Yusef allowed his own empathies and antipathies to direct his information consumption, siding with the judges: "I'll always be inclined that the government are assholes"

You feel good about the judges, so you feel that there is a conspiracy against the judges or the judges are right. You keep reaching the story you want hear or want to find out, which 90% of the cases proves to be right. You confirm them over time. (Yusef)

According to Yusef, this was inevitable in most situations: "you go and check with preconceived notions, emotions and ideas. No matter how logical you think you're not."

Such biases served as a means of coping with the glut of information. Yusef observed that "you choose who to trust and it saves you the energy of going through all this flood of information," offering his mother as an example. His mother would first come across a piece of news then wait for a broadcast from her chosen opinion leader, journalist and Brotherhood critic Ibrahim Eissa, and "listen to what he has to say, what he feels about it. He will give some facts to verify his opinion, so then she will think that, 'Okay, that's what it is about.'" Given the stresses of mistrust and uncertainty, it is not surprising that citizens took solace in information from sources that matched their partisanship. Kassem, a professor sympathetic to the Morsi government, viewed this factional disposition as the natural refuge of people facing a tumult of claims and counterclaims, bereft of an ability to independently assess the information or news reports they came across, relying instead on personal familiarity with a faction:

As a result, they have to rely on perceptions of trustworthiness which, to a certain extent, depend on your interactions with a group. So unless you have interactions with that group, you have no reason to trust it. You have every reason to suspect it. (Kassem)

Yasmine observed that with no expectation of conclusive facts to be revealed, only further confusion, "people are fed up with arguments and debates that lead nowhere." She

confessed to no longer having “the guts to listen to a different argument, go[ing] through [...] debates and arguments that don’t lead to any conclusion,” instead finding herself becoming “more comfortable to listen to the channels and people who are saying my opinion” and “more relieved to listen to what I’m biased towards.” Noha, the liberal politico, admitted her information sources were diverse only “up to a point.” Despite following news on foreign sources such as the BBC, CNN or EuroNews, she would nevertheless find herself gravitating to television personalities such as Ibrahim Eissa to hear “someone saying what I’m feeling.”

When I am listening to Ibrahim Eissa, it is because I've been charging up all day and I want what I've inside me to be announced loud and clear. So I listen. To this extent, I'm falling in the same trap. (Noha)

Ahmed, the middle-aged liberal activist, supported these claims by observing that the consuming habits of citizens minimized their exposure to other views, and thereby limited their knowledge: “Everyone has his own facts because he listens to only one channel. If he has the voice of other channels, he will start to think” (Ahmed).

Besides the allure of confirmatory messages and as a means of coping with uncertainty, there was also the repulsion from sources one found ideologically unpalatable. “It is not just the confusion” confessed Sherine, “Sometimes it is because you become irritated when we hear the other side of the story, like from the Islamists, and you feel your blood pressure goes up.

Thoraya struggled against her partisan information silo by sampling television stations from both sides, but as a liberal she found herself “on a personal level” attracted to private oppositional stations such as ONTV and CBC. “I’ll turn the station to see what channel Misr25 [the Brotherhood private station] is saying, but it’s not saying anything I want to listen to so I just move on,” while Al-Jazeera was also supportive of the Brotherhood, “which is fine, I just don’t watch it.” Thoraya saw her political biases dictating what sources she followed: “I have no choice. There is not one single middle-of-the-road station in Egypt right now.”

For some, the bias *against* sources was more salient the bias *for*. The revolutionary, Abeer, was averse to anyone who supported the Mubarak regime, such as Ahmed Shafiq and Mustafa El-Fiqi. She avoided them, “couldn’t stand” them and didn’t trust them, despite admitting that they were not entirely illegitimate sources of information:

I believe that part of what they are saying is trustworthy. I know a lot of what Ahmed Shafiq is saying is true, but I don’t want to take it from him because it is just his side of the story at the end of the day. I don’t trust his side of the story. (Abeer)

Some participants were perturbed by dogma operating as the central arbiter of credulity. The concern they expressed was not over the political or ideological allegiances of consumers, *per se*, but rather that these allegiances dictated what sources consumers followed and trusted without further reflection or scrutiny.

If someone loves [Ahmed] Shafiq and he says something, they will listen to what he has to say. Or if someone loves Baradei, even if he is wrong they won’t question it. The question is whether you question what these people say. I have real problem with that. (Hassan)

Noha and Kassem both blamed this on the segmented and partisan media sector which allowed Egyptians to readily “listen to what he wants to say”, leaving them “unprepared to listen and filter” (Noha) a range of sources and independently assess facts and explanations amongst them.

If reaching out according to affiliations offered one means to finding sources and sorting through claims, the converse approach when dealing with inadequate information was exercising one’s thinking and creativity as an individual to arrive at an independent understanding of issues.

8.5 Inventiveness

Given people’s skeptical and suspicious disposition towards much of the news in circulation, filling in gaps in one’s knowledge and answering outstanding questions demanded more than finding and acquiring information. “Over the years, the way

Egyptians think has become very inventive. Every fact that now comes to him has a ‘hidden side’ and he fills in that hidden side with what he imagines” (Ziad).

Like a detective coping with unreliable witnesses, participants relied on their imagination and ingenuity to deduce the reality they sought to apprehend, often arriving at unsubstantiated but acceptable conclusions. Medhat, a retired professor, retreated from the clamour of media coverage and preferred to base his views on his own faculties rather than any set of information sources: “I use my logic and personal feeling more than any documents.” This self-reliance is evident in his conclusion that Hamas and the Brotherhood orchestrated the attacks on the prisons:

I consider Hamas and MB [Muslim Brotherhood] as one entity—they are a branch of the MB. [...] I believe after the revolution they [the Brotherhood] took advantage of it and used Hamas, since they are one [entity] and I feel they have a role in it [the prison break], both of them. I never imagined Hamas would come with good operations to free their people and leave the Brotherhood [out]. This is my logic without any documents.

Abeer’s ingenuity led her to a different conclusion regarding the assault on the prisons: that the police were involved “up to their heads” in the attacks and were covering-up their involvement. Once again, this assessment lacked any supporting information: “These are only thoughts of mine. I don’t have any documents. I don’t have any proof of what I’m saying.”

The inferences made by people occasionally led them to construct fairly elaborate conspiracies from otherwise trivial facts. Noha discovered that there were commercial flights between Egypt and Syria with Morsi in office—she had confirmed this with airline staff she knew. Given that Syria was in the middle of a civil war and all the Egyptians there had been evacuated, Noha raised the question “why there are still flights to Damascus” and arrived at the conclusion that the Islamist president was transporting jihadists to fight the Assad regime as part of an Islamist agenda: “He [Morsi] doesn’t realize that even if we were blind we can see this.”

Noha considered this native ingenuity for understanding obtuse, complex, or clandestine issues as a common feature among Egyptians, regardless of education or background. She was convinced that even if one asked a simply, uneducated parking lot attendant whether Egypt should seek a loan from the International Monetary Fund “he will say exactly what I’m saying; he will say ‘If my salary is 1000 pounds, and the richest guy in Egypt gets 53,000, we won’t need the IMF loan.’” This capacity to “make do” or “get by” on amateur knowledge carries specific cultural resonance in Egypt, where *fahlawa* is considered a part of the national identity.

Fahlawa generally refers to an uneducated, informal and somewhat audacious cleverness, where a layperson lacking the prerequisite knowledge, experience, training, or even the authority to make any claims nevertheless applies their intelligence and intuition applied to situations (Messiri, 1978; Shama, 2013). The colloquial term that is sometimes translated as “Egyptian ingenuity,” though this fails to capture the nuances of the concept with both positive and negative connotations (i.e., of resourceful creativity on the one hand and presumptuous ignorance on the other). *Fahlawa* is nevertheless considered a defining attribute of Egyptians, making it simultaneously an object of pride and shame. The pre-eminence of *fahlawa* in guiding people’s everyday practices was attested to by Ziad: “On the U.S. dollar it is written ‘In God We Trust.’ Here in Egypt it is ‘In *Fahlawa* We Trust.’” Conceptually, *fahlawa* seems to offer a cultural license to construct one’s reality with minimal facts or education. For instance, Noha approvingly observed that “the simple man walking outside just says, ‘They [the Brotherhood] are lying sons-of-bitches.’ [If you ask him] ‘How did you figure out they are liars?’ [He’ll respond] ‘They’re liars and just take my word for it.’”

If inventiveness as a characteristic made participants, regardless of class or income, part of a nationwide collective through the notion of *fahlawa*, the pretense of universality is rebutted by the final characteristic to be exhibited—elitism.

8.6 Elitist

Since the Uprising, interest and attention in public affairs had grown within society at large. The liberal legal reformer Sawsan witnessed this change percolating in her own

household staff, where instead of arguing over soccer now her “cook and driver are fighting over politics [...] it is amazing how politicized they have become and how knowledgeable they have become.” Yet participants were generally apprehensive and critical of the information practices of the general public, especially in light of their own. “Ordinary citizens don’t analyze,” stated Yasmine, “A small spectrum of citizens are listening, analyzing, and focusing on what is said, like intellectuals.” Sherine felt her rigor in vetting information was beyond most people: “you have to do a lot of work, even as an ordinary citizen, to verify that news is correct. [...] They cannot keep up the number of events and amount of news, a lot [of which] turn out no to be true, so they lose interest.”

Often this distinction between themselves and the population at large was cast in socio-economic and geographic terms. Many participants defined their information practices by the media they could access, such as private satellite broadcasts, international news, or social media, and this access was in turn a reflection of one’s social status and location. Noha felt that as Egypt entered the information revolution in the 1990s only “a specific class of people”—herself included— “started looking for the truth for themselves, whether looking for it in the newspapers, or the internet, or the different television channels.” This truth-seeking class was cosmopolitan: urban, sophisticated, and materially well-off. They had escaped the state’s propaganda apparatus. By contrast, the rest of the population living outside urban centres “are still mobilized and only in one direction—the direction of the government” (Noha). Noha saw this wider, gullible constituency who lacked access to satellite dishes and were left to continue consuming state media such *Al-Akhbar* and *Al-Ahram* (government papers which all participants disavowed) “and believe since they are state-newspapers they can’t lie.” Yusef also described the constituency outside the big cities as heavily reliant on state media, especially television, for their information: “the state media is really good at reaching those people, especially in Upper Egypt and places far away from the capital.” This dependency was fostered due to a lack of alternative sources, since people in such remote areas have “no access to the internet, obviously, or they wouldn’t be watching this bullshit [...] some of them didn’t even have satellite channels, but they have the radio and the state media with the regular antenna” (Yusef).

Besides government media, the majority of poor and rural Egyptians were also perceived as relying on Islamic media for their knowledge of public affairs. Abbas compared this to his middle-class parents who “are watching the Islamic media a lot but not for political stuff, only the religious stuff. This is the difference.” Thoraya noted that religious channels, especially the conservative Salafi networks, existed largely under the radar of privileged secular Egyptians who “can’t stand them”: “We’re watching CNN and assuming everyone is watching CNN. But no, there are a whole lot of people getting their information from [the Salafi] *El-Nass* channel.” Thoraya saw “two Egypts” manifested in the practices of its people as audiences segmented themselves according to their respective media cultures, one secular and the other religious. Ahmed described the humble audiences of such channels as severely limited in their ability to engage in sophisticated political concepts:

This isn't easy, because this type of people are very poor, most of them illiterate, most of them working as hair dressers or [trades]. Simple people. So we [liberals] need to talk with them on their [Salafi] channels, in their language and their tone. If we use academic words, they won't understand.

As Ahmed demonstrated, the audiences of Islamist channels were commonly seen to be simultaneously poor, religiously conservative, and intellectually limited. They were perceived to be easily alienated by complex political issues and ideas, since their “lack of education and the poverty makes it harder to explain things in a way that will touch the real lives.”

Even social media was implicated in social stratification, with all users admitting that Twitter was more elite and exclusive than Facebook. Less people used it, mostly committed activists, academics, officials, writers, and journalists, leading Thoraya to liken Twitter to “a pool for the intelligentsia of Egypt”. This made its content more informative and easier to navigate compared to Facebook, which was cluttered with opinions, jokes, long-winded conversations, and other copious miscellanea. “It feels like I’m just walking into the streets” was how Naveen described her experience using Facebook, which suffered from being “too popular”. This distinction between the Twitter

and Facebook communities also carried an ideological dimension. “The people of the poor class are mainly using Facebook, not Twitter.” Abbas observed, “That is why the ideas on Facebook are less progressive than on Twitter.” According to Abbas, Facebook’s initial reformist character had been diluted by its popularity following the Uprising:

The progressive people went into the Facebook in 2008. Then everybody came, so the progressive people went into Twitter. Not everybody came, but a lot. Now, really, we’re making jokes when you find somebody with very conservative ideas or supporting the government on Twitter, we say to him, ‘Get back to Facebook!’

Whether monopolized by the state, Islamists, or popular sentiment, participants felt that majority of Egyptians were easily herded into whatever they believed to be true. The general public, according to this view, were without the means to become more critically informed and remained susceptible to regime control. Yasmine saw religious dogma as the primary mover of the general public, with Islamists “dominating all the minds of the poor people, the un-intellectual people.” Noha illustrated the perceived gullible, unsophisticated, and dogmatic lower classes through an anecdote of her interaction with a pro-Brotherhood grocer who “proclaims ‘They’re God’s people, so they won’t cheat us!’ [and] You can’t convince him otherwise.” Such views of an unsophisticated, easily-manipulated polity led some participants to adopt anti-populist political beliefs, as seen in Thoraya’s reaction to Justice Tahani Al-Gebali’s voting proposal. In 2011, judge and Supreme Constitutional Court vice-president Al-Gebali proposed allotting voting power according to citizens’ education levels, which would have increased the political influence of higher income citizens relative to lower socio-economic segments.

Initially I thought “My god, that’s a horrible idea.” [But] when I thought about it, I thought, “Yes, why not?” Surely, there is a method or a way you can gradually incorporate people or find other ways. The [referendum] elections were fair but I don’t know how informed people were, including the liberals. [...] I don’t know that anybody that I know

except for the experts at the universities ever read the draft of the constitution. (Thoraya)

To Thoraya, democracy was a “new thing to everybody,” and if the institutions of democracy were implemented without an informed and responsible electorate still inchoate, it seemed a disaster: “that’s a scary thing—a whole country is heading one way or another based on emotional votes.”

Several participants acknowledged the elitism among citizens but were critical of its basis and implications. Hassan, the independent journalist, rejected its conceit of the “ignorant masses” or self-satisfying fantasy it offered liberals who “think of themselves as very informed others as uninformed.”

Sure, there are segments of the population which rely heavily on what their local cleric will say in the mosque. But they live the indignity of poverty every day. They know how policies affect them. They are not stupid people. Those who say “I’m so informed” don’t realize that their own biases are political. (Hassan)

Walid concurred with this critique. While many portray Egyptians as either well-read and savvy or ignorant and illiterate based on class and geography, “this kind of situation might not exactly reflect the facts on the ground” (Walid). He admitted that generally “when it comes to the upper class and the middle class, supposedly the level of awareness is higher—supposedly,” but “this is not necessarily the case here in Egypt.” Walid attributed this disconnect between class and knowledge to several factors, including the low quality of education Egyptians received even at the university level. Meanwhile Abeer saw Egypt’s poor as possessors of profound political insight as the people most vulnerable to the state’s abuses. Drawing on her own interactions with low-income Egyptians when running her business, Abeer found them to be shrewd and cognisant of their best interests, making them legitimate participants in Egypt’s democratic transition. Finally, the elitist accusation of public ignorance may in fact reflect divergent interests and concerns. The lofty topics such as the IMF loan, the constitution, or the judiciary which dominated political discourse were far removed from the concerns of average citizens who focused “on what affects them personally, their daily problems: prices, gas,

electricity” (Ingy) . Most Egyptians, struggling to make ends meet, were preoccupied by more immediate concerns and conditions like rising prices, unemployment, electricity and fuel shortages, or the lack of security. The capacity for a privileged class to consume and analyze information on esoteric issues was not so much a sign of their authority and legitimacy as savvy citizens, but a luxury their class status afforded them.

8.7 Discussion

The collective attributes of information consumers is not a common focus of attention in LIS, and less so when examined according to social, economic, and cultural conditions. A seminal example of this approach is the work of Elfreda Chatman (1991, 1992, 1999) on marginalized peoples (see **3.3.2.4.Spotlight 1**). Chatman’s studies of retirement home residents, janitors, and incarcerated women revealed characteristics of these groups as information consumers which were intimately connected to the confined, precarious world they inhabited. They concerned themselves largely with immediate issues, expressed low self-efficacy and fatalism, were mistrustful of outsiders, routinely exercised secrecy and avoidance, relied on media for entertainment and distraction rather than knowledge, and preferred intimate sources of information while neglecting official or institutional resources. The work here draws similar attention to the foundational characteristics of participants—skepticism, suspicion, bias, ingenuity, and elitism—which co-constitute their life-world.

In later chapters the significance of these characteristics will be shown in the types of sources participants identified (**9.Sources**) and how texts are approached (**10.Tactics**). Skepticism and suspicion suggest that sources and texts are approached with some degree of incredulity. Inventiveness indicated a reliance on private interpretations and conjectures. Bias and elitism show the influence of identity—as members of a class, party, or community of thought—in how messages are consumed, interpreted, and valorized.

8.7.1 The importance of character

The traits of consumers are important because of what they reveal about the information ecosystem and the larger political, social and cultural milieu participants were situated

within. The characteristics were invariably presented as reflections of social or environmental factors rather than treated as innate individual dispositions. Ingenuity, skepticism, and suspicion were variously portrayed as the results of decades of state propaganda, memories of domestic and foreign intrigues, reactions to dysfunctional media, and—in the form of *fahlawa*—indigenous facets of the Egyptian identity. Mistrust and uncertainty were considered natural responses to unreliable and duplicitous power-holders capable of deceit, cover-ups or strategic leaks to manipulation of the public. Moreover, the skepticism of participants reflected a belief in the inescapable limits of knowledge in the current environment, given the complex and numerous issues they faced.

One can also see how, given the characteristics expressed by consumers, trustworthiness became highly granular and less readily afforded to an institution, organization, or party than specific people or personalities. As discussed in **7.Social Media**, trust was shown to be extended on an individual basis, whether through broadcast media or social media, to specific experts, hosts, or contributors whose credibility the consumers had independently established. The following chapter (**9.Sources**) will further explore this as the classes of information sources participants relied upon are examined. The bias of consumers, meanwhile, was a reaction to the polarization in the media (**6.Broadcast Media**) and society at large, orienting the attention and credulity of consumers regarding sources that confirm or oppose their political views. Trust, problematized in the skepticism and suspicion of audiences, was conditioned—though not necessarily predetermined—by the affiliations of consumers.

Elitism represented the glaring economic, geographic, and ideological divisions in the country. The types of sources people turned to (liberal, government, or religious) and how they consumed them (uncritically, dubiously, or analytically) were differentiated according to stark social categories: the privileged from the poor, the urban from the rural, the educated from the illiterate, and—ultimately—the legitimate citizenry from the illegitimate citizenry. This informational elitism raises concerns over the pejorative connotations to notions of *information literacy* and *information poverty*, as the attribute of being “well-informed” becomes the pretense for conferring legitimacy and authenticity

to the views of one segment of the population at the expense of others. In Egypt's fledgling democracy and broken welfare state, some may see this inequity as a harsh reality, but associating preferential information consumption practices with status functionally reinforced social schisms as much as participant's biases reinforced political schisms.

8.7.2 An information culture

These characteristics were prominent features in the narratives of participants regarding how information was consumed, avoided, interpreted, analyzed, and valorized, just as the alienation experienced by Chatman's participants dictated their own information practices. Taken together, the characteristics come to constitute what I call an *information culture*, which is conceptualized along the same lines of a coffee culture or a drug culture. Here, the word "culture" defines "a way of life or social environment characterized by or associated with the specified quality or thing" ("culture, n.," 2014); just as a coffee culture refers to the "social atmosphere or series of associated social behaviors that depends heavily upon coffee" (Wikipedia contributors, 2013, para. 1), an information culture refers to the atmosphere and attitudes associated with information. This ethnographic concept of an information culture is distinct from the one developed in the field of information management, where an information culture is defined by a set of best practices in the handling of an organization's intellectual and technological resources (Virkus, 2012). In the ethnographic approach, an information culture is explored as the collective dispositions of those engaged in the consumption and analysis of information within a socio-political context. The foundations of an information culture are, on the one hand, the quotidian choices and actions of information consumers participating in it (see **9.Sources** and **10.Tactics**) and, on the other hand, the resources and institutions creating its material base (See **5.State Information**, **6.Broadcast Media**, and **7.Social Media**).

Profiling an information culture offers both a symptomatic and diagnostic view of local conditions by highlighting the crucial but abstract and subjective factors undergirding the movement of information through society, e.g., faith, ambiguity, loyalties, authority, identity, status—what Sztompka (1999) calls the "soft" cultural components of sociology. For instance, trust, which Sztompka analyzes as a social theorist, is a powerful

antecedent to how information is consumed and processed. Trust can be analyzed at several levels (personal, organizational, and societal); an information culture approach applies a societal lens, examining the wider context in which information is consumed or avoided, processed or rejected. An information culture operates to circumscribe, however heuristically, complex notions by reducing them to their shared association with information. Hence within an information cultural lens a highly complex concept such as trust, treated very differently across disciplines like psychology, philosophy, economics, and sociology, is reduced to how participants used the term: as a reflection on the quality and efficacy of the information and sources, where the paucity of trust leads to reports of confusion, mistrust, or ignorance. This approach pragmatically delimits the scope of such ponderous concepts. Further demonstrating richness of the information culture approach was the inclusion of bias and elitism, which recast perceptions of information, sources, and audiences according to societal divisions along cultural, political, and economic lines. Participants' discussions on the differential distribution of information across a divided polity (of urban and rural, well-off and poor, educated and uneducated, conservative and progressive, or religious and liberal) suggest that information has itself become constitutive of particular groupings, consolidating social factions into competing knowledge communities.

These applications of information culture deepen the sociological analysis of information and its related activities as the rationalistic, individuated, prescriptive, and universalist discourse on information behaviours gives way to more variegated, societal, expressive, and contextual phenomena (Tuominen, Savolainen, & Talja, 2005). An information culture exposes how a people conceptualize information as well as its production, consumption, interpretation, and evaluation as constructions within specific groups and settings. This is because, on the one hand, the information landscape itself is shaped by the operative social, technical, and economic forces (Tuominen et al., 2005) and, on the other hand, the utility, capacity, and significance of information is a matter of intersubjective standpoint. For instance, the assumption of information behavior that people wish to reduce their uncertainty and anxiety and do so by consuming only trusted information seems a sensible proposition, but participant feedback suggests that skepticism, mistrust, and bias were direct responses to a situation where such

opportunities were not available to them. These people do not construe uncertainty as a personal failure (e.g., Nahl's notion of affective load) but as the appropriate reaction to an environment that is itself chaotic, noisy, imprecise, incomplete, and so on. This information culture reveals that Egyptians were coping with ambient exposure to myriad information rather than inhabiting informational silos and exclusively accessing consistent and unchallenged claims in their pursuit of information. The skepticism that had become part of people's everyday behaviors confirmed the claims of participants regarding the diffusive movement of information across social interactions and broadcasts, exposing citizens to a plethora of views and claims "even if they don't want to" (Sherine) (for more, see 6.3.2. Conditional acceptance). Such findings expand on Chatman's notion of *life in the round*, defined as "a dynamic everyday world based largely on approximation [...] where imprecision is largely accepted and inexactitude tolerated and where 'members move in and out of the round depending on their need for more systematic, precise, and defined information'" (Savolainen, 2008a, p. 53). The information culture presented here extends this understanding of coping with information overload and making order out of chaos in the context of contentious politics without falling back onto mechanistic or universal notions of information.

As stated in the introduction and demonstrated in the findings, the characteristics making up the information culture are not wholly isolated from one another, but overlap and intersect on various levels—mistrust with biases, biases with skepticism, biases with elitism—allowing us to reconstruct more complex information practices from their basic conceptual components. For instance, the convergence of inventiveness, mistrust, skepticism, and bias can explain the prevalence of conspiracy theories in Egypt's public discourse. Conspiracy theories are commonly treated as the manifestations of impoverished rationality among the paranoid and disaffected (Pipes, 1997; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009), while others consider conspiracy theories as sociological phenomena that reveal issues of political illegitimacy, disenfranchisement, or domestic/international interference (J. W. Anderson, 1996; Gray, 2010). In the information culture model, the characteristics of citizens provide another understanding of how conspiracy thinking is sustained and reproduced. In this study, where accusations of liberal, military, Islamist, and foreign conspiracies were prevalent, these emerged from a constellation of

characteristics that orient how information was consumed and interpreted—skeptically, inventively, partially, and mistrustfully. Conspiracy theories can be understood as symptomatic of a range of particular information practices rather than a conclusive condition or belief.

Lastly, the concept of information cultures serves to distinguish different milieus which information consumers inhabit. Being conscious of this can protect us against prematurely projecting expectations from one context to another before understanding the nature of the informational disjuncture. Consider the dissonant information cultures revealed in the negative reaction of Western observers to public discourse in the Middle East:

Those first Western sightings of the Arab public sphere produced breathless reports on “anti-Americanism,” seemingly irrational “conspiracy theories” and “cultural hostility.” Statements and political rhetoric that made perfect sense in one public sphere [composed of Arabs], tapping into well-established motifs and languages, seemed literally incomprehensible in others. (Lynch, 2006, p. 58)

However, even internally an information culture need not be uniform or consistent. An information culture circumscribes the collective experience of information while allowing for internal comparison of dissenting views. The salience of the characteristics described above should not be allowed to overstate the consensus over the impact or significance of these characteristics. Uncertainty led some to avoid consuming information, others to persist in consuming media with the hope of absolving it, and still others to project their expectations of the truth. Some participants accepted uncertainty as a natural and inevitable circumstance while others strongly rejected uncertainty as the product of deliberately sown confusion. Some participants justified elitism while others decried it, just as some celebrated the ingenuity of Egyptians while others saw it as evidence of an impoverished intellect. Even the partisanship of information consumers was reluctantly indulged in as a stress-relieving strategy. The representation of Egyptians as savvy and critical, honed by years of hard-won experience, was contradicted by the

portrayal of them as gullible, lazy, or disaffected subjects liable to be misled by either the state or Islamists. Since the revolution, Egypt has seen an increased political awareness of the population; since the revolution, citizens have also become tired and disinterested. The very same participant could one moment present herself as being highly critical of all media one minute and then admit relying on biased sources the next. Yet these contradictions do not refute the significance of these perspectives—in a population of 85 million, it would be ridiculous to expect any one statement to represent the entire population. The competing narratives of the same characteristic demonstrate the natural variability among individuals, and even within a single individual. The importance of these narratives and the information culture they substantiated is not simply their fidelity to reality but also the expectations they accorded to reality and the tensions they testified to.

8.8 Conclusion

One objection that might be raised against this chapter and the approach it puts forward is that the findings here are the inevitable correlate of feedback participants expressed in previous chapters: the biased character of participants reiterates the findings of media partisanship (**6.Broadcast Media**); the suspicious and skeptical characteristics reiterate the lack of credible information sources (**5.State Information**, **6.Broadcast Media**, and **7.Social Media**); and the reliance on ingenuity and creativity reiterates the lack of official information (**7.State**). Meanwhile, elitism is unsurprising given the social standing and political sophistication of participants. While these are valid points to consider, it would be misleading to consider these characteristics and the information culture they compose as the mirror-image reflection of the ecosystem participants previously described. A better perspective is to see both the ecosystem and culture as two sides of the same coin, each serving as one component of a narrative whole: the story of information consumption during an unstable and contentious period. Knowing the paucity of reliable information does not tell us how citizens are reacting, the general ethos of audiences, the central themes in how citizens negotiate information, or how they conceive of themselves as information consumers. Exploring the narrative according to these general characteristics is meaningful in itself, representing the overt tones of public discourse

during the transitional period. The information culture does not simply reflect judgements made of media, state, or social media, but they do demonstrate the basis on which participants assessed them. Without isolating the characteristics that represent the self-conception of information consumers, one loses sight of the thematic threads that consciously weave the life-world of participants and justify their practices.

Chapter 9 - Sources Consulted for Information

9.1 Introduction

Having established the character of information consumers in the previous chapter, we now examine the sources consumers relied upon, investigating the types of sources described and the criteria by which they were selected. As will be demonstrated, the accounts of sources instantiated the previously introduced information culture, pervaded with skepticism, suspicion, bias, resourcefulness, and elitism (see **8.Characteristics**). This is most immediately evident in how sources were most commonly presented by participants, not as channels, mediums, networks, documents, or institutions but as individuals. The data presented here conceptualizes sources of information as categories of people participants relied upon, whether these people were accessed face-to-face or through media. Personalized sources fell into specific categories that reflected differing bases of their credibility and expertise, and participants negotiated between these variegated authorities accordingly.

A useful starting point for this investigation is the analogy of a trial, where the court depends on the testimony of witnesses, such as a bystander or the victim, and experts, such as a psychologist or a forensic examiner. Witnesses and experts, as we shall see, are prominent sources in the accounts of participants, but they are not alone. Personal contacts, people the consumer knew personally, also served as important sources of information (whether solicited or unsolicited). As we shall see, each of these sources was assessed according to different standards and made a different contribution to a person's knowledge. The types of insight a witness can offer differs from that of an expert, and both may differ from a personal contact, if not in content than in standing. Before discussing these three sources—witnesses, contacts, and experts—however, we will begin with the least mediated and most intimate source of information, one's own first-hand experience. Here, the consumer was herself the primary source of information through her direct observations. First-hand experience played a surprisingly important role in the accounts of information, and therefore we explore it first before discussing the

sources people turned to when relying on information from outside the consumer's sphere of first-person experience.

9.2 Oneself

The most immediate information a person can arrive at is that which she gathers first-hand. Direct experience was consistently afforded a primacy among participants in shaping their opinions and those of fellow Egyptians. Yasser, the veteran journalist, highlighted the significance of first-hand experience with the Arabic expression *ro 'yat al-ayn* ("the eye's sight") which refers to what is seen in plain view. According to Yasser, the conditions of the country were self-evident; citizens did not need to watch any channels or read any newspapers to learn about the state of affairs because their daily life afforded all the information they needed. He gave the example of corruption: any victim of a car accident would inevitably be faced with demands for bribes from the police officers or impound employees and know that exploitation is the foundation of the country's ruling regime, "so he doesn't need to see Al-Hayat or ONTV [private TV stations] in order to make an assessment on what is happening around them" (Yasser). Noha, the politically involved Nasserist, attested to the weight given to first-hand experience by observing that she would only be approached for her knowledge of political affairs when said information could not be ascertained personally:

What he can confirm for himself, he isn't going to ask about. [...] The facts he already has confirmed for himself he won't bother asking me about. What he can grasp in his own hands, that's it. But what he can't grasp with his own two hands he will ask me about. (Noha)

She discussed the example of the IMF loan debate to show the influence of first-hand experience in people's information practices:

When they say the IMF will raise prices, he doesn't need to inquire into this because he has already seen and felt the rise of prices. But when they say that subsidies will be lifted though he can still buy a loaf of bread for 5 piasters...so he comes and asks me: "Is it true they are going to raise the price of bread?" (Noha)

Being the next resort to direct experience was indicative of the lower esteem second-hand information held compared to first-hand information. As Noha remarked, despite being identified as “a researcher or someone following an issue,” the consumer approaching her “is carrying some doubt [about me], not fully trusting me.” Contrasting the two examples of rising prices and lifted subsidies, Noha stated that the man would continue seeking information regarding the subsidies even after getting her input; he would have “trusted me on the first one because he felt it, but what he doesn't experience for himself he continues to ask about since he doesn't fully believe me.”

Since, as Noha suggested, any claim made by others unsubstantiated by direct experience was considered tentative, regardless of the source, first-hand experience was essential for verifying any second-hand information. This role for first-hand information is significant in a context where, as already established elsewhere, much of the copious content circulating within Egypt's information ecosystem was of questionable merit and in need of vetting (chapters 5, 6, and 7). For example, consider Brotherhood member Ziad's stance on the controversial firing of the Cairo Opera House director by the Minister of Culture (Appendix 2: Opera firing). While many Egyptians interpreted the dismissal as an attack on the arts by a culturally conservative Islamist government, Ziad believed the government's explanation: that the director was fired on the grounds of fiscal incompetence. The Culture Minister had appeared on television and presented official documents to substantiate his claim, yet Ziad was not convinced by the official reports but rather his own observations of the Opera House. He personally witnessed extravagant shows charging nominal admission prices and performed for an empty hall. It was Ziad's first-hand observations that allowed him to overcome the typical skepticism and accept the documents presented by the Minister as true:

It is different for me because I used to frequently go to the opera. I'd find a big production with a lot of people in it, and a large empty theatre. And the tickets are only 5 pounds. How? All this for only 5 pounds? I was puzzled how a state could fund something like this. So when [Culture Minister] Alaa Abdel Aziz came around, even without the documents, I saw it [the mismanagement] with my eyes. (Ziad)

Amid the competing accounts of pro- and anti-government factions, first-hand experience offered a means of distinguishing genuine information from misinformation and arriving at one's own conclusions. The legal reformer, Sawsan, observed that citizens "can now decide between lies and statements that seem to be consistent with their everyday life, what they see around them and notice for themselves, and decide what is true and what is false."

But there was also the danger of inappropriately extrapolating from personal experience. Since people ordinarily "don't have a background to disagree with anything" (Abeer) they are inherently susceptible to accepting any story that conforms to what they immediately observed, regardless of how tenuous the connection. For instance, the negative living condition citizens experienced firsthand under Morsi's rule led many to retroactively believe allegations made against the Brotherhood by the previous regimes which persecuted them. Initially, the accusations "that the MB are looking for power, to rule this country, and when they rule this country so-and-so is going to happen" (Abeer) were dismissed, but in the face of the deteriorating state people witnessed daily, "they are re-thinking that it was not such a big lie [after all]—that it was probably true and these people [former authorities] knew what we didn't know." Abeer, a newly politicized revolutionary in her 30s, noted how this was channeled towards increased sympathy for the former regime and exaggerated antipathy towards the Brotherhood.

If you come tell me—given all that is now happening around us—stories about the Muslim Brotherhood, I'll probably believe you because I'll link it to whatever they are doing now. (Abeer)

Nevertheless, the ability to resist speculations and propaganda depended on being part of the story and having experienced the truth for oneself, as happened to Abeer during the 2011 Uprising: "You have to actually be part of these incidents that the made-up story is talking about to know that it's not true: 'No, I was there!' This is what happened to me" (Abeer). This was a common observation from revolutionaries, who learned the significance of first-hand experience by comparing what they personally witnessed at the protests with media coverage, official statements, and public perception. Yusef, himself a

revolutionary, saw the revolution as “really an intensive crash-course in how to decipher news” and counter propaganda, exposing the revolutionaries to “all the tricks” of authoritarian regimes. Abeer’s participation in the protests allowed her to get to know many revolutionaries personally, observe unfolding events, and witness the actions of security forces. This put her in a position to vehemently repudiate the circulating claims undermining the movement. From this experience Abeer grew to prefer first-hand information—by personally participating in actions, interacting with people face-to-face, and directly witnessing happenings—rather than join most of her fellow revolutionaries online: “I like to get to know people, see with my own eyes, experience things.”

Of course, one of the shortcomings of first-hand experience as a source of information, however reliable that information may be, was that it severely limited the range of issues on which a person could be informed. Abeer recognized this, noting that it left only “very few people who know the truth” on matters of public concern while the rest of Egyptians were burdened by “the tremendous amount of lies we were being told and there was no way to know.” Illustrating how exceptional such information was, Abeer recalled a gathering of acquaintances where one attendee began praising the governor of Cairo, commending what “a great man he was, that he wasn’t part of the corruption, and so forth.” This was immediately disputed by another person at the party, who started sharing his personal experience with the governor: during a legal dispute between them, the governor tried to extort several million pounds from him and refused to be satisfied and abide the much lower settlement sum (a few hundred thousand) the court had decided upon. For Abeer, this story demonstrated the insights that could only be derived from seeing and hearing events and people directly, cutting through appearances, but also how exceptional such information was. Yet she also admitted that with the new openness in public discourse since the revolution “stories like this are now being told,” allowing for first-hand experiences to be shared among citizens, potentially exposing mistruths and circulating genuine information. This transitions us to the next category of sources who offer their own first-hand accounts to others: witnesses.

9.3 Witnesses

The information provided by witnesses is initially gathered through immediate, first-hand observation, but these observations are imparted to others in the form of testimonies. As with any consumer's own first-hand experiences, the credibility of witnesses rests in part on their proximity to the reality and happenstance of a story, leaving less room for speculation. The weight participants gave to first-hand accounts is seen in Abeer's preference for learning about events through witnesses, as opposed to fellow consumers lost in distorted, misleading "stories":

The things that I know, I like to hear it first hand from people I know. Were you there? Did you see that with your own eyes? Was this a story you were told? "Yes, I was there and I saw so-and-so." These are the people I believe; otherwise I'll be lost in stories as well. (Abeer)

For the moment let us set aside Abeer's personal familiarity with her preferred source ("people I know") (see 9.4.Contacts) and focus on the importance of the source's direct experience ("were you there?"). This was considered a crucial basis for reliable information, and social media (especially Twitter) offered a powerful platform through which technologically adept revolutionaries could seek out witnesses for their testimonies (see also **7.Social Media**). What is significant here is not the tool, social media, but the approach: seeking out on-the-ground observers for credible reports. As with first-hand experience, witnesses served as a means of confirming or refuting reports consumers encountered from dubious outlets. Sherine, a revolutionary, described how she and her fellow activists, when coming upon a story from a formal outlet or an online post regarding a protest, a strike, or some other altercation, would begin searching through their networks for someone with direct knowledge of the matter in question:

So when we see a piece of news about something happening, we start to ask each other "Do you know someone in-person who lives there? Can you make a call and make sure this is really happening? Because we don't know this person who is posting this news."(Sherine)

“We rely on ourselves to try to verify,” said Sherine, and this verification process relied primarily on finding “someone near to the place where the event happened.”

Intermediaries were often needed to locate pertinent witnesses, as illustrated by the grizzled leftist activist, Hisham, who gave the example of sectarian violence breaking out in the countryside:

[Say] something happened between Muslims and Copts in Edfu. I don't know anybody in Edfu, but I know some in Kom Umbu. I tell them I heard so-and-so. They'll ask the folks in Edfu. Then I get the facts from people in the know.

Besides experientially-based information, witnesses share another parallel with the previous type of source: both consumers themselves and witnesses tend to be ordinary civilians who happen to become information creators. Witnesses are usually bystanders who happen to be in the right time and place to speak to occurrences and events. This stands in contrast to professionals or privileged insiders, such as journalists, specialists, or officials (see 9.5.Experts). This attribute of witnesses, and the credibility it conferred on them, reflected the suspicion many consumers expressed that sources may be politically or economically motivated to misrepresent the facts of a story. For the experienced revolutionary, Abbas, a witness was a vital source because of his proximity to events and that his willingness to freely share his testimony evinced accurate, unmediated, and disinterested information. To verify a story circulating through the media, he would “compare the newspapers with people on the ground, who have first-hand experience and who are doing this voluntarily.” If, for instance, “we hear there was a fight at the Sheraton” and Abbas happened to be on the scene, he would “tweet that I’m there and that it is not political but just two people settling a bill,” effectively countering the sensationalistic media reports with his testimony, which “is very spontaneous, that’s why it’s trusted.”

Even among non-activists there was a strong need for disinterested sources as the purveyors of reliable information, and a bystander seemed to offer just such objectivity. Consider Sonya’s acceptance of the account from a security officer who appeared on a

public affairs show and claimed to have witnessed the prison breaks. The politically unaffiliated, pro-army Sonya maintained the officer's credibility as follows:

He saw how the prisons were opened. He told us everything. He saw it. And he gave testimony in court. The deputy attorney handling this case about the prison breaks announced that anybody with details is welcome to present them, so the officer went of his own volition. No one demanded him to go. Why would he go unless he had the real facts? (Sonya)

Though the revolutionaries would have disagreed with anyone characterizing a member of Egypt's security forces as neutral, Sonya's assessment of this source follows the same criteria employed by Abbas, Abeer, and Hisham. For her, this police officer demonstrated the same impartiality as a bystander in Edfu—a source who experienced events first-hand and volunteered information for no apparent personal gain.

Whereas witnesses are defined as sources intimately familiar with the events in question, the next category of sources—contacts—are individuals intimately familiar to the information consumer.

9.4 Contacts

A contact is a source of information who the consumer knows personally, such as a friend, an online acquaintance, a colleague, a relative, a fellow party member, a client, or a former professor. While the credibility of a witness came in part from their supposed disinterest as a bystander, the credibility of a contact came from their relationship with the consumer. Leveraging her familiarity with her co-workers, Abeer positioned herself as a contact to overturn the misconceptions her colleagues held about the Uprising due to slanderous media coverage.

A lot of people were influenced by media saying the people in Tahrir Square were traitors, were from Hezbollah and Hamas, they had weapons, and so forth. So when I told them I went down there with my friends and people I know asked how could I go along with these people. I said, "Don't believe what the media is saying. You know me."

You've known me for years. You can trust me. Do not believe the media. People there are not looking to bring chaos into the country. (Abeer)

In this situation Abeer qualifies as both a witness (experiential knowledge) and a contact (personal acquaintance), yet it is her status as the latter that was emphasized to give her testimony gravity. Noha also spoke about herself serving as a contact (see 9.2.Oneself) but unlike Abeer she described herself being *actively approached* by acquaintances as a source of information, remarking that after the revolution citizens were more open to consult those they could access personally who stood to offer useful insights: “what started to happen is whenever they [Egyptians] can check the facts, they do.” Since Noha was known among her community for being politically engaged and informed, she frequently found herself approached by people from modest socio-economic backgrounds for information:

The maids, the porter, the guy helping me part my car, the people in the street—once they get a sense that you are someone in the know, they tell you, "I heard so-and-so. Is it true?" The inquisitive mind hasn't appeared, especially regarding the media, except in the period after the revolution. [...] That is what makes a guy come up to me and ask: "Did this actually happen? Is it true? What is their intent?" The mentality has changed. Reflection of the kinds of facts being said started to become discernable. (Noha)

Sawsan described a similar political curiosity overtaking her household staff following the Uprising, and subsequently she was also identified by them as a knowledgeable source and approached for her insights.

I hear my cook and driver fighting over politics. Two or three years ago they were always fighting about football. [...] They'll say, "You know, this person yesterday on that talk-show was saying this-and-that and so on. Is it true? How did this happen?" They ask me.

Noha and Sawsan, then, served as contacts, intimately familiar and accessible sources of information. The two, in turn, relied on their own network of contacts for their information. In order to become informed on the confrontation between Egypt's executive office and legislature with the judiciary (Appendix 2: Judicial authority), Noha sought out her relevant contacts to go beyond the coverage presented in the television and newspapers: "You figure out the situation through people you sit with. We know judges, counsellors, attorneys, [...]." Sawsan also enjoyed exceptional degrees of access to such insiders who supplemented her media consumption:

I read and I watch and I meet people in conferences, socially. NGOs, human rights movement, women's movement; you get insights from people you trust. It creates an overall image of what's happening that's probably close to the truth. Of course, you can never tell a lot of things, but you're probably close to the truth because it is close to reality. (Sawsan)

Despite retaining some residual skepticism, Sawsan showed that pre-established personal relationships with contacts of various backgrounds lent higher credence in the information they supplied, allowing her to cut through the confusion surrounding numerous issues. To learn the true state of Egypt's economy, for instance, past the claims spun by the government, Sawsan once again relied on her personal contacts in the financial sector, "so I know we are in deep trouble."

Revolutionaries also relied heavily on contacts, often enabled by the social media networks they utilized. One exception was Abeer, who preferred soliciting contacts face-to-face rather than online.

I'm not very good with the internet and social media. When you have a chance to talk to activists, they are always on social media. I don't have a Facebook account; I hate the internet. I'm more into personal contacts. (Abeer)

Those more comfortable with social media would reach through their online contacts to find pertinent and credible information. The approach of these activists matched that of journalists. Mohamed, a liberal reporter, in researching the military conflict in the Sinai,

relied on personal, unofficial contacts with networks extending into the region to learn more about what was happening.

I use personal sources in the regions – in the Al-Arish, Al-Aqueesh, people I know in Cairo with relatives. I look at the writings [on the internet] of the youth in opposition in Sinai.

Some accounts of informal contacts resembled rumour-mongering, though once again the intimacy of a sources gave these claims a veneer of substance. Sonya was convinced that the Palestinian group Hamas and the Brotherhood together orchestrated the prison breaks (Appendix 2: Prison break) based on an anecdote passed on through a family friend:

One of my sister's friends lives far in the outskirts, and the escaped prisoners were having a drink at this guy's villa. He asked who broke them out, and they said the people didn't speak Egyptian Arabic but Palestinian, from Gaza.

The examples of Mohamed, Noha, Sawsan, and the social media activists also present another important role of contacts as intermediaries. Contacts often functioned as conduits for information or sources of information. Abbas, critical of the coverage of the state's trial of several dozen foreign NGO workers (Appendix 2: NGO Trial), discovered what he considered the true motive behind the prosecution—a conflict between the Egyptian army and the US government over arms deals negotiations—based on information accessed through a friend on social media.

I'm getting this from my sources, because a friend on Twitter shared a piece on an American blog talking about the crisis of armament in the US, where manufacturers are fighting with the American organizations to keep the Egyptian aid to keep their factories working. Because my friend starts something, and another re-shares it, I get it.

Despite the expanded pool of trustworthy information afforded by one's network of contacts, alongside witness testimonies and first-person experience, relying exclusively on such sources would still severely narrow any citizen's worldview, especially when facing issues requiring more abstract knowledge, which were too diffuse or complex to

be simply “witnessed”, or where one’s personal network fell short. In such situations a different class of sources were required: experts.

9.5 Experts

Experts are sources of information whose authority is derived from a supposed mastery of a field of knowledge, whether arrived at through the source’s education, training, or occupation. Unlike the previous types of sources, the informational role of experts tended to be an extension of their professional duties. Experts took the form of professors, subject specialists, former officials, public intellectuals, and consultants. Of all the sources discussed, experts tend to be the most remote in two senses. First, they were usually distant, impersonal sources consumers accessed through broadcast media or official documents. Second, experts did not usually have immediate experience of the event or issue in question, such as the contained accounts from personal experience or witnesses, basing their accounts instead on a broad body of knowledge. As a source, then, experts were doubly-detached, both from the consumer and the issue in question. They also represented the most abundant type of individuated source in Egypt’s contemporary information ecosystem.

Broadcast media was the core venue for experts, who weighed-in through newspaper columns and talk show discussions to inform audiences on the innumerable controversies. Experts from their respective spheres spoke on the economy, national security, public policy, religion, civil liberties, international affairs, popular culture, constitutional matters, human rights, political scandals, social welfare, and many other areas of interest, with participants following their chosen experts accordingly. Popular experts among participants were people like Amr Hamzawy (political scientist) and Ibrahim Eissa (journalist) for their accounts on political and economic matters. On military matters, the Muslim Brother Fouad turned to analyses from Sufwat al-Zayat, while the Islamist Osama looked for insight into legal issues with Hazem Salah Abu Ismail. These choices demonstrated once again how individuated people’s information sources were, even for mediated and impersonal sources, leading the liberal-leaning, retired civil servant, Yasmine, to observe that the media were “becoming more like a personal media, now.” Yasmine, without any “solid facts” at her disposal, relied on the relevant specialist

familiar to her, “the people that I trust, the expert that I had already trusted, who I knew was an expert in law and criminal matters. I would hear from him and start to form an opinion.”

Yasmine’s comments pointed to an interesting disjuncture in Egypt’s changing information ecosystem: while experts proliferated due to the recent media boom, they were not consumed according to specific platforms, channels, or programmes. In several cases, participants described seeking out experts for information irrespective of where they were hosted, even when they appeared on outlets unpalatable to the consumer. Fouad described watching channels like Al-Hayat, Al-Nahar, and even the blatantly anti-Brotherhood network, CBC “when they bring in someone who is trusted, a real expert.” This often entailed even tuning out the host of the programme: “when he [the expert] talks, I focus on him and his words, not the host” (Fouad). Hence the most respected talk-show hosts were the ones who allowed experts to present their own facts, with minimal sensationalism or dogma: “They present your [the expert’s] opinions, not the opinions of the show, or their personal opinions, or the channel’s opinions—things aren’t mixed up” (Noha).

Yet the procession of experts was a mixed blessing, with participants expressing four core concerns regarding experts. First was the sheer multitude of experts, whose myriad analyses fragmented and exhausted the public. Yasmine observed that the very same news story “will be on every channel, but when you have a talk show on every channel and a lot of experts, you always hear different opinions and you don’t know the truth.” Choosing to spend one’s limited attention on certain experts was a means of coping with the “overload” and attenuating the commiserate skepticism and suspicion the cacophony fostered (see **8.Characteristics**). Yusef observed that by “choosing who to trust to save you the energy of going through all this flood of information, so you have your leader, your figures who you’d like to listen to.”

An extension of fragmentation was the second concern, polarization. Experts were commonly seen as reflecting and perpetuating the country’s ongoing political contention since “the experts themselves are also partial” (Ingy). These biases activated Yasser’s

suspicious of most experts as working in concert to dilute any truth, and for every expert that gave an honest report there would be “5, 6, 7, 10 experts falsifying information to manipulate the Egyptian public.” Experts, then, were often suspected of perverting facts to advance political agendas.

The third concern was that many experts were “experts” in name alone. Participants were wary that a media “hungry for new faces” (Khaled) did a poor job filtering out unqualified sources (see **6.Broadcast Media**) and instead put forward as experts sources with only tangential or tenuous authority. “Everyone is an ‘expert’,” remarked Khaled, a leftist and political reform expert, observing that a supposed “‘security expert’ or ‘constitutional expert’ is just a retired police officer.” This led to “too many!” (Khaled) issues to be misrepresented in the media, with “no experts to provide a theoretical framework to the issue.” Khaled gave the example of Brotherhood MP Sabry Sabah, who discussed legislative issues on television with authority conferred by his official standing: “I’m not a law expert but I studied some political sciences and I know most of what he is saying is nonsense.” This was not unique to Brotherhood-leaning stations, as “other parties do the same, bringing in whoever shouts in the square, even though they might not be able to talk logically” (Khaled). Besides misinforming the public, the media’s indiscriminate selection of experts allowed special interests to plant fake experts to promote their views among the public.

If I want to get an intellectual for the university to say what I want him to say what’s going to be the problem? [...] You’ll go on TV and say “I’m the president of the university and I have I.D.” and go on without any documents [to support his claims]. And people won’t look for documents. (Ziad)

The fourth concern was that the experts themselves lacked sufficient information to offer reliable analysis to their audiences (see **5.State Information**). Yasmine felt there was a popular perception (which she shared) that “the intellectuals are confused, they are lost, they don’t know what is true and what is untrue.” Mona, the young moderate Islamist, backed this view with the example of her economics professor who, lacking reliable data

on the current economy, confessed to her his confusion and that he did not “understand what’s happening in Egypt” despite his standing in academic and financial circles.

Faced with the glut of experts variously suspected of being biased, unqualified, or uninformed, several participants felt that many such sources enjoyed an unwarranted following. The political reform activist, Ingy, was baffled by the status of people like pro-Mubarak polemicist Tawfeek Okasha or renowned intellectual Mohamed Heikal, leading her to cynically conclude that most “Egyptians have completely different standards for judging speakers.”

To avoid falling into such misdirection, participants described methods for sorting through experts, exhibiting so-called *meta-expertise* (expertise as assessing expertise). Reaffirming the individuated approach to sources, participants relied on their familiarity with an expert’s record of supplying information and their political history. Yusef described his own reliance on an expert based on these parameters, namely performance and politics, supporting Yasmine’s observation of a “personalized media”:

I know this person is more involved than me and I trust his motives because I’ve known him for years and followed him. I know he doesn’t have ulterior motives so if he’s upset about this law it is worth considering. (Yusef)

When encountering new experts, the internet was frequently used to review their record, disclose their political stance, and establish or demolish their credibility, illustrated by Abbas:

For every single piece of information I need to know who is saying it and why. If I don’t know who is speaking on this point of view, I have to go to the internet to know this man and what he said previously and how can classify him. (Abbas)

Sherine described using social media features to examine a supposed-expert’s “timeline to see what he said in the previous days and if he is the type of person to exaggerate.”

Objective sources were sometimes sought in experts outside the local political context. In this vein, Mohamed described turning to the reports of foreign journalist: “It is very beneficial to get the opinions from the outside, and in this case a foreigner is unlikely to have a stake on the issue.” That said, a political affiliation did not necessarily disqualify an expert as a source. Given the challenge of finding neutral voices in Egypt’s current climate, Fouad pragmatically found himself following anyone “who really understands issues, regardless of whether he’s from the Brotherhood, Marxists, Liberals, anyone.” An expert’s political leanings could be anticipated without entirely contaminating the quality of information they supplied.

Nevertheless, the consistency of an expert’s position over the course of Egypt’s shifting political situation was considered an important factor in evaluations of trustworthiness. Many participants rejected experts who presented themselves as supporters of the revolutionaries if they had a history of supporting the Mubarak regime (see **6. Broadcast Media**) or had no standing prior to the revolution. Fouad was careful to follow experts who were “there before the revolution and in the time of Mubarak and didn’t change his stance.” Ibrahim Eissa, a distinguished journalist who had publically opposed Mubarak’s rule and supported the Revolution since its start, was commonly brought up as an example of such a consistent and untainted source. Since Eissa “was opposition since day one” (Abbas), this set him apart from other liberal-leaning experts who were accused of compliance with the former regime and only backing the revolution after the fact.

Another means of identifying reliable sources, despite their affiliations, was balance they demonstrated in their content. To learn about the IMF loan (Appendix 2: IMF loan), Sherine and her fellow activists relied on certain economy experts who “they tend to write articles with very specific points about what is good about the loan, what is bad, and what are our other alternatives.” As noted by Osama, a professional “should at least speak about the negative and the positive [...] but here we have either all the day criticizing or praising.” Someone able to present both sides of an issue was considered a fair source for information, demonstrating that “they are not biased, they will not say a certain opinion because this is what serves their needs or it’s closer to the party they support” (Sherine).

There was some threshold for inconsistency in an expert, however, so long as the expert still offered meaningful insights and facts. Osama admitted that with enough supporting evidence backing up a claim, he could listen to and trust even a source who contradicted himself:

I can trust people even if what he's saying are contradictions if he says something very convincing. If he says "Black is very good" and he reasons through this, then the next day he speaks for white and gives reasons for this, I can accept this from him. (Osama)

This shows that consumers were often tentative towards claims even from approved experts, yet were willing to follow capricious or otherwise imperfect sources to glean useful information. This also demonstrated that consumers' skepticism did not entirely subside when attending to a source, even an expert one regularly turned to for facts. Referring to this situation, which was traced to Egypt's legacy of authoritarianism, institutional mismanagement, and corruption, Fouad observed that as a consumer "you have to learn to be critical because there aren't any choices."

9.6 Discussion

Table 5 presents the four classes of information sources identified through the accounts of participants. The sources are differentiated according to the type of knowledge they supply (direct and experiential or indirect and remote) and their proximity to the consumer (familiar and personal or distant and impersonal). This classification places one's first-person experience as the most intimate source of information and experts as the most distant, with witnesses and contacts between the two extremes. These distinctions were not absolute, however, as several documented sources evinced hybrid attributes. Abeer preferred sources that had the familiarity of contacts as well as the direct experience of witnesses, while Sawsan relied on contacts with the formal knowledge of experts. Despite these exceptions, the table serves to highlight the dimensions of sources articulated in the accounts of participants. These findings will now be discussed against studies of everyday information practices based in the West before analyzing their local significance within Egypt's information culture (see **8.Characteristics**)

Table 5: Types of personalized sources

		Proximity	
		Personal	Impersonal
Knowledge	Direct	<i>Oneself</i>	<i>Witness</i>
	Indirect	<i>Contact</i>	<i>Expert</i>

9.6.1 Hierarchical knowledges

Though shaped by participants' local context, the accounts presented above revealed that information consumers negotiated among and between individualized, differentiated sources in a manner which conforms to earlier investigations into the everyday information practices of citizens in the West. The notion that people start to rely on the accounts of others when they reach the limits of their observable world was noted in Walter Lippmann's seminal examination of public opinion, where he remarked that "inevitably, our opinions cover a bigger space, a longer reach of time, a greater number of things, than we can directly observe. They have, therefore, to be pieced together out of what others have reported and what we can imagine" (Lippmann, 1922). Implicit in this otherwise innocuous observation, however, is the subordinate status of external sources compared to firsthand experience, which was underscored by Patrick Wilson. Like Lippmann, Wilson admitted that people "mostly depend on others for ideas, as well as for information about things outside the range of direct experience" (Wilson, 1983, p. 10), but he went on to postulate that referring to such indirect information as "second-hand experience" fittingly described both the position of the source and the relative value of the information they provided:

The phrase second hand is especially appropriate in suggesting second best, not so good as first hand; for in an obvious way, finding out by being told differs from finding out by seeing or hearing or living through an experience. (Wilson, 1983, p. 10)

While admitting that for most information needs "second best is quite good enough", in some situations such "reports are not quite satisfactory substitutes for first-hand doing

and observing,” being “thinner, more abstract, and purely verbal” compared with first-person experience (P. Wilson, 1983, p. 10). Wilson went no further into this contrast, going on to study how and why consumers ascribe authority to some secondary sources over others, focusing on formal sources. Yet subsequent empirical studies into information practices revealed a persistent reliance on firsthand information alongside the consumption of second-hand information in the course of everyday activity. In fact, studies demonstrated that information derived from first-hand experience frequently shaped consumers’ orientation to external sources, with external sources themselves distinguished according to their proximity and knowledge-base—patterns that converge with the findings from the present study. In a review synthesizing the findings from information seeking research, Harris and Dewdney (1994) noted a fundamental trend among consumers to rely primarily on personal experiences, followed by interpersonal sources, and lastly formal sources:

Studies in a variety of disciplines have repeatedly shown that when people need information to cope with problems, they frequently review their own experience first, then turn to people like themselves, including their friends and family. Institutional or formalized sources tend to be consulted as a last resort. (Harris & Dewdney, 1994, p. 24)

Drawing on the hierarchy of sources these authors described, information was found to be increasingly tendentious the more socially and epistemologically remote the source. This conclusion, supported by Harris and Dewdney’s own research into the information practices of abused women, matches the relative skepticism participants expressed (in ascending order) towards information derived from oneself, contacts, witnesses, and experts.

These patterns were identified and expounded upon in Chatman’s study of impoverished citizens, who prioritized experiential, situational knowledge by relying primarily “either on one’s own experience or on hearsay from someone else” (Chatman, 1991, p. 440). Paralleling our dichotomy of direct and indirect knowledge, Chatman made the distinction between first-level and second-level knowledge to explain these practices: first-level knowledge is knowledge *of* things the information consumer personally

experienced, while second-level knowledge is knowledge *about* phenomena outside of the consumer's personal experience and, by extension, from sources positioned outside her lived world. Chatman's participants preferred first-level information because "it conforms best to common sense" as well as the reliability and verifiability of such sources:

[T]he information is credible because the provider is trusted. Viewed from a small-world perspective, information is accepted because the source's claims can be easily researched and verified. Moreover, the sense-making activities that accompany the information occur within a context that is shaped by cultural norms and mores.
(Chatman, 1999, p. 215)

In the confined and precarious world of her participants, information was consumed according to "its need to respond to immediate concerns, its pragmatism, its focus on concrete situations and its reliance upon first-level experience" (Chatman, 1991, p. 440). Meanwhile, second-level information "received from outsiders is suspected and often ignored because this type [of] information is not compatible with the common sense reality of the small world" (Savolainen, 2009b, p. 1783). Consumers, then, distinguished between insiders and outsiders to prioritize sources and decide what to consume and what to avoid. This was corroborated by Savolainen's study of environmental activists. While the environmentalists were more accepting of remote sources (e.g., media outlets) than Chatman's participants, they also depended primarily on familiar and personal sources through "thematically focused sources provided by organizations such as environmental associations" (Savolainen, 2008a, p. 164). According to Savolainen, his participants reproduced the first-level knowledge world of Chatman's participants as "these associations and their subgroups formed by like-minded people [...] because they tend to put more faith in 'firsthand knowledge' produced within this world than in 'secondhand knowledge' provided by outsiders" (Savolainen, 2008a, p. 164).

With consumers favoring direct knowledge of issues and the importance of sources one could identify with, these outside studies corroborate the accounts of the participants. If mediated claims in Egypt were suspect (see **6.Broadcast Media**) it is unsurprising that

first-hand experience and personal sources were seen as the fundamental means of asserting truth and arriving at facts. The trust one had for contacts was due, naturally, to their familiarity with the source. Witnesses, on the other hand, while not usually intimately familiar, tended to be casual observers to events, exhibiting a genuine ordinariness that the average consumer could identify with and whose descriptive testimony could be assumed that of a disinterested party. As noted by Harris and Dewdney, the interpersonal sources consumers turned to tended to be similar types of people; consumers were more likely to identify with a bystander than a pundit or official. Furthermore, whether gleaned firsthand or second-hand through a witness, direct knowledge based on immediate observation of the phenomenon in question seemed to offer empirical facts rather than opinion, deduction, or supposition. Essentially, experientially-based information created less room for ambiguity than the complex, selective, deductive, or associative information experts marshalled when informing the public. Experiential, eye-witness knowledge seemed plain and ingenuous.

In contrast to a witness recounting specific, tangible events, then, the information provided by experts seemed more tendentious, with the source's particular analyses and reasoning susceptible to bias, omission, or misinformation. Experts were both remote from the events in question and the consumer, and this made them subjects of heavy scrutiny. Yet experts were undeniably crucial to explaining complex phenomena, providing crucial background, contextualizing circulating claims, analyzing contemporary circumstances, and exploring long-term consequences. Already we have noted that first-hand experience would severely restrict the range of one's information, as even adding a limited network of personal contacts and testimonies of witnesses would only expand this knowledge-base marginally. So while second-level knowledge was not rejected entirely, it was negotiated carefully, as observed in Savolainen's study, into the first-level knowledge world of the consumer. Reinforcing Wilson's description of formal information sources occupying specific spheres of authority (P. Wilson, 1983), participants were highly conscious of the field each expert they consulted occupied, whether in security issues, economic issues, constitutional issues, and so on. Sorting through these respective fields' experts, as well as copious pseudo-experts, required examining both a source's political and intellectual credibility. This corroborates studies

of communication that found a source's affiliation and expertise were important factors in his persuasiveness (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953; Meyer, 1988). The records of experts, subject to detailed review, were crucial in establishing their trustworthiness.

9.6.2 Conceptualizing sources

Despite similarities to outside studies, the approach to sources described by participants remained highly contextual, reflecting the information culture they moved within (**8.Characteristics**), with mistrust, skepticism, ingenuity, affiliation, and elitism exhibited in the characterization and negotiation of information sources. The characterization of sources as classes of individuals rather than media outlets, for example, demonstrated the granular trust necessitated by the failure of information institutions and the suspicion they fostered. While the data presented in earlier chapters showed that platforms and organizations were frequently mentioned in the interviews with participants, a closer examination of the descriptions of sources revealed that consumers were more refined when discriminating among information providers. Instead of conceptualizing sources at the level of government offices, Al-Jazeera, or Twitter, *who* was speaking was more important than *where* they were speaking. In many cases, participants described attending to individuals irrespective of the medium or programme airing them. This follows up on themes of personalized trust (**7.Social Media** and **8.Characteristics**). Channels, newspapers, parties, or offices being the basis of information consumption, were largely seen as vehicles for particular people who were information sources on their own individual personal merit. Sources and vehicles of information were thereby detached from one another, as neither were seen as representative of the informational quality of the other. Without reliable *agencies* provisioning information, participants discriminated more carefully between sources at the level of individuated *agents* of information. This suggests, in a contentious information culture, that an information agency (an organization, network, community) and information agent (a specific person within or outside an agency) are treated as dissociated entities. In short, trust was not associative, as sources were evaluated according to individual traits, such as their political background and knowledge-base. Consumers shouldered the onus of assessing experts because agencies (e.g., media

outlets) failed to function as reliable gatekeepers filtering credible experts, leaving it to citizens to independently evaluate expertise. Besides the shortcomings of the media, this mistrust was further validated by the legacy of authoritarianism, under which special interests frequently co-opted formal knowledge producers to present partial information favorable to particular stakeholders (Hudson, 2005; UNDP, 2003). So while the suspicion of indirect, impersonal sources did not mean citizens abstained from consuming news, it did mean that the choice of experts one attended to varied wildly. One implication of this reality for public discourse was that while there may be consensus regarding tangible, immediate real-world events, knowledge of more complex issues—economic development, constitutional debates—would be mired in rival knowledge communities.

Understanding this approach to sources is important for research into information and media consumption. Explanations of audience behaviours tend to rely on various designates of credibility: media credibility, source credibility (institutional or individual), message credibility, technology credibility, and distributed credibility (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000; Metzger, Flanagin, Eyal, Lemus, & McCann, 2003; Rieh & Danielson, 2007; Savolainen, 2008a). The findings presented here suggest that both sources and messages are the primary operative dimensions, with the sources being individuated and personalized rather than institutionally defined. Distributed credibility, through online or offline interpersonal contacts, is also influential as social networks assessed and proffered sources. Abbas, Yusef, and Sherine, who represented a younger, wired, and privileged generation that became emblematic of the Revolution, felt that access to the internet enabled more nuanced information gathering for those skilled enough to take advantage of it. Social media especially became a useful means of soliciting sources that were either witnesses or personal contacts (see **7.Social Media**). But for the rest of Egyptian society impersonal sources came through a partisan mass media where audiences were channeled according to allegiances (see **6.Broadcast Media** and **8.Characteristics**). Yasmine, who did not enjoy her daughter's first-hand experiences of political events nor her (online and offline) community of activists, was left "to listen to contradictory facts and evidence [...] coming through media." The findings here go beyond a dichotomy of "traditional-versus-new-media" by exploring the individualized sources that underpin these mediums.

Participants' accounts of sources were rarely confined to a particular medium, programme, or station, suggesting that any investigations into information practices or media consumption which operationalize sources according to channels (Al-Jazeera, CBC, Al-Ahram), genre (talk shows, news broadcasts, newspaper column), show (*The Opposite Direction, End of the Day, Talk*), or medium (internet, radio) would obscure the mechanisms of selection and negotiation taking place within such an information culture. This reinforces the argument of Marsh and Dibben (2005) that trust across different units of analysis—political system, organization, culture, environment, society, equipment—can all be considered “attempts at reducing the complexity of interpersonal trust,” defined as the trust between people. In Egypt's information culture, such a reductive approach to trust loses important insights into how judgments are made. The authors consider the lack of analytical distinction sacrifices accuracy for facility: “Trust resides in one individual and is something to which that individual alone has direct access. It requires another individual as a stimulus” (Marsh & Dibben, 2005, p. 476). This is also supported by Wathen and Burkell (2002) who observed the myriad of overlapping concepts—trust, believability, credibility— which related information consumption to the inherent quality of an organization, object, person, or message, and responded by positing that quality was essentially a subjective judgment by a consumer. What the present study shows is that within a mistrustful and skeptical information culture, the subjective notion of a source contracts to the level of an individual, allowing for a more versatile negotiation of information at more refined and variegated attributes such as proximity, knowledge type, allegiance, performance record, and familiarity.

Furthermore, the accounts of participants also demonstrated that even information from one's chosen sources—whether contacts or experts—were still only cautiously received. As we saw, even claims from accepted sources were not necessarily adopted whole-cloth. Faced with the systemic scarcity of entirely reliable sources in Egypt's information ecosystem, the skeptical consumers exhibited a tolerance for sources perceived as somewhat deficient information providers. After acquiring information from sources, then, consumers went on to process and parse information develop a more credible and complete understanding of issues (for more see **10.Tactics**).

9.6.3 Sources of the information culture

While the individualization of and differentiation among sources revealed the suspicion and skepticism of participants, one can also note the ingenuity characteristic of Egypt's information culture. Recourse to what is *in plain sight* (*roya't al-'ayn*) as the ultimate arbiter not only shows an underlying wariness of mediated sources of information but also demonstrates people's resourcefulness in distilling information from their immediate environment: looking at grocery prices to learn about the economy, black-outs and fuel lines to learn about the energy supply, and minor abuses of power to learn about the character of a regime. In the case of Egypt, such amateur induction was not simply seen as a survival mechanism but as also an indelible part of the Egyptian identity, for good or for ill. This resourcefulness was also demonstrated in the reliance on contacts, with Egyptians mobilizing (or cultivating) interpersonal relationships for new informational purposes.

The findings also demonstrated that the current information culture was an historical phenomenon, emerging against the backdrop of political change (alongside the well-documented transformations to Egypt's media landscape). Several participants noted the increased willingness of people to stand as sources, whether as witnesses or contacts, and receptivity of a curious and engaged public. The contrast between Abeer forcing information on the one hand and Noha and Sawsan on the other is illustrative. It highlights the different periods, with Abeer's incident set in the early days of the Uprising and Noha's in its aftermath. Whereas Abeer offered herself as a contact to challenge her audience's preconceptions, Noha and Sawsan described themselves as actively solicited for any information they could provide. In this fashion, one might observe, and many participants did, increased expressions of skepticism, mistrust, and ingenuity among Egypt's consuming public since the Uprising (see **8.Characteristics**).

Yet one must hold back from overstating the trajectory of these social transformations, as several problematic assumptions underpinned the accounts presented. For one, the emphasis on oneself and one's contacts for information, as well as the sophisticated means of negotiating impersonal sources, placed a great deal of personal responsibility on the individual information consumer; by extension, the blame for being "misinformed"

became a personal failure. Relying on first-hand knowledge to confirm truths reflects how contentious situations shift the burden of “knowing” onto the individual, while also fostering the optimistic notion that truths will be self-evident in spite of any regime or outlet’s attempt at misdirection. The discourse surrounding these new civic duties, and how the population undertook them, also reproduced Egypt’s class structures through the differentiated reliance on sources.

Frequent references were made to low income Egyptians suddenly seeking out information with their newfound political consciousness, but also their reliance on personal experience without fully engaging with complex, remote sources. Given their precious standing compared to more privileged citizens, the experiential knowledge of Egypt’s marginalized populations was acknowledged to afford them greater insight into some topics, such as the country’s economic conditions or state corruption. But despite such sympathetic portrayals of class difference, most accounts reinforced a social stratification whereby complex knowledge was monopolized by wealthier segments of the public, who enjoyed the education, time, and access to pursue more varied sources of information. Furthermore, the primary reliance of poorer Egyptians on first-hand information supposedly made them vulnerable to inappropriate extrapolations from immediate experience; for instance, attributing declining living conditions to a Brotherhood plot to destroy the county. Without a sophisticated understanding to contextualize their experiences, marginalized citizens were seen as reactionary and volatile mobs, swayed by demagoguery and fueling Egypt’s escalating political polarization.

Chapter 10 - Tactics for Processing Information

10.1 Introduction

Egypt's information culture was not only exhibited in how citizens approached information providers (**9.Sources**) beyond the initial point of consumption, but also in how they subsequently processed the texts supplied. As observed in the previous chapter (**9.Sources**), consumers simultaneously negotiated a myriad of information suppliers, all the while remaining skeptical and mistrustful of even accepted sources. People did not immediately receive claims as either completely true or false but inferred and conjectured their way to truth across a range of claims in a show of suspicion, skepticism, and inventiveness. Phrased differently, information was not only actively *consumed*, but also actively *digested*.

Coping with content of varying quality and from different perspectives, participants described undertaking a range of activities in order to become informed, including identifying attempts at misdirection, discovering hidden meanings, and authenticating claims made. Due to their strategic, militant, and confrontational tone, these coordinated activities are referred to as *tactics*. A tactic is a planned action or method used to achieve an end, especially against an opposing force; yet the term is also appropriate here for its military connotation of infantry maneuvers and arrangements, which in regards to the present practice is reflected in how sources were repositioned, marshalled, and juxtaposed to create a coherent and satisfying sense of reality (Barber, 2004; OED, 2014).

Two tactics were identified in participants' accounts: *reading between the lines* (RBTL) and *piecing things together* (PTT). RBTL refers to the practice of finding and inferring hidden meanings or intentions behind the explicit content of any text (Ayto, 2010; Cambridge, 2003b; Spears, 2005b) while PTT involves assembling and integrating the claims from various (and often incongruent) texts to construct a complete, meaningful, and accurate picture of an issue (Cambridge, 2003a; Spears, 2005a). Both tactics operate at different levels, with RBTL applied at the scope of specific texts and specific sources while PTT assembled claims from across many sources concurrently; loosely put, the

former compensates for manipulation of information and the latter its incompleteness. This chapter focuses on these two tactics because they were the most explicit tactics participants independently identified using, even referring to them by name (as opposed to more implicit practices for processing information, such as conspiracy theorizing). Taken together, RBTL and PTT illustrate citizens struggling to inform themselves amid a plethora of sources of mixed reliability, employing both tactics simultaneously and continuously. This complementary deployment of RBTL and PTT is seen in the professed practices of the journalist, Mohamed:

I also read a lot, never from a single source. I will read the same matter from several sources, read between the lines, takes parts of each source, which I also assess according to my sense, experience, and my perspective. (Mohamed)

Beyond describing the key behaviours constituting Egypt's information culture (and by implication, citizens' responses to the information ecosystem) these tactics also demonstrate how consuming news was more involved than accessing sources—the common focus of attention in the field of LIS (Savolainen, 2009b). As complex interactions with dubious texts, RBTL and PTT present counterpoints to general prescriptions (i.e., information literacy) of how claims ought to be evaluated and consumed. These tactics invite us to explore other ways of framing information practices in context; these ideas are further examined in the later discussion.

10.2 Reading between the lines (RBTL)

“Reading between the lines” was a phrase repeatedly used by participants. The tactic was described as part of the Egyptian character, cultivated by decades of authoritarian rule and propaganda: “Every Egyptian reads or hears between the lines, we always have, because of that legacy” (Thoraya). Lotfy, the Marxist intellectual, highlighted Egypt's defeat at the hands of Israel in 1967 as the turning point “which made us realize we were living a fantasy,” when opposition and suspicion towards authorities began and—according to the liberal professor, Thoraya—the media by extension. This led Hisham, the leftist activists, to describe Egyptians as naturally suspicious of media, which they “read with a critical mind” and “don't believe right away,” as might be exemplified by

the scholar Naveen, who read both privately-owned Al-Masry Al-Youm and the state-run Al-Ahram despite seeing both printing the “same bullshit” (Naveen). Inferring hidden meanings was an expression of people’s wariness towards sources, identified as agents or agencies with their own agendas couched within the content they supplied, inquiring into the goals of sources and anticipating attempts at manipulation. This suspicion was expressed by the revolutionary, Abeer: “Every now and then, some stories come out—probably to serve some purpose.”

One example of this tactic being used was in reaction to the liberal media broadcasts of recordings purportedly between Hamas and Brothers leaked from Egyptian intelligence. Supposedly, the conversations implicated the Brotherhood in the attacks on revolutionaries during the 2011 Uprising (Appendix 2: Killed revolutionaries). Rather than take the document on face value, several revolutionaries instead interpreted the recordings and affiliated reports as part of a false-flag operation by Egypt’s security apparatus for the purpose of exonerating their culpability for the deaths of protestors and shifting the blame onto the Brotherhood. The revolutionary, Sherine, expressed frustration with her parents for failing to see the hidden goals served by such claims:

We are being distracted! As if the Interior Ministry is totally innocent. They didn’t do anything, didn’t kill anyone. Meanwhile we have a thousand people killed and we’re losing focus from that. We’re only talking about MB and Hamas. (Sherine)

Without RBTL consumers would credulously believe whatever claims they were exposed to, taken at face-value without considering their source or their consequences. Instead the tactic of RBTL allowed citizens to decipher the interests of the factions producing content within a context of contention.

For many participants, reading between the lines meant excavating the hidden intentions of media masquerading as legitimate sources. The private channels Abeer watched, branding themselves as pro-Revolution agencies following the ouster of Mubarak, gave the impression of serving the public while subtly promulgating the interests of its business elite owners (see **6.Broadcast Media**).

You are the media channel that is “with the people” and you understand their demands, and you say whatever you want to say between the lines. This happened a lot and it’s happening right now. (Abeer)

RBTL allowed one to cope with contradictions and omissions that arose from partisan reporting. The pro-Brotherhood Osama, remarked that the liberal media coverage to the judicial authority law (Appendix 2: Judicial authority) fanned concerns of *Brotherhood-ization*, a term used to refer to the Brotherhood assimilating institutions such as the judiciary:

Why are you calling the Brotherhood-ization? That the judges are becoming Brotherhood-ized, will be replaced with Brothers? Even so, do you think a Brother is not Egyptian? That he comes from the sky? The way the issue is exaggerated: “They’re making the government Brotherhood!” What are the criteria you are using? This is something very stupid. If you listen to this, you are more stupid than the speaker. (Osama)

Osama similarly noted omissions in the coverage of the state’s issuance of Islamic Bonds (Appendix 2: Islamic bonds), where some speculated that national monuments such as downtown Cairo’s Al-Jazeera Tower would be sold to Qatari investors, failing to mention the landmark had already been leased out to foreign investors: “the media is silent on this, that Mubarak had been leasing it [the tower] to some Lebanese people for 30 years.” Reading into such omissions, insinuations, and contradictions led Osama to discover a hidden agenda: an attack against religion on the part of the opposition and secular media, under the guise of opposing the Muslim Brotherhood.

Whatever is against Islam, the liberals support. They make unified front against this [government] because it is an Islamic project. They cannot dare to say this, and for this made a cloak. They claim to be against the Brotherhood. (Osama)

Clearly, reading between the lines allowed consumers to anticipate, and thereby attenuate, attempts at manipulation. It was between the lines that players and their

intentions were revealed, and these intentions were often sought out among the circulating claims. Parsing subtext was seen as essential to identifying the hidden intentions behind claims and messages—especially given the mistrust for the sources of origin. Noha, the Nasserist, claimed that even the wording could betray a report: “You notice from the wording of some news it isn’t genuine or isn’t expressing any actual ideas.” Thoraya’s incredulous response to claims of a Hamas-Brotherhood connection also had to do with the way the story was presented, where the sources of the story were vague: “Where did you get your information from? If I look at a story and I don’t know the sources or it’s anonymous, I just glaze over and switch off. [...] I seriously will not even read through an article like that unless I can see real names.”

Yet information was rarely rejected as entirely baseless. This was indeed the stance taken by Hisham who, despite judging most news as sensationalistic, asserted that it was “never groundless—maybe only in 5% [of the news] there is no basis at all.” Over time as one became familiar with the various sources “you develop a technique of reading each one” (Hisham). Many participants observed how sources in Egypt practiced “mixing lies with truth” (Abbas) in order to operate effectively and convincingly, requiring the discriminating analyses that RBTL permitted. Abeer exercised RBTL in the course of her everyday news consumption. While she read local papers and watched talk-shows she was adamant that one could not rely upon them in an absolute binary of credulity: “It’s not that you trust or you don’t trust—you read between the lines all the time” (Abeer). Harboring suspicions of sources yet still finding them potentially informative, citizens read between the lines to become informed.

Reading between the lines had another important implication: that misinformation was informative. Documents and texts whose surface content is dismissed as false or redundant could nevertheless have merit in the hidden meaning they disclose irrespective of the communicators’ original intent. In this way, to read between the lines is a means by which audiences appropriate or distill meaningful “facts” from texts. Thoraya recounted her early practice of such sub-textual reading as a child, when warnings of “summer diarrhea” outbreaks were decoded as a cholera epidemic which her family prepared for accordingly. This explained how several participants subscribed to news from sources

they ideologically opposed. Thoraya claimed that Egyptians frequently (though mistrustfully) monitored the discourse from rival parties, just as she followed news on the Brotherhood's semi-official website *IkhwanWeb*: "I would say in Egypt at large people are watching the other camp just to see what the other camp is saying." Yusef counterintuitively subscribed to many pro-Brotherhood pages on Facebook to gain insight into the Morsi government. The young revolutionary and media practitioner found it especially informative to observe responses in the Islamist online community: "if it is something they are ashamed of something, something they are trying to cover-up, you can really see it in their reaction." Even the kind of information circulating on these networks could be suggestive. For example, if he saw Brotherhood social media recirculating news on the same issues he was following, Yusef would instantly become suspicious and begin asking himself "Why are they making propaganda about the same thing I'm worried about? Something must be wrong." Thoraya observed that this tactic of inferential reading emerged from Egypt's "culture of distrust", allowing citizens to continue consuming and decoding information from the state or the media despite their incredulity:

If the government is telling them something is happening, it's not. Or sometimes the government tells the truth, but nobody believes it. It's [...] processing information but built upon a culture of distrust. Distrusting your government, and therefore you distrust your media. They say they're fed up, or blaming the messenger, but they're not shutting it off. (Thoraya)

Despite the supposed prevalence of RBTL among participants, with some even considering it a national trait, several claimed the tactic was an exceptional practice. Those holding this view saw only a small segment of the population having the skill, interest, or drive to be so tactical in their information consumption. Instead, most of the public credulously consumed everything they come across; as the liberal senior Yasmine stated, "the majority of the people just hear one thing and are convinced by it" without any further decoding or critical reflection. Only by deploying RBTL could the production and dissemination of information be treated as an action laden with goals, intentions, effects, and consequences.

10.3 Piecing things together (PTT)

Whereas *reading between the lines* allowed the claims of sources to be understood through their text, subtext, and context, *piecing things together* (PTT) allowed people to use texts from across a range of sources to construct a comprehensive and balanced picture of the issues and knowledge of the world around them. As the pro-military Sonya observed, faced with “missing facts”, “no transparency”, and “no trust in anyone”, citizens were left to rely on variety and ingenuity to become informed: “So we get our information from many sources. It is up to your intelligence and your education to judge.” As Sherine noted, despite the improved assortment of media available to them, it still fell upon the citizen to compare among sources to confirm information:

We have some that are better than others, but we don't have a reliable source of news. That's why we rely on ourselves to try to verify. You look for someone near to the place where the event happened. Or you try read the news from more than one agency and go to the website of the party involved to see if they have an official statement.
(Sherine)

Ingy, the reform activist, described moving successively from news on Facebook to broadcast media and other online outlets in developing her understanding, not trusting any of these outlets exclusively: “I take the information from the Facebook at first, then I try to search Google for things that appeared on Facebook, the news, and so on. I think most of the news is not accurate, even on Facebook.” The metaphor of a puzzle was used by Abeer to encapsulate this tactical approach, where information was sorted through across a swath of sources:

Some people speak, but they tell you stories. You have to put the puzzle together. If it doesn't match, you have to take out the piece that doesn't match and throw it away. (Abeer)

No single source, then, offered a complete picture of an issue but, rather, fragments of said picture. PTT treated the content from sources as pieces, sifted through for only those pieces which fit the larger image a consumer was constructing. “You can listen to someone,” Mona, a member the moderate Islamist Egypt Party, remarked, “but just take

the pieces you want from his speech and connect things together to get your analysis at the end.” Consider how several participants treated the claims of Amr Hamzaway, a celebrity pundit and critic of the Morsi government. “His personal opinions are always against the Islamists,” noted Ziad, himself an Islamist as a member of the Brotherhood, “But when he’s explaining an issue or discussing documents, I take from him sources that I can then look for myself on the internet.” Fouad gave a similar reaction to Hamzawy, who he listened to “for his analysis, but not his opinions.” These examples also serve to illustrate how interconnected the tactics of RBTL and PTT were.

It would be a mistake to simply interpret this as a means of verifying or falsifying information, though that was part of the process. Piecing together, as emphasized by Abeer and others, was not a means of distinguishing true claims from false claims so much as amalgamating many imperfect claims from multiple sources simultaneously, with incongruent reports set aside, to arrive at a more complete representation of events. Ingy stressed the need to triangulate upon the truth from several sources and various types of sources. “I review several outlets to confirm any facts,” She said, “and even then I have my doubts.” She would scan local newspapers, academic journals, books, the internet, and international media, “then I have to analyze all this together.” Ingy repeatedly emphasized that she “must use more than one source” because all sources and stories were questionable:

You can be sure that the truth, the whole truth, isn't anywhere among what is said. No one has all the facts. There always is something missing, something hidden by someone. This happens in lots of things. (Ingy)

Noha concurred, observing that “to establish facts, you have to get other perspectives.” Some blamed this incompleteness of any particular source on the widespread partisanship permeating Egypt’s information ecosystem (see **6. Broadcast Media**), where the complete story could only be deduced by reconciling facts from opposing narratives. Osama claimed that Egyptians were “in the middle of huge, lying media, pro-Morsi or anti-Morsi,” with neither faction presenting the full story, and as such “the truth is in-between” these conflicting reports. Mohamed agreed with these sentiments, noting that

“to see clearly the truth, you have read from the furthest rights, the furthest left, and to the middle. [...] This gives you balance, allowing you to patiently and rationally understand the issue.” Ingy observed that most Egyptians were keeping informed while avoiding personal involvement in the political fray by “trying to hear all points of view and make their own perception.” Taking a somewhat different approach, the experienced activist and revolutionary, Abbas, described practicing PTT not as balancing out competing political viewpoints (Islamist and secular) but as balancing out superficial and generic mainstream coverage with more critical alternative coverage, relying as he did on social media especially to learn “the things behind the things” covered in general and official news stories. It was in this fashion that he connected news on the prosecution of foreign NGOs (mainstream information) with weapons negotiations between the state and US manufacturers (non-mainstream information).

Beyond subverting biases, the tactic of piecing things together allowed citizens to cope with uncertainty. While the overload of sources risked exhausting and alienating consumers, patching together different accounts allowed the emerging ambiguity to be contained, as converging facts were emphasized and inconsistencies were pushed into the background. For instance, Noha recalled vastly different numbers reported on Egypt’s military activity in the Sinai Peninsula (see Appendix 2: Sinai soldiers):

You will find in one article that about 100 armored cars went to Sinai, another paper claiming 200,000 armored cars went to Sinai, and another claiming that basic army units appeared in Sinai. So [...] you know that there are cars and you can just ignore the numbers.

Noha contented herself with the gist of an issue—a military contingent had been sent to the troubled area—and set aside the vacillating details of the case. PTT, then, made it possible to circumscribe certainties and uncertainties, with the uncertainties being consciously neglected and kept from tainting the overall integrity of the report. Osama made similar use of this tactic to resolve the controversy surrounding President Morsi’s visit to Sudan, where the issue of Egypt’s disputed territories of Shalateen and Halayeb arose.

If you go to [the Brotherhood-founded TV channel] Misr25 they will say he never spoke about Shalateen and Halayeb in Sudan. The others insist that, no, he offered to give Shalateen and Halayeb back to Sudan. I make my own facts: when he was in Sudan, he said he would talk about this issue, maybe go to arbitration to find some solution for Shalateen. But he cannot offer to give them Shalateen and Halayeb, and he cannot go to them while they are worried about the issue and not speak about it at all. (Osama)

Osama created his understanding of Morsi's visit by reconciling the conflicting accounts and injecting his own independent reasoning.

Sonya and Mohamed provided other examples of PTT used to merge diverse claims to ascertain the Brotherhood's role during the 2011 Uprising (Appendix 2: Prison break). Sonya concluded that the Brotherhood orchestrated their rise to power with Hamas by piecing together information "from television and the oppositional newspapers", "from the people in politics and economics who appeared and explained the politics to us", from her own knowledge of the Brotherhood's history as an international organization, from the testimony of "an officer who came out on television saying that he witnessed the prisons that were opened up by Hamas", and from the account of a personal acquaintance who spoke with one of the freed inmates from the prison attacks. For his part, Mohamed drew on a Dutch reporter's accounts of witnessing men on the rooftops of buildings surrounding Tahrir Square during the Revolution, which Mohamed personally inferred must have been Brotherhood agents sniping at the revolutionaries (Appendix 2: Killed revolutionaries): "He witnessed Muslim Brothers moving around rooftops; though he didn't realize it, I figured it out."

Mohamed's example also demonstrates that international media were important sources of informational fragments for several participants. Noha followed coverage in British and Saudi-based news networks (BBC and Al-Arabiya) but once again admitted these outlets were "no more trustworthy" than their local counterparts. They were nevertheless valued for offering "just different points of view."

It doesn't mean that everything CNN says I believe and these others [domestic media] are liars. No. But you discover things from different points of view. It is not taking from this one or that one. No, it is a matter of finding commonalities you can figure out yourself. That's it.
(Noha)

Social media was another popular resource for assembling a comprehensive picture of events. Yusef employed it for “getting opinions from different people” in order to stay informed. Abbas consumed online news from both broadcast media outlets and his social networks, “comparing the news coming from the different newspapers and from our friends or followers or people we are following who are in the place of the accident or incident.” Osama, who was “very active on Facebook,” described it as a useful for platform for gathering a “good diversity of news” and accessing “to videos from both sides.”

Whether online or offline, one’s immediate acquaintances played a prominent role in how she pieced a story together, by sharing facts and analyses. In the post-Uprising period—where “everyone is following everything and everyone has a theory about something” (Hassan, the reporter) and “people are talking about every single issue [...and] have a very high level of discussion on politics and political affairs” (Abbas)—many citizens relied on personal acquaintances to orient themselves more so than formal and remote sources (**9.Sources**). Yusef observed that most citizens received information from both sides, as noted above by others, but that they “ultimately make their opinion through word-of-mouth and what the general public is leaning toward” (Yusef). He described a process of people coping with information by “feeling their way through the news from talking with people” like friends and family, but also casual acquaintances (on buses, in taxis, or at coffee shops) to arrive at a sense of “how the public feels, how the general country feels.”

They hear about something on TV, the first thing they do is tell it to someone else and they both reflect on what it could be, try to deduce something. Then even if they come up with different scenarios or interpretations, they look for a third

person to choose a side. Then all three of them take that side. (Yusef)

Yusef compared this plebeian approach of processing information to a spectator having watched a play and, not knowing what to make of the performance, then standing among the audience exiting the theatre and overhearing the opinions of others:

Then you kind of agree with some of them and decide that is how you feel as well: “Ah, you’re right! It was a bit boring in the end” or “Ah, you’re right. The costumes were a bit tacky.” (Yusef)

As with RBTL, PTT was considered a tactic underemployed by most of the population. Essentially, while Egyptians no longer lived in a controlled media sphere—“there is no such thing as ‘directed’ media anymore [...] because with a button on my iPhone I can get whatever I want if I don’t like it” (Noha)—it fell upon citizens to recognize the limits of most content and to consume accordingly. Sherine observed that even Egyptians with access to the internet, which was a crucial tool for PTT, preferred uncritically consuming along party lines, whether pro-Brother or anti-Brotherhood, without any further tactical engagement:

Some people who have access to the internet but don’t do this, either because they are too lazy to do it or because they want to believe what they hear. They just want to believe everything their party says [...] and everything the [opponent] says is wrong or not right. (Sherine)

Ingy similarly noted how amid the diversity of information “it’s easy to chase after any fact that corroborates our criticisms, even if it isn’t logical, just as long as it matches our criticisms, and in this way public opinion can be misinformed.” Such targeted misinformation “gets circulated and [sways] anyone who is not sufficiently informed and thoughtful—and this is much of the Egyptian public” (Ingy). Hisham had a different interpretation, seeing Egyptians as inherently skeptical but consciously choosing to consume according to their biases, opting to “glom onto false news because [they] want to glom onto it.” PTT, then, could be used to reinforce the characteristic of biases among consumers (**8.Characteristicss**). But otherwise applied to defuse partisanship instead of

reproducing it, PTT was recognized as an exhaustive process, what with attending to multiple, contending sources, picking through them for acceptable facts, and independently assembling them into a coherent picture. Several participants considered most Egyptians too lazy, busy, suggestable, or disinterested to fully employ this tactic, stating that only the activists, intellectuals, and other politically-engaged citizens who were so reflective, systematic, and involved: “Those who are comparing are mainly those who are interested in political affairs” (Abbas).

10.4 Discussion

This chapter’s findings are perhaps the most emphatic proof of information’s contentiousness in Egypt’s contemporary environment. It documents the lengths to which citizens went in order to become informed regarding current events, revealing two levels where consumers simultaneously enacted this struggle: by reading between the lines (RBTL) consumers analyzed individual texts to disassemble their component facts, manipulations, and intentions; by piecing things together (PTT) consumers assimilated various partial and competing texts representing a subject in order to develop complete, coherent, and consolidated knowledge of it. Together, RBTL and PTT formed a complementary set of tactics whereby the consumer moved between different levels and layers of information with the objectives of becoming informed and, conversely, avoid becoming misinformed. Given their aims, RBTL and PTT may be considered the local information culture’s indigenous form of *information literacy*, a modern, universal skill set “to find, evaluate, and use information effectively to solve a particular problem or make a decision” (American Library Association, 1989, para. 19). Yet the general and abstract framework of information literacy serves better as a point of contrast to articulate the significance of these tactics, the social context they reflect, and their implications for the study of information practices in real-world settings.

10.4.1 Revisiting information literacy

Information literacy has been defined as the ability to “reliably detect biases, to discern fact from nonfact and information from noninformation, and to be able to choose only high-quality and respected information sources for use” (Tuominen et al., 2005, p. 335).

Underlying information literacy is a prescriptive, black-and-white view of sources and texts:

The binary logic of information acceptance and rejection is represented, for example, by the standard of drawing a strict line between “scholarly and disinterested information” and “biased information.” (Tuominen et al., 2005, p. 335)

Observers of contemporary Arab media often see the information landscape through this same “binary logic” without explicitly mentioning information literacy. In Alterman’s seminal report on the Middle East’s transforming media landscape, he observed that in “an Arab world awash in information of all kinds, individuals are called on to evaluate data countless times in a single day” (1998, p. 60) placing an “increased premium on their ability to sort through that information and separate the important and meaningful from the scurrilous or irrelevant” (1998, p. 59). In other words, information literacy is a basic survival skill that modern Arab citizens must cultivate to sift the good from the bad in the new communication era they found themselves in.

But how useful is this binary for interpreting people’s everyday processes of negotiating information in their natural environment? Some have suggested that in the contemporary digital and networked culture, distinguishing information on the criteria of “good” and “bad” is an outdated paradigm of the age of print (Dervin, 1983; Tuominen et al., 2005). Yet the case of Egypt suggests the binary is problematic for reasons that have less to do with advances in information consuming and sharing capacities than the historical formation of the information ecosystem, rife with politicization, polarization, competition (economic or political), and unprofessionalism, which citizens respond to through their courses of action. RBTL and PTT show that in such a milieu, the notion of information becomes more layered (RBTL) and diffused (PTT) than the binary of “good/factual” and “bad/nonfactual” would allow, as sources and texts largely fell in a grey area between these extremes. Instead of such a Manichean discrimination of sources, rendering absolutist verdicts on their authority and reliability, participants consumed broadly but interpreted selectively.

Previous chapters already demonstrated that accepted sources were tentatively consumed with residual wariness (**8.Characteristics; 9.Sources**); RBTL and PTT demonstrate how selectively and consciously the claims of such sources were negotiated, a phenomenon referred to as “differentiated trust” by Fandy (Fandy, 2000, 2007). Fandy illustrated differentiated trust in a Syrian woman’s feelings on fellow Syrian and famed Al-Jazeera talk-show host, Faisal Al-Qasim:

Sometimes I trust him but most of the time I don't. For he is a Ba'thist and also a minority Druze. When he sings the praise of the Ba'th of Syria, I know he is lying, when he is critical of some Syrian practices, I also know he is lying
(Fandy, 2007, p. 134)

The woman’s statements regarding Al-Qasim echoes the RBTL employed by participants, who identified a source’s biases and flagged corresponding claims without definitively accepting or dismissing him. Perhaps this tolerance for suspect sources is best grasped in the thoughts of Ender from Orson Scott Card’s sci-fi novel, *Ender’s Game*, as a nurse promises the young prodigy a treatment will be painless:

It was a lie, of course, that it wouldn't hurt a bit. But since adults always said it when it was going to hurt, he could count on that statement as an accurate prediction of the future. Sometimes lies were more dependable than the truth.

Mistrust of sources attenuated fears of deception by imposing a sense of consistency in the source and confidence in the consumer’s capacity to anticipate lies or exaggeration. Whether a source of information was entirely trusted for their impartiality or comprehensiveness, then, was irrelevant—which was just as well, given the paucity of reliable sources in Egypt’s information ecosystem. Instantiating people’s mistrust and prejudice (see **8.Characteristics**), the tactics of RBTL and PTT demonstrate how consumers viewed sources as goal-driven agents and agencies, motivated to use their status of information sources to insert their own agendas for an intended audience. But so long as misinformation was understood as such it could serve numerous purposes, such as a sign of the source’s allegiances, as insight into the understanding of opposing factions,

as chafe peeled from kernels of truth, and as signifiers of an issue's importance. Questionable content could therefore be rendered meaningful rather than simply rejected, which would otherwise leave little to be consumed at all. The propaganda which Yusef witnessed circulating among Brotherhood supporters online, for instance, was interpreted by him as an attempt at hijacking public discourse and alerted him to revisit a specific news topic. Put in another way, in a world where the information ecosystem is systematically tainted with partisanship and manipulations, the knowledgeable citizen was proficient both in information and misinformation. This is opposed to the standard notion of information literacy which pursues "good information" and avoids "poor information". With most sources occupying a grey-zone between these poles, consumers made do with what was available by employing the appropriate tactic to learn what could be learned. RBTL and PTT show that facts, omissions, insinuations, and falsehoods were all systematically conflated in most claims participants encountered (making them therefore unavoidable) but all the elements could be meaningful when this conflation was anticipated and identified.

In a contentious setting, factual and contra-factual claims are interrelated rather than distinct fields, requiring the savvy citizen to be familiar with both. This conforms to the constructionist viewpoint where "facts" are manufactured to challenge other views of reality (instead of autonomous and objective reflections of singular reality). As noted by Potter, every claim of reality competes (explicitly or implicitly) with other claims: "one of the features of any description is that it counters—actually or potentially—a range of competing alternative descriptions" (Potter, 1996, p. 106). This was especially true in Egypt, where the all-encompassing arena of political contest made it both necessary and unavoidable to be exposed to conflicting reports, as antithetical claims circulated while other vital perspectives were missing or suppressed. Furthermore, the social resonance and reverberations of claims, true and false, made them significant irrespective of their truth-value (though truthfulness was still important, of course).

In fact, RBTL was already an established practice in Egypt's information culture, blurring the distinction between information and misinformation long before a "digital culture" took hold. In an example anticipating how participants sought insights into the

Morsi government through the postings of Brotherhood supporters, Rugh (2004) described how in the 1950s and 1960s Muhammed Heikal rose to the position of “the most widely read journalist in the Arab world in modern times” for insights into the rule of President Gamal Abdel Nasser, with whom he was closely associated:

In his day, thousands of Arabs read Haykal's weekly column and followed the news in the daily paper he edited, not as much for factual reporting and objective analysis as for clues about what the Egyptian regime was thinking and doing. (Rugh, 2004, p. 11)

Despite most media practitioners being “frequently suspected of being politically motivated rather than professionals dedicated solely to accurate, factual reporting and enlightenment of the public” (Rugh, 2004, p. 11), audiences persisted in pursuing information by employing a “defensive skepticism, akin to that of an American toward a commercial advertisement”:

Certainly the most sophisticated groups, and to a large extent other people as well, do not accept the news in the mass media entirely at face value, but assume that it may not be completely objective or reliable. They read between the lines, looking for significant omissions and implied meanings. (Rugh, 2004, p. 11)

In an earlier chapter I suggested that the Lebanese media landscape resembled Egypt’s **(6.Broadcast Media)**, and there too one observed how RBTL was an operative practice, as sectarianism was structured beneath the national “symbols and discourses that are blatantly ‘Lebanese’ [...were also] open to sub-national readings ‘between the lines’” (Haugbolle, 2009, p. 144), creating “a public sphere unusually rife with coded signals, masks and voices in play” (2009, p. 145).

RBTL and PTT are vital tools for negotiating such complex information landscapes: not simply by avoiding “bad” sources and consuming “good” sources, but by processing information from various outlets at multiple levels to cultivate a consumer’s understanding. As noted by Tuominen, Savolainen and Talja (2005), the value of any text relies on its positioning within a larger constellation of texts, sources, and knowledge

negotiated by citizens, with the authors arguing that knowledge “is not located in texts as such—or in the individual’s head. Rather, it involves the coconstruction of situated meanings and takes place in networks of actors and artifacts” (Tuominen et al., 2005, p. 338).

Not only did PTT allow partial sources to be synthesized into a unified construction of reality, but it also exemplified what Brenda Dervin called *circling reality*, “the necessity of obtaining a variety of perspectives in order to get a better, more stable view of ‘reality’ based on a wide spectrum of observations from a wide base of points in time-space” (Dervin, 1983, p. 7). Circling reality is “not only desirable (i.e. valued) but necessary” according to Dervin, but all the more so in Egypt’s information ecosystem. Identifying and juxtaposing information was necessary to develop one’s understanding of events by filling-in details into a composite image of reality. Of course, whether such exposure lead to further clarity or confusion is subject to debate. This coping strategy seems a catch-22, since the exposure (or over-exposure) to a myriad of conflicting sources remained a primary cause behind the prevailing uncertainty (**8.Characteristics**). Whether a wealth of information from a variety of sources served as boon or a curse may lie in how effectively they *bounded* uncertainty to particular subsets of a controversy (e.g., the number of troops or protestors, the degree of violence, the underlying intent of policy makers, the precise perpetrators of a crime, or the amount of government funds embezzled) without diluting an understanding of the issue overall. Inventiveness went hand-in-hand with suspicion and skepticism (along with biases) as participants imaginatively and creatively engaged with texts to fill in informational lacuna (e.g., applying the *cui bono* maxim to deduce responsible actors behind events or reports).

Despite the challenges these tactics pose to the information literacy paradigm, two of the paradigm’s fundamental attributes were nevertheless salient in participants’ accounts: the binary framework itself and the notion of consumer responsibility. RBTL and PTT show that the acceptance/rejection of sources was too simplistic a description of behaviour, and blurred the distinction between information and misinformation. Yet the binary itself persisted throughout the accounts as a frame-of-reference as participants spoke of truth and lies, information and misinformation, or news and propaganda. While few claims

could be accepted as complete information or complete misinformation on their own merits, the dichotomy of these ideal states were reference points at the ends of a veracity spectrum, wherein a source or claim could be positioned according to differing parameters. As such, expanding upon the standard binary of information does not mean these elementary concepts need to be entirely dispensed with. The accounts of participants show that this would render discourse on information practices unintelligible. Another tacit foundation to information literacy which Tuouminen, Savolainen, and Talja's (2005) critique is its basis in personal responsibility and individual agency. For example, alongside the binary of information and misinformation, personal accountability was also prevalent throughout the accounts of participants. The tactics of RBTL and PTT were successfully enacted based on the capacities of the individual citizen, distinguishing the savvy from the credulous. Based on the interviews, it was the tactics participants employed which characterized and defined them as careful information consumers rather than the knowledge the tactics imparted them with. This self-reliance, after all, was a pillar in the information culture, attested to in participants' accounts of intuition, experience, inference, and personal contacts (**8.Characteristics** and **9.Sources**). This discrepancy can nevertheless be reconciled with Tuouminen et al.'s(2005) call for exploring "the social, ideological, and physical contexts and environments in which information and technical artifacts are used" (Tuouminen et al., 2005, p. 340)—which this study validates—by noting that participants' reliance on RBTL and PTT were self-conscious responses to local conditions (unprofessional media, partisan sources, polarized public, insufficient confusion, etc.) rather than personal inclinations. Nevertheless, the rhetoric of personal capacity connects tactics to the character of elitism in Egypt's information culture (**8.Characteristics**).

10.4.2 Information consumption as performance

Considering the problematics raised by the information literacy framework, perhaps a better framework to understand the tactics can be adapted from the conceptual approach that Jon Anderson (2009) advances for the study of blogging in the Middle East. Previous approaches (including his own) to new media treated blogs as threats to traditional media by amateurizing knowledge production, as platforms for nurturing new political

formations, and as the bases for informed, rational, and progressive political action (J. W. Anderson, 2009). But in lieu of these lofty expectations, empirical findings over the course of years revealed a more modest but still significant effect on a citizenry's practices, with blogging largely operating "as commentary that is linked both to sources of information, which are often mainstream media, and to other commentary, which is usually in the form of other blogs" (J. W. Anderson, 2009, para. 14). Anderson criticised the social determinism that attended the new media for ignoring the more immediate behaviors taking shape. In response, Anderson suggested revisiting matters of information circulation and processing as *social performances* instead of speculating endlessly on their social efficacy. He advised researchers to move "beyond thinking of their discourse as report [i.e., transmission] to something more performative" (J. W. Anderson, 2009, para. 20) to allow empirically and anthropologically substantive areas of investigation to open up, such as "how information is formed and acquires authority both in general and specifically under conditions of networked communication" (J. W. Anderson, 2009, para. 24).

While Anderson focused on the latter in the form of blogging, it is the "general" scope of information formation that I find applicable to the study of information practices. By adapting this approach, the routinized *performances* of RBTL and PTT become more (sociologically) significant than their relative success or failure. In the information culture in which they were situated, the performance of these tactics reveals the ambiguity of texts, the mistrust of sources, the inventiveness in interpreting and synthesizing accounts, the biases in approaching alternative accounts, and elitism in what these tactics are taken to signify. It was the re-enactment of these tactics, then, which defined consumers and reflected the context they inhabited, not the specific information they acquired—performance over outcome. This framework stresses the iterative and continuous employment of RBTL and PTT by citizens, expressing a local information culture and responding to a contentious and convergent information ecosystem. Each issue or event that participants sought to understand was part of the larger political context they struggled to understand, leading to repeated exposure to the same sources, the same voices, or the same factions. The performative approach sidesteps this issue by simply observing these practices without assessing their ultimate efficacy.

An approach like Anderson's to the tactics of consumers is useful because RBTL and PTT, as already demonstrated, undermine certain expectations of what qualifies as information and how it is handled as information. The tactics demonstrate that what qualifies as information emerges over the course of multiple actions and encounters within a particular context of claims, sources, institutions, and interests. Though these tactics, as any tactic, are enacted to serve *instrumental* ends, they are sociologically grasped as *performances* on the stage of Egypt's information culture. As a performance, such information consumption patterns are treated as routine, iterative activity—as an information *practice* (Savolainen, 2007, 2008a)—over the course of which what qualifies as information and how it is used is revisited and revised. Where equivalent practices are identified in LIS models of information behavior, they tend to be treated as transitional phases in the course of a linear progression. Kuhlthau's intermediary stage of the Information Search Process model, for instance, describes a period when consumers, early in their search, are exposed to information experience confusion and uncertainty, unsure what information they need and baffled by the novelty and inconsistency of the information they find; this stage is then followed by stages of increased confidence, efficiency, and focus. The approach of much information behavior research follows this pattern (Kuhlthau, 2013; Savolainen, 2007; T. Wilson, Ford, Ellis, Foster, & Spink, 2002), systematically plotting consumers' practices as elementary components (gathering, analyzing, evaluating, and internalizing information) organized into progressive phases as subjects move from being uninformed to informed persons. Despite the utility of that approach, particularly for the design of services and tools, it presents analytical limitations that these informational tactics highlight.

The tactics of RBTL and PTT are made-up of particular sets of actions and maneuvers (e.g., selecting particular sources, reading texts, processing claims against prior knowledge, seeking confirmation or refutations, and surveying fellow consumers) which could easily be disaggregated and re-sorted as minor intermediate behaviors within a linear, pragmatic model like the Information Search Process. But the findings show that these actions were undertaken as a coherent ensemble, that they were characterized as continuous, open-ended practices rather than transitional phases, and that they were adapted to the controversies and the information sources a participant was exposed to.

Finally, these specific performances were seen more meaningful and expressive than could be reduced to their instrumental ends; they represented the chaotic information landscape these citizens inhabited and their own savviness at navigating it. It is obvious from the descriptions of participants that the tactics were considered amalgamated and continuous patterns of action that were more meaningful than the sum of their parts. The second limitation of the usual approach to information behavior is the emphasis placed on the most tangible and distinct stage, the initial point of consumption: “most attention has been paid to the early phases of the information process, in particular, the selection of, and access to information sources and channels [...and] the selection of individual sources” (Savolainen, 2009b, p. 188). Yet the empirical weight of “source preferences” is especially problematic in regions such as Egypt where “Arab television viewers’ ‘decoding’ of media messages remains largely a black box” (Hafez, 2008a, p. 11). The performative approach, then, as applied to the tactics presented above, deemphasizes the linearity of information processing inherent to the field of information studies and the topic of information literacy, while simultaneously expanding the scope beyond the point-of-consumption phase. The approach allows local information practices to be interpreted as coherent and multifaceted expressions of a citizen’s social milieu and information culture. The performance approach opposes the emphasis on linear movement through successive stages in the information process (e.g., Kuhlthau, 2013; Savolainen, 2008a) by allowing us to focus on specific activities, regardless of their position in the course of an individual’s quest for knowledge, as more central to and emblematic of the information culture they constitute. These performances move us past the focus on the point of consumption which is the emphasis of much information behavior research (Savolainen, 2009b)—not to mention the resilient notions of a “hypodermic” media effect. RBTL and PTT reveal the characteristics of skepticism, suspicion, ingenuity, bias, and elitism in how information was processed when surrounded by diverse, partial, and incomplete texts. RBTL and PTT evinced an information consumer facing head-on the confusion, contradictions, omissions, and biases, blurring any clear boundary between good and bad sources that usually orient the negotiation of information.

Chapter 11 - Conclusion

11.1 Introduction

This study set out to describe how politically-engaged citizens perceive the sources available to them and process the information they encounter amidst growing media complexity and political instability. The preceding chapters used the narratives of citizens from various backgrounds (ideologies, professions, and age-groups) to describe local sources, practices, and conditions. The narratives of consumers—hitherto “conspicuous by their absence” in Arab media studies research (Sakr, 2007a, p. 5)—were used to answer the call for thick descriptive analysis of daily information consumption habits. Citizens’ experiences learning about on-going political controversies were used to provide further detail to the analysis. The study was also distinguished by its contextual sensitivity, setting these narratives on the one hand within a milieu of media operating simultaneously and dynamically with one another (i.e., the context of convergence), and on the other within the milieu of political transition, faced with an authoritarian legacy and contemporary political conflicts (i.e., contexts of contention). The study applied the approach of *information practices*, defined as the “socially and culturally established ways to identify, seek, use, and share the information available in various sources” (Savolainen, 2008a, p. 2), to redress these methodological and theoretical concerns. Relying heavily on in-depth, open-ended interviews, information practices research explores inter-subjective, routine, informal, and contextualized activities regarding information.

Chapters 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 each addressed a specific theme for exploration (official information, broadcast media, social media, consumer characteristics, consumers’ sources, and consumer tactics), though connections were made among data across these themes. This final chapter summarizes several key findings from across these sections, compiling them into the analytical framework of an *information ecosystem* and an *information culture*, which were both developed over the course of the preceding chapters. Preliminary impressions of Egypt’s post-Mubarak period based on the findings

are then presented, ultimately concluding with several implications of the study for the field of information studies.

11.2 An ecosystem

The information ecosystem refers to the interconnected nature of information creators and providers. Whereas other common metaphors of an information/media *environment*, *setting*, *milieu* or *landscape* connote a space with particular features and elements within which consumers move and interact, an *ecosystem* draws emphasis to the interactions, relationships, and dynamics that connect the entities within this setting. Identifiable sources of information—mediums, channels, organizations, and personnel—are understood as more than atomistic *options* available to consumers to choose from based on each source's independent attributes. Rather, the producers, purveyors, and consumers of information are seen as facets of a social assemblage; it is based on this assemblage and its varied internal relationships (of dependency, cooperation, coercion, alignment, competition, conflict, and supplementation) that the character, quality, and capacities of particular informational agents are predicated. Understanding this assemblage is crucial for exploring the choices people make and how they conduct themselves. Additionally, the assemblage reveals the political, economic, and cultural forces acting upon consumers and which they conversely react to. Through the concept of an information ecosystem, the term used to refer to this assemblage, the contentious and convergent communication context outlined in **2. Background** and **3. Literature Review** was not only reiterated, but substantiated. Three facets of the information ecosystem, and their respective characteristics, were identified: the state, broadcast media, and social media.

11.2.1 State of ignorance

In this metaphorical ecosystem, the state sat squarely at its center. Most research tends to understandably focus on how the government and its agencies restrict the circulation of information in the media, on the internet, or from civil society. But the present study found that the state was perceived to hold a fundamental responsibility for the quality and quantity of information circulating throughout the country based on its own practises as a primary producer and disseminator of knowledge. Its performance in this regard, whether

good or bad, determined the potential performances of all other producers of information, as the argument went, because they invariably relied on the state's output. As such, the consensus was that the state's failures to create and spread trusted information cast doubt on all other sources. The lack of official information undermined all other secondary producers such as experts, officials, activists, and reporters.

The state's derelict production of information was linked to the system of authoritarianism and corruption in place for decades, where passive negligence and obstruction were as much a part of the regime's institutional modus operandi as active intrusion and manipulation. It was observed that the state—with its various agencies, ministries, executive offices, councils, legislatures, and officials—avoided producing information, produced unreliable information, and made information inaccessible. Various reasons were given for these failures of Egypt's agencies and officials: being skeptical of the potential utility of information, being territorial and guarded about the information at one's disposal, using *ad hoc* methods for producing and storing information, or manufacturing information according to political interests. Given these conditions, the state appeared to operate without producing, disseminating, or using information, rendering the basis for their decision-making obscure and fostering deep mistrust of its actions. The formal channels to access official information, meanwhile, were seen as dysfunctional or obstructed, forcing people to rely on insiders and informal contacts to circumvent the barriers to access. This situation limited what citizens perceived as knowable or the degree of certainty with which claims could be asserted regarding any number of controversies, permeating the entire ecosystem with uncertainty and suspicion.

11.2.2 Bi-polar disorder

Outside the state, the most prominent institutions responsible for the circulation of information were broadcast media, where the contention in the political sphere had openly taken root. A central dichotomy characterized the media: those with an agenda supporting the Muslim Brotherhood now in power and those against them. But beneath the umbrella of the pro-/anti-Brotherhood camps was a myriad of finer binaries, classifying media sources around particular concerns: religion (Islamist or secular), the

state (government-run or privately-run), the 2011 Uprising (pro-“Revolution” or reactionary), and the Mubarak regime (apologists or critics). Media sources (channels, programmes, and personalities) were sorted according to these binaries, and by extension, their credibility. For instance, the shifting editorial allegiances of state media through the successive rule of Mubarak, then SCAF, then Morsi exposed their subservience to any government in office; while some participants felt the pro-Brotherhood agenda had not been wholeheartedly adopted by state media, the institutions were generally seen beyond rehabilitation as feckless regime-boosters. Many hosts from private media who had histories of being Mubarak apologists or had moved from a reactionary position at the start of the Uprising to a pro-revolution position in its aftermath were similarly seen as opportunistic, and worthy of mistrust.

These binaries demonstrated the contentiousness that pervaded the information sources most people relied upon, and oriented their consumption. Yet the binaries and their degree of antagonism also demonstrated a degree of diversity in broadcast media. This diversity stood in contrast to the monopolized, uniform, and muzzled media of the past. For this reason, despite its problems, many celebrated the current media sphere for allowing at least different points of view, as well as open criticism of the government. Others felt that this “diversity” was shallow, however, having devolved into a contest between pro- and anti-Brotherhood factions, which itself only represented the agendas of Egypt’s political and economic elite engaged in a power struggle, and ignored the interests and concerns of ordinary Egyptians.

Despite these concerns, the notion of a “neutral” media, generally, was met with skepticism. Nevertheless, it was felt that ideology or commercial competition should still leave room for *principled* media—adopting a political stance but still adhering to professionalism and balance in content—over *politicized* media—wherein partisanship and sensationalism permitted the quality of information to be sacrificed. The questionable content of the media, however, could also be linked to the endemic obscurity foisted by the state officials over the public (as mentioned above) which promoted sensationalism, speculation, and uncertainty even among the pundits recruited by the polarized media.

11.2.3 Cybernetic enhancements

Social media were very much part-and-parcel of this state-of-affairs. Social media remediated many of the deficiencies of mass media and official sources by increasing the diversity of content available to citizens, provisioning more personally tailored content and trustworthy sources, as well as offering mechanisms to verify and substantiate information. But from the outset it was apparent that an either-or division between social and broadcast media was misleading. Across both matters of content and credibility, the functionality of social media was overlaid upon mass media rather than an isolated alternative to it. The fact that social media drew so heavily on formal media for content made the distinction all the more artificial. Acting as a mediating layer, social media permitted selective exposure to news, information to be filtered according to online social networks, alternative content to be juxtaposed with mass media content, various opinions and perspectives on controversies to be displayed, and stories from online or offline media to be vetted.

But social media also took on many of the characteristics of mass media. While social media played a role by injecting some more alternatives in content, it still added to the political contest underway in the country, feeding the battle over narratives, issues, and “facts”. It too was a platform for the polarization which undermined the credibility of media outlets, sacrificing professionalism for propaganda. And while it allowed fact-checking, social media was seen as rife with misinformation, proving susceptible to the same defects as mass media by falling victim to the pernicious pace, sensationalism, and biases of news production. In these various ways, social media proved convergent with broadcast media, variously mediating, remediating, and reproducing its practices.

11.3 A culture

In order to describe the nature of consumers within this information ecosystem, the concept of an *information culture* was developed as the ecosystem’s analytical counterpart. This culture was explored in the attitudes and practices of citizens when consuming and processing information. Referring to *an* information culture emphasized that the manner in which a group of people approached information was constitutive of

the particular ecosystem they inhabited. How citizens characterized themselves or others as consumers, identified sources, and processed claims reflected an ecosystem rife with misinformation, polarization, and speculation.

The degree to which the wealth and variety of information available to citizens served as a boon or a curse lay in how effectively citizens responded to the threats of contradictions, overload, and uncertainty; contradictions needed be resolved, overload attenuated, and uncertainty bounded to allow citizens to continue engaging in consumption. Faced with these challenges, motivated citizens were characterized as skeptical, suspicious, and resourceful consumers. For instance, with most mediated sources of information falling into competing factions, citizens coped by juxtaposing opposing narratives, attempting to ascertain the veracity of a controversy by consuming from multiple sources of different parties, types, and standards to tri-angulate upon the truth. Yet their practices also reinforced social divisions, with sectarianism and elitism prominently reflected in the narratives of information practices.

Studies elsewhere have shown that citizens seeking information from day-to-day “were aware of a number of alternative potentially useful sources” (Savolainen, 2008a, p. 123); in Egypt this awareness extended to the respective agendas, perspectives, audiences, and prestige of alternative sources. Even so, reflecting this convergent context, information consumption was rarely confined to a particular medium, programme, or station; even social media was understood as offering a heterogeneous mix of content, with information from formal and informal sources representing various ideologies and positions. This convergence was leveraged by politically-engaged consumers for fact-checking, which was described as an essential practice they conducted, regardless of whether the original information arrived from broadcast media, social media, or state officials. Reports needed to be confirmed, their claims vetted, and different viewpoints consulted. These practices were core activities for politically-engaged citizens, who each engaged in fact-checking activities through personally developed strategies of verification. This suggests that any investigations into information practices or media consumption which operationalizes sources according to channels (Al-Jazeera, CBC, Al-Ahram), genre (talk shows, news broadcasts, newspaper column), show (*The Opposite*

Direction, End of the Day, Talk), or medium (internet, TV, newspapers) would obscure the mechanisms of selection and negotiation taking place within such an information culture, where convergence has clearly taken hold. More significant than the traditional categories of sources (e.g., as channels or mediums) were the conceptualizations of sources articulated by the consumers themselves: how they characterized and assessed sources and the significance they attached to particular patterns of consumption.

11.3.1 Consuming people

Across social and broadcast media, as well as interpersonal relations, there was an emphasis on approaching and assessing sources as *individuals*. These individuals could be categorized according their proximity (a personal or impersonal source) and knowledge-type (direct or indirect knowledge). Sources such as contacts (personal and indirect), witnesses (impersonal and direct), and experts (impersonal and indirect) were consulted according to their perceived relevance, credibility, and trustworthiness, but also according to the type of controversy the consumer was confronted with. Witnesses, for instance, were more suited for learning about contained, episodic *incidents* (e.g., Appendix 2: Prison break; Maspero massacre) rather than more abstract and extensive *issues* (e.g., Appendix 2: Judicial authority; IMF loan). For the latter group of controversies, regarding issues such as economic policy, legal reform, or poverty, experts were more useful. Furthermore, whereas citizens could become informed regarding incidents by accessing “self-explanatory” evidence (e.g., video footage), issues represented complex, open-ended, and multifaceted controversies which required the guidance of an experts. For these reasons, and to cope with the overload and conflicting opinions, citizens focused their attention and tentative trust towards specific experts on particular matters (e.g., Amr Hamzawy on the economy), developing a stable of experts whose performance record and politics could be trusted. The fact that sources were negotiated on this personalized level exemplified how suspicious consumers were of information, relying on personally-earned trust to establish a source’s credence.

Social media was a useful means of accessing information from individuals, allowing users to develop trust in particular contributors and follow them directly. For instance, one of social media’s strengths, making it such an effective tool for vetting information,

was the access it gave users to informal contributors who acted as witnesses offering first-hand testimony regarding controversies. Because social media was useful for connecting to witnesses, it was admittedly not as powerful a tool for gaining information regarding open-ended issues. But this approach was not unique to Facebook and Twitter users; those who relied primarily on broadcast media for their information also depended on personalized trust, following particular speakers and expert writers or intellectuals they had come to respect and rely upon irrespective of the programme, channel, or newspapers they appeared in. The strategy, then, had less to do with the technology than the backdrop of contention that made people increasingly discriminating about their sources of information.

This also explained the value attached to non-mediated information; first-hand experience and interpersonal contacts were seen as essential for orienting oneself and soliciting information. The importance of first-person experience, personal contact, and witnesses seems to be their “ordinariness” as information providers, seemingly detached and naïve to the political conflict, in contrast with experts who could be suspected of having a stake in the issues they discussed. The findings here go beyond a dichotomy of “traditional-versus-new media” or “mediated-versus-non-mediated information” in the consumption and processing of information. In fact, mediated sources were relied upon in a manner reminiscent of people’s everyday offline life, much the same as routinely consulting with their acquaintances around them.

11.3.2 Beyond good and evil

In an effort to stay informed amid contending claims, it might be surprising that consumption was not restricted according to sources perceived as highly credible. Rather, the relationship between consuming from a source and its perceived credibility was more complex, with citizens consuming information in a dubious or even incredulous manner. In this context, even non-credible sources offered important insights, whether to acquaint the consumers with opposing narratives, to indicate the gravity of an issue, or to provide some gratification in gossip. As observed by Wilson, it is this conscious consumption of unreliable content in the constant effort to remain informed that marks the complexity of everyday practices of citizens, whose understanding of the world is “based not simply on

partial information from doubtfully trustworthy sources but on information we can be certain is distorted and more or less intentionally misleading” (Wilson 1983, 143).

This reliance on the unreliable—once again highlighting the endemic misinformation within the information ecosystem—was evidenced in the tactics citizens employed when consuming information. People engaged in selectively amalgamating many imperfect claims from multiple sources, with incongruent reports set aside, to arrive at a more complete representation of events; this opposed a basic idea that people simply discriminate true, credible texts from false ones, consuming the former and rejecting the latter. People also read between the lines, excavating subtexts that could make overt misinformation meaningful, as hidden claims, masked intentions, accidental admission, or attempts at misdirection were identified. Texts whose surface content was dismissed as false or redundant could thereby have merit in the hidden meaning they disclosed irrespective of the communicator’s original intent. Within the professedly dysfunctional ecosystem, where officials, media practitioners, and online contributors engaged in various degrees of propaganda, obfuscation, and sensationalism, the notion of information became more layered and diffused than the binary of good and bad sources alone could represent. Consumers coped with the grey-zone in-between “factual” and “fictitious” sources.

11.3.3 Information as distinction

Participants identified themselves as socio-economically privileged compared with the majority of Egyptians, and most saw their information practices as a reflection of this distinction. Complex knowledge was perceived as the monopoly of well-off segments of the population who enjoyed the education, access, income, and time to become informed on political matters. Most described themselves and other politically-engaged citizens as more savvy and informed, having the time and background to understand issues and consciously employ sophisticated strategies of identifying sources and negotiating contradictory claims. They saw themselves as the exclusive beneficiaries of a convergent media landscape and as more successful at maneuvering the contention without being susceptible to biases and manipulation, in comparison to the less sophisticated general public.

By contrast, the general public was constructed in several ways. For one thing, they were seen to be more reliant on immediate sources of information, such as first-hand experience and social contacts, limiting their scope of knowledge. They were also perceived as more dependent on others for forming their opinions regarding controversies, if they were interested at all. Average, lower-income citizens were perceived as more apathetic to political matters (except perhaps towards economic conditions, given their precarious livelihood) and were therefore seen to be uncritical consumers of information. They were seen as unsophisticated consumers of mass media (or social media), too lazy, busy, suggestable, poor, or disinterested to exhibit the same degree of engagement as the more privileged segment of the population many participants hailed from. This public was characterized as not only being poorer and more gullible, but also more religiously inclined, thereby forming the base of the Brotherhood's support due to religious deference rather than informed decision-making; higher-income liberals, on the other hand, were represented as too savvy and cultured for such manipulations. These poorer, gullible, and dogmatic "masses" were considered the consumers of the most disparaged sources of information, such as state media and Islamist media, failing to enjoy the benefits of private liberal media, international media, or Twitter.

Even those who strenuously disagreed with the validity of these claims admitted that they were prevalent among Egypt's privileged segments of the population. Many of the dismissive views of the "masses" and their tendency to be misinformed and manipulated were similar to reports of Douai (n.d.) that privileged Arab audiences exaggerated the detrimental influence of media on others but considered themselves immune (i.e., the third person effect). Based on responses from Arab focus groups, Douai's participants perceived the influence of media to vary depending on whether it was received by the "savvy elite" or "the masses," the latter lacking the insight, political education and analytical skills to defuse propagandistic claims. Ultimately, patterns of information consumption and processing were seen to reflect different classes and political leanings in Egypt.

11.4 Egypt in transition

This study provided insight into the mindsets of politically-engaged citizens during a turbulent period in Egypt's transitional process. The fieldwork was conducted in the lead-up to massive anti-Morsi rallies on June 30, 2013, which were followed shortly by his ouster, counter-rallies by Morsi-supporters, and bloody cycles of violence and repression thereafter. The study of the information ecosystem presented here reveals a thoroughly politicized and polarized sphere of public discourse, divided into antithetical factions, with few spaces for moderate discourse. It also reveals how the state failed to present itself, its policies, and its decision making in a manner that would be defined as rational or informed, instead perpetuating uncertainty, confusion, suspicion, and mistrust regarding the regime.

The information culture shows the endemic mistrust, elitism, and bias characterizing responses of citizens, demonstrating a complete disavowal of the Morsi regime by its opponents. The data shows high intolerance for the Brotherhood by opponents and an equally dismissive view of liberals by Morsi supporters. The narratives around the controversies this study explored demonstrated how Morsi and the Brotherhood were consistently framed as an existential threat, with each controversy successively pitting pro- versus anti-Brotherhood factions. Meanwhile, the primacy placed on first-hand experience to inform people's political views explains how the immediate state of Egypt's economy and security—already in decline before Morsi's rule—shaped the impression citizens had of the government, regardless of how representative these experiences may genuinely have been of his Islamist government. Given that the legitimacy of Egyptian regimes rested on “the image of a development-oriented national leadership that is able to deliver, if not prosperity and wealth for the majority, at least some relief from economic misery and social decline for the population,” (Wurzel, 2009, p. 120) first-hand experience would explain much public sentiment against the continued rule of Morsi even among less politically-engaged citizens.

Finally, the elitism exhibited in this information culture shows how the views of a large segment of the polity were dismissed. The elitism exhibited here, especially by liberals,

explains how the electoral legitimacy Morsi enjoyed could be readily dismissed as the product of ignorant, misinformed, and misled masses.

11.5 Implications for information studies

The study applied the approach of everyday information practices outside the traditional setting of an affluent, stable, and Western liberal-democracy to expand the conceptual tools of the discipline. It explored the production, circulation, consumption, and interpretation of information in the context of a tumultuous political and communication landscape, where the shadow of authoritarianism still loomed. Periods of intense contention and instability render visible the societal nature of information—and its corresponding concepts of trust, certainty, and credibility—exposing people’s information practices as reflections of the cultural, political, and social context they invariably participate in. By adapting information practices research to such a setting, the conceptual tools developed here could further the study of societal dimensions of information.

The phenomena observed in Egypt, while carrying an historical and cultural specificity, offer insights on information practices beyond the Arab setting. The information ecosystem and culture observed in Egypt can be considered an extreme case of sources and consumers during contentious politics, offering a point of comparison for citizens in other contexts experiencing different degrees of contention and a different configuration of media convergence. A new setting could expose divergent patterns in how sources were assessed and classified, what collective characteristics represented consumers, or what tactics consumers employed. For instance, the attitudes of consumers towards sources notably reflected the information culture they moved within (**8.Characteristics**), with mistrust, skepticism, ingenuity, affiliation, and elitism demonstrated by the Egyptians studied. To what degrees might such characteristics be identified in other cultural or national settings? What new characteristics could be revealed in their place? How would such differences be connected to differences in the information ecosystem? Another example is seen in the documented reliance on first-hand experience and interpersonal contacts for knowledge. In Egypt, these practices represent two separate characteristics of the information culture: the first being of elitism, perceiving those most

reliant on these sources as poorer, less sophisticated citizens; the second characteristic was of suspicion, the general failure of institutional sources and the legacy of systematic propaganda. Yet the practice of relying on first-person experience and direct acquaintances was also identified in everyday information practices based in the West, where it is primarily considered practices of disenfranchised citizens and representative of barriers to formal institutions (Case, 2006; Chatman, 1999; Harris & Dewdney, 1994). In short, the accounts revealed that the activities of information consumers conform to findings from earlier investigations into the everyday information practices of citizens in the West, but exposed radically different interpretive significance in a divergent context.

To better conceptually represent the practices undertaken by information consumers—where informative texts occupy a grey-zone between good and bad sources, where consumption is a non-linear process, where certain classes of behavior take on more specific significance, and where practices express an social identity—the idea of approaching information practices as a *performance* was presented in the closing remarks of the last chapter, **10.Tactics**. The performance approach allows local information practices to be interpreted as coherent and multifaceted expressions of citizens’ social milieus and information cultures; while this insight was originally adapted from Arab media scholarship, it happened to directly coincide with Chatman’s own impression of information practices as a “performance” based on her observations that people’s practices reinforced their lived world, be it a retirement home or a prison:

In trying to explain how information aids in forming a worldview, a conclusion I’ve reached is that information is really a performance. It carries a specific narrative that is easily adaptable to the expectations and needs of members of a small world. It also has a certain form. In this situation, the form is interpersonal, and for the most part is being used by insiders to illustrate ways of assimilating one’s personal world to the world of prison life. (Chatman, 1999, p. 208)

Such performances take on different shapes in different contexts, whether a prison, a retirement home, or a democratizing Arab state, with their own respective “forms” and “narratives”. Chatman’s contextually-rich research into the *small worlds* of her

participants could easily be reinterpreted as explorations of paired information ecosystems and information cultures, which the present study developed at a more ambitious scale. With this study, I have shown that information practices research can (and ought to) be scaled-up to the level of *large worlds*, with the appropriate conceptual equipment and scope.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: List of participants

Abbas is in his late 20s but has been a political activist for years. He labelled himself a social democrat.

Abeer became politicized following with the Uprising, befriending and joining revolutionary groups. In her 30s, she manages a business in the service sector.

Ahmed is a middle-aged liberal who heads a civil society organization. A member of the secular political parties prior to the Uprising, he supported and joined the Uprising.

Amira is a staunch supporter and member of the secular and nationalist Free Egyptians party. In her early 50s, she is strongly against the Muslim Brotherhood.

Enis is a retired professional. He was the most politically disengaged of participants, in contrast with most other participants.

Fouad is in his late 30s and has been a member of the Muslim Brotherhood for years.

Galal is a senior faculty member at a university.

Hala is in her 20s and recently returned to Egypt after living abroad. Despite this, due to her upbringing she enjoys a sophisticated and outspoken disposition to local politics.

Hassan is an independent journalist in his 30s.

Hisham is a veteran activist in his 40s who can recall Second Intifada protests in Tahrir a decade prior to 2011 Uprising. A Marxist, he joined the revolutionaries and is a member of one of the revolutionary coalitions.

Ingy is in her 30s and has been an active participant to several government reform initiatives. She joined the revolutionaries and subsequently supported Sabahi's leftist Popular Current Party. She refused to vote for Morsi in the final round of elections.

Kassem is a professor who sympathized with the Morsi government, though he did not identify with the Muslim Brotherhood.

Khaled is middle-aged and occupies a senior position in a political reform NGO. He was a member of the leftist Popular Current.

Lily is a recent university graduate who was involved in and inspired by the revolution. She initially supported El-Baradei's secular Constitution Party (which her family continues to support) but has since distanced herself from it for being overly conservative and elitist, presently gravitating to anarchist political thought.

Lotfy is a public intellectual and a life-long activist in his 60s. A staunch socialist, he strongly opposes Islamism and the Morsi government. He identified with and supported the revolutionaries, joining the demonstrations.

Medhat is a retired academic and an Islamist, though he opposes the Brotherhood's government.

Mohamed is a veteran journalist working for a liberal partisan newspaper.

Mona is a young female Islamist and member of the Egypt Party, founded by the popular televangelist Amr Khaled.

Naveen is an early-stage academic closely connected with Egypt's activist communities and the social media sphere.

Noha is a member of El-Baradei's liberal and reformist Constitution Party. In her youth she supported then President Nasser and she remains a committed Nasserist/Arab socialist. She remains politically active and an avid consumer of political news.

Osama is a legal expert in his 30s who supports Islamist politics and the Muslim Brotherhood government. He is suspicious of Egypt's liberals.

Sawsan, an experienced attorney, is a long-time activist for legal reform and women's rights. She admired Egypt's young revolutionaries and supports them.

Sherine is a computer engineer in her 20s who joined the revolutionaries and became politicized following the Uprising. She backed moderate Islamist Abdel Mounem Abou Fatouh for president. She is an active user of social media.

Sonya is in her 50s and is engaged in politics, though unaffiliated with any parties. She is strongly anti-Brotherhood and wished Egypt's military took control of the country.

Thoraya is a senior faculty member at a university. She identifies ideologically as a liberal.

Walid is a senior scholar and former state official during Mubarak's rule.

Yasmine is a retired government employee and an avid consumer of news.

Yasser is a long-time practitioner in state media. He defines his political identity as "Islamic" (but not Islamist) and "nationalist".

Yusef is a young professional who joined the revolutionaries in Tahrir, then pursued a career in independent media production. He describes his politics as "radical opposition".

Zeinab is the youngest of the participants, a young university student and ardent politico. She is involved in informal political movements but she is also interested in formal politics.

Ziad is in his late 30s and has been a member of the Muslim Brotherhood for years.

Appendix 2: Timeline

2011

January	Popular protests against the President Hosni Mubarak regime After violent clashes, security forces disappear across the country. Prisons and police stations come under attack, freeing thousands of prisoners
February	Mubarak steps down. An interim military government is established by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF)
October	Massacre of Coptic demonstrators at Maspero broadcasting building
December	Several foreign civil society organizations are raided and their workers arrested

2012

January	Parliamentary elections for the lower house (People's Assembly) lead to a landslide victory for the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist parties. Similar result would follow in the upper house (Shura Council) elections.
February	A riot at a soccer match in Port Said leads to 79 people being killed
June	The People's Assembly is dissolved by court order Muslim Brotherhood candidate, Mohamed Morsi, wins the presidency Morsi government announces a plan to issue Islamic Bonds
August	After 16 soldiers are killed in an attack in Sinai, Morsi forces senior generals heading SCAF into retirement, pushing the military out of the political sphere Morsi government announces plans to pursue a \$4.8 billion dollar loan from the International Monetary Fund
November	Morsi grants himself executive powers, ensuring the constitution draft by the Islamist-dominated council is passed without judicial interference and personally assigns a new prosecutor general

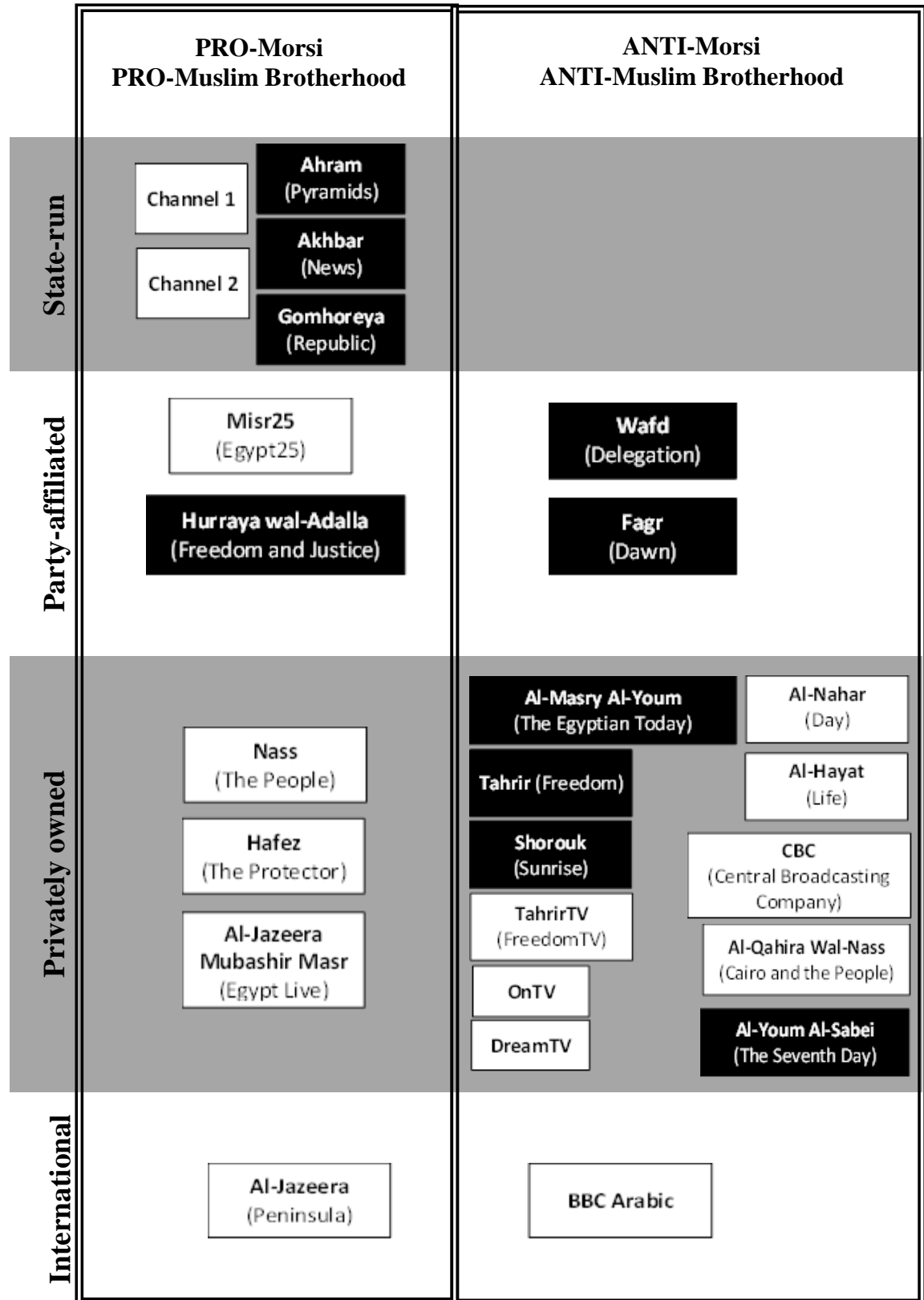
2013

April	Food poisoning outbreak in Al-Azhar academy hospitalizes 500 students A law is put forward by the Islamist-dominated Shura Council to reform the judiciary
May	Director of the Cairo Opera House is fired by Morsi's Culture Minister Seven soldiers are taken hostage in Sinai and later released
June	The Ethiopian plan to operate a dam on the upper Nile sparks new controversy
June 30	Massive demonstrations held calling on Morsi to step-down on the anniversary of him assuming office
July 4	After a 48 hour deadline, Defense Minister Fatah Al-Sisi forcefully removes Morsi from office and places him under arrest

Appendix 3: Media map

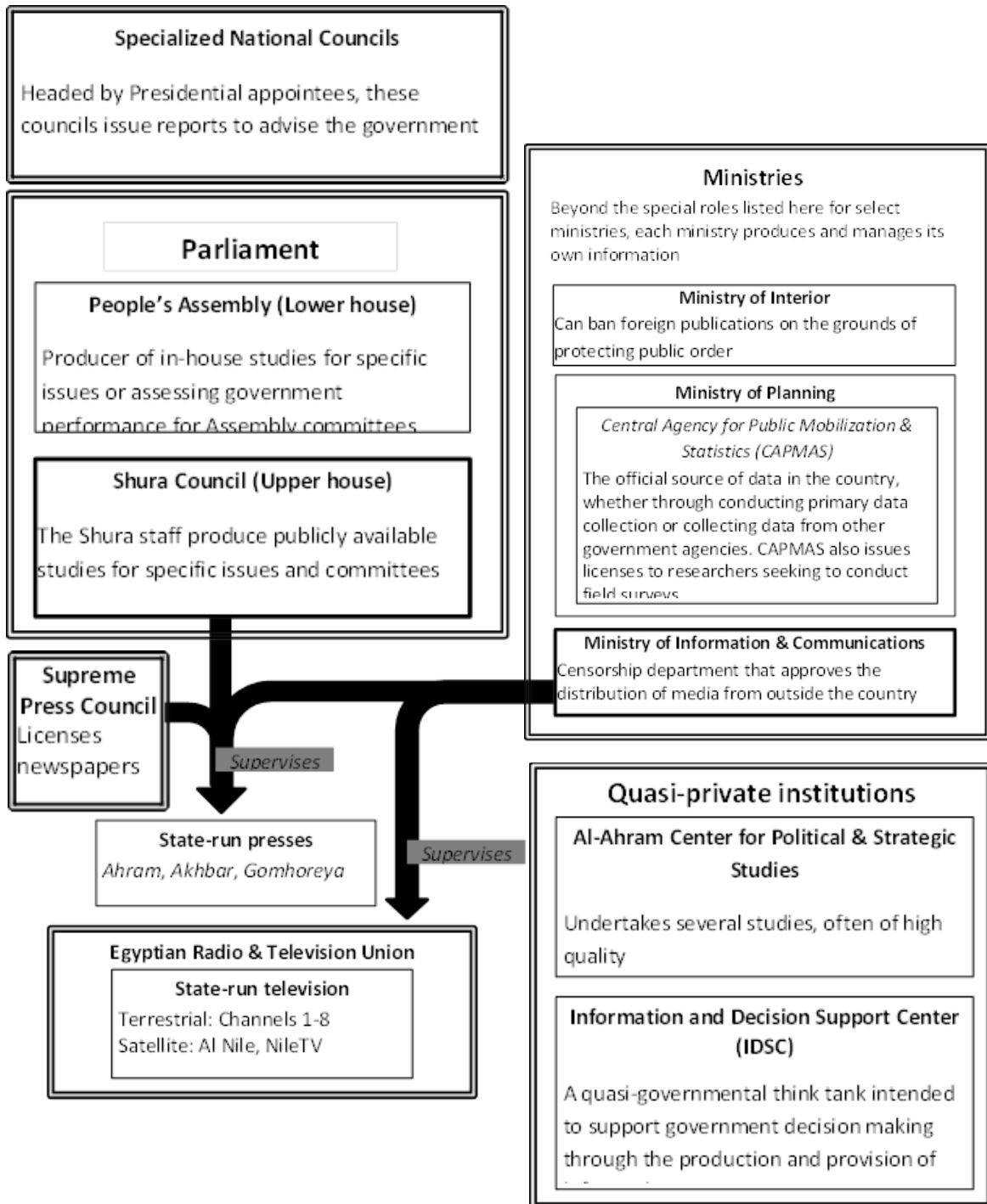
Newspaper

Television channel



Appendix 4: Map of state institutions

Based on Rugh (2004) and El-Mikawy and Ghoneim (2005)



Appendix 5: Glossary

Adeeb, Amr	Amr Adeeb is the bombastic host of his own political talk-show Al-Qahera Al-Youm [Cairo Today] on the satellite channel Orbit
Adeeb, Emad	Emad Adeeb is the host of CBC's Behodoo (Quietly), a current affairs talk that stands out for its calm tone—especially in contrast with the tone of Emad's brother, Amr Adeeb.
Al-Ahram	Al-Ahram (The Pyramids) is a state-owned newspaper. It is one of the oldest running newspapers in the Middle East and has historically claimed the highest circulation rate in Egypt
Al-Akhbar	Al-Akhbar (The News) is a state-owned newspaper comparable in circulation rates Al-Ahram (The Pyramids)
Askar Kazeboon	<i>Askar Kazeboon (Army Are Liars)</i> is a campaign to expose the military propaganda and misinformation by staging various public awareness events
Al-Azhar Poisoning	A serious case of food poisoning broke out at Al-Azhar, the prestigious academy for Islamic religious learning. Over 500 students were hospitalized, and calls were made for the director's dismissal. What made this incident significant was that it came about during a confrontation between the Morsi government and the religious institute over the government's plan to issue certified Islamic bonds (see below). Some suspected that the poisoning was orchestrated by the Muslim Brotherhood to oust opponents in Egypt's leading Islamic institution and replace them with more compliant officials.
Al-Badeel	Al-Badeel (the Alternative) is a private newspaper that began in 2007 with a leftist orientation.
El-Baradei, Mohamed	El-Baradei is the former director of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and Nobel Prize laureate who became a prominent critic of Mubarak due to his international status. He supported the 2011 Uprising from the start, returning to Egypt from Austria, where he lived. He then founded the secular Constitution [al-Doustur] Party and became head of the political coalition against Morsi, the National Salvation Front.

CBC	CBC (Capital Broadcasting Center) is a satellite channel started after the Revolution. Due to its hosts and backers, the channel was considered by many to represent the interests of remnants of the Mubarak (<i>feloul</i>).
Eissa, Ibrahim	Eissa is an established journalist and the presenter of “This is Cairo” (“Hona al-Qahira”) on the private station <i>Cairo and the People (Al-Qahira Wal-Nas)</i> . Under Mubarak, he was openly critical of the regime, working as editor for private newspapers.
Ethiopian dam	Egypt relies on the Nile River for 95 per cent of its water, so when Ethiopian construction of a dam became public knowledge, there was fear that this could lead to a significant decrease in Egypt’s water supply. Besides being perceived as an infringement on Egypt’s national resources, the way the regime handled the issue became a point of contention and ridicule. This was not helped by a broadcast meeting where the political figures in attendance seemed to unaware that they were being televised, engaging in several impolitic statements.
Feloul	Translated as “remnants”, the word derisively refers to those affiliated or connected with the old regime under Mubarak, impugning their political credibility. Tycoons like Naguib Sawiris (owner of ONTV and founder of the Free Egyptian Party) and Mohamed Ragab (owner of CBC and Al-Nahar) and TV personalities such as Lamis Al-Hadidy and Amr Adeeb were just some of those on accused of being feloul.
Freedom and Justice	Freedom and Justice (Al-Hurraya Wal-‘Adalla) is both the name of the political party the Muslim Brotherhood formed following the revolution in order to officially compete in elections, as well as the name of the party’s official newspaper.
Fouda, Yosri	Yosri Fouda is a reporter as well as host to ONTV’s “Last Words” (<i>Akher Kelam</i>). Fouda is the former chief of Al-Jazeera’s London bureau.
Foutoh, Moneim Abdel	Moneim Abdoul Fotouh was a prominent member of the Muslim Brotherhood, but quit the party when he decided to declare his candidacy for President in 2012 as an independent. He later formed the moderate Islamist Strong Egypt Party.
El-Hadidy, Lamis	Al-Hadidy hosts the talk-show <i>Ettkalem</i> (Talk) on the private channel CBC (Capital Broadcast Center)

Al-Hafez	Al-Hafez (The Protector) was originally a religious educational channel. Since the Revolution it became a platform for conservative Islamist politics.
Hamas	Hamas (Enthusiasm) is an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood that was established in Palestine in 1987. Originally an Islamist resistance movement, Hamas has governed Gaza Strip since it won local elections 2007. Gaza sits on Egypt's border, in the unstable Sinai region.
Hamzawy, Amr	Amr Hamzawy is professor of economics at the American University in Cairo and a former member of parliament. On secular outlets, Hamzawy became a common guest television talk shows for his analysis.
Al-Hayat	Al-Hayat (Life) is a private satellite station. Its owner also happens to be the leader of the Wafd party
Al-Hikma	Al-Hikma (The Wisdom) is a Salafist satellite channel, a platform for fundamentalist Islam
El-Ibrashi, Wael	Wael El-Ibrashi is a journalist as well as a presenter on Ashera Masa'an (10 pm) on the private satellite station, DreamTV
IMF loan	To increase the state's reserves, the Morsi government pursued a \$4.8 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The negotiation process was obscure to the general public, leaving citizens to fear conditions of the loan could include subsidy cuts and other austerity measures enacted without public consultation. The government's clandestine passage of tax-hikes—which were just as quickly withdrawn—only exacerbated people's uncertainty and mistrust.
Islamic bonds	To raise capital, the Morsi government planned to issue bonds that adhered to Islamic tenets (i.e., non-interest based) to subsidize state projects. Skeptics feared that these Islamic Bonds would be issued for Egypt's national resources (e.g., the Suez Canal), paving the way for the country's treasures to fall under foreign ownership, especially wealthy Gulf states like Qatar, seen as a close ally of the Brotherhood.
Islamism	Islamism or political Islam refers to an ideology where Islamic doctrine is the basis of social and political thought.
Islamist	An adherent or advocate of governance according to Islam

Islamist constitution

The constitution passed by the Morsi government was written by an Islamist-dominated constitutional assembly. It was perceived by some as a means of unilaterally establishing conservative Islamic ideology into Egyptian governance, offending secular Egyptians. In November 2012, in a move to secure the passing of the bill against judicial interference, Morsi gave himself unchecked executive powers. After a general referendum, the constitution was successfully adopted for the next few months, only to be suspended after Morsi's removal on July 4, 2013.

Judicial authority

As Egypt's judiciary and the Morsi government found itself increasingly at odds over the legality of various policies and court decisions, there came from Islamist parties a bill to curb the power of judges—the Judicial Authority Law. This galvanized the country, with many seeing it as an important step to reform Mubarak era appointees and the dynasties that had emerged within the profession, and others who saw the Islamist government infringing on the independence of the court system.

Al-Jazeera

Al-Jazeera (The Peninsula) is a Qatar-based news network that broke new ground in regional media content, processes, and markets. This can especially be seen in its introduction of engaging talk-shows covering topics not before discussed publically. The network's staff in Egypt had played a crucial role during the Uprising sustaining international coverage of protestors and the state's countermeasures. Following the political rise of the Brotherhood, however, the network (especially its Arabic-language production) was increasingly perceived to biased coverage for the Islamist government. Besides its flagship network, broadcasting from Qatar, Al-Jazeera also established an affiliate station in Egypt to produce local content, Al-Jazeera Egypt Direct (Al-Jazeera Mubasher Misr)

Kifaya

Kifaya (Enough) was grassroots movement in 2004 of largely middle-class protests for political reform. It was composed various political factions, including, liberal, leftists, and Islamists, opposing Mubarak's continued rule or the succession of his son, Gamal.

Killed revolutionaries	Around 800 revolutionaries had been supposedly killed during the 2011 Uprising, and the question of culpability was still openly debated. Most accusations centered on the Mubarak government, blaming Egypt's security services, including Mubarak himself and his head of the notorious Interior Ministry. Others, however, accused Islamists, seeing them as benefiting from the escalating violence and maligning the regime.
Liberalism	A secular ideology which repudiates the intermingling of politics with religion; in Egypt's peculiar political history, the terms connection with other liberal values (constitutionalism, restrained government, free-market economics, progressive social freedoms) is somewhat inconsistent
Maspero massacre	In October 2011, Coptic protesters marched on the state television Maspero building, in response to inflammatory coverage of their grievances over sectarian conflict. These protesters were violently attacked by military personnel. The media defended the actions of the officers, claiming they were being attacked, though videos spread online of soldiers using live ammunition on protesters and running through them with armored vehicles.
Al-Masry Al-Youm	Al-Masry Al-Youm (Today's Egyptian) is a popular privately-owned paper. Its daily circulation doubling from 80,000 in 2008 to 180,000 in 2011, surpassing Al-Ahram with the largest newspaper readership in Egypt
Ministry of the Interior	Notorious branch of government responsible for domestic security through a combination of formal (e.g., police) and informal forces (hired thugs), whose human rights abuses were a galvanizing factor behind the Uprising.
Misr25	Misr25 (Egypt25) is a satellite channel owned by the Muslim Brotherhood.
Morsi, Mohamed	Member of the Muslim Brotherhood and head of its new political party, the Freedom and Justice Party, Morsi was fielded as the Brotherhood's candidate in the 2012 presidential election. His regime proved highly divisive, and the Islamist president was ousted July 3, 2013, removed from office after massive demonstrations and military intervention.
Mosireen	Mosireen (Insistent) is a film collective that support and circulate documentaries and citizen journalism

Mousa, Amr	Amr Mousa was a diplomate in the Arab League and ran as a candidate in the 2012 presidential election. He heads the liberal Congress Party
Mubarak, Hosni	Former air force officer and president of Egypt from 1981 to 2011, when he was removed from office following the 2011 Uprising.
Muslim Brotherhood	<p>A religious organization founded in 1928 in Egypt, banned during a violent conflict with the state in the 1950s, but continued to operate in charitable works and even competed in local politics. In elections following the 2011 Uprising, the Brotherhood's official political party, the Freedom and Justice Party, were successful at both parliamentary and presidential contests, with their candidate—Mohamed Morsi—taking office. Their political ideology is founded on the application of Islamic principles.</p> <p>The Muslim Brotherhood is a transnational Islamist political organization founded in Egypt in 1928. It conducts both political activism and charity work. Following the Uprising and elections, the Brotherhood formed a political party, the Freedom and Justice Party.</p>
National Democratic Party	The NDP monopolized control of the government under Mubarak, operating as the main political organ of the regime throughout the government. Characterized as a network of corruption, it was dismantled following Mubarak's ouster.
Al-Nass	Al-Nass (The People) was original in 2006 as an entertainment channel funded by a Saudi businessman, but quickly transformed into a religious channel platform for radical Islamic perspectives. In 2012 station that publicize the notorious "The Innocence of Islam" film, which ridiculed the prophet Mohamed.
Nasser, Gamal Abdel	Gamal Abdel Nasser was one of leaders of the officer's revolt that established the Arab Republic of Egypt in 1953. As president 1956-1970, Nasser brought sweeping social and political changes which often combined Arab socialism with anti-imperialism (Nasserism).
NDP	See National Democratic Party

- NGO trial** In December of 2011 the offices of several foreign non-governmental organizations (NGOs)—including Freedom House, International Republican Institute, International Center for Journalists, National Democratic Institute—were raided. Forty three workers were arrested, with the organizations charged for receiving up to \$50 million in illegal funds. Accusations were also made of foreign interference, though the charges were seen by many as politically motivated.
- No to Military Trials for Civilians** No to Military Trials for Civilians is a civil liberties group which stands against trying civilians in military courts. They investigate the detentions of political activists and allegations torture against the military
- Nour, Ayman** Ayman Nour of the liberal Tomorrow Party was the first person to run against Mubarak in a presidential election, held in 2005, where he won ~7% of the vote. He was arrested following Mubarak's victory
- Okasha, Tawfiq** Okasha owned and operated *Al-Faraeen* (The Pharaohs) television channel. A militant supporter of the army and Mubarak, and liable to propound accusations of contrasies and bombastic rhetoric, Okasha was a controversial figure. He's vitriolic attacks on the Brotherhood and Morsi made him and his station one of the earliest and most prominent tragets of legal prosecutions under the Morsi government
- ONTV** ONTV is a private Egyptian television channel launched by businessman Naguib Sawiris in 2009
- Opera firing** Culture Minister Alaa Abdel Aziz, dismissed the Cairo Opera House director, Ines Abdel Dayem. This followed his firing of the heads of the General Book Authority and the Fine Arts Council. As the opera staff rallied behind the director and held demonstrations, the affair became a public issue. Though Minister Aziz was not himself a member of the Brotherhood, his actions were seen by some to represent an attack by the conservative Islamist government against the arts and culture, while others saw his actions as redressing corruption and misuse of public funds.
- Partisan papers** Partisan papers like Al-Wafd (the Delegation) are a long standing part of Egypt's media. These outlets are affiliated with particular political party. Another example is the Muslim Brotherhood's official paper, the Freedom and Justice.

Port Said massacre	In February 2012, fans of a Cairo soccer club were attacked at a soccer game in the Suez city of Port Said, resulting in the killing of 79 and 1000 casualties. Around two dozen locals were held responsible and sentenced to death (but no security personnel); the appeal upheld 21 death sentences, leading to riots that caused further deaths, as well as having emergency laws implemented across Suez canal cities. Since the victims of the massacre had been among the revolutionaries, it was suspected that state security was responsible, but no security personnel were held accountable.
Prison break	In the days following January 25 (2011), several attacks on Egyptian prisons and police headquarters across the country took place, killing over 50 officers and prisoners and freeing around 20,000 inmates. Many of the prisoners were political prisoners, including many senior members of the Muslim Brotherhood, such as the future president, Mohamed Morsi (held without charge). Speculations around the incidents led many to allege that the attacks were orchestrated by the Brotherhood, working with outside militias; others blamed the Mubarak regime, seeing a ploy to spread unrest and cow the civil uprising.
Revolutionaries	Refers to a class of political actors who participated in the 2011 Uprising and are largely (mis-)characterized as predominantly young, technologically savvy, and well-educated stratum whose radical (and radically expressed) demands for reform.
Sada El-Balad	Sada El-Balad (Echo of the Country) is both a private newspaper and a channel
Sadat, Anwar	Second president of Egypt; assassinated by Islamists in 1981
Saad, Mahmoud	Mahmoud Saad, host of “Akher Al-Nahar” (End of the Day) on the private station Al-Nahar (The Day).
Sabahi, Hamdeen	Hamdeen Sabahi, founder of the leftist Popular Current, is a long-time Nasserist, journalist, and pro-labour activist who ran in the first run of presidential elections. He came third behind Shafiq and Morsi, excluding him from the final round. He later became a leading figure in the National Salvation Front.

- Salafi** A conservative branch of Sunni Islam with Saudi roots, this revivalist interpretation of Islam stresses that legitimacy is exclusively based on the Islamic foundation of the Quran (the sacred book) and Hadith (prophetic teachings). Though previously apolitical, Salafists became politically active in the aftermath of the Uprising and very successful so, especially in the Salafist *Nour (Light) Party* which won a quarter of parliamentary seats. Salafists usually worked closely with the more mainstream Islamic Muslim Brotherhood.
- Sawiris, Naguib** Naguib Sawiris is billionaire who hails from Egypt's most prominent Coptic family, with enterprises spanning construction, tourism, and telecommunications. Sawiris has stakes in several media outlets, including ONTV, CBC and Al-Masry Al-Youm. He also co-founded the liberal Free Egyptians Party after the Revolution
- SCAF** See Supreme Council of the Armed Forces
- Shafiq, Ahmed** Ahmed Shafiq ran in the 2012 presidential election. He was former air force officer and served for a short time as Mubarak's last prime minister. He was widely seen as the representative of the old regime and lost the election against Morsi by a relatively close margin, having won 47% of the vote.
- El-Shater, Khairat** El-Shater was a prominent and influential leader in the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as a wealthy entrepreneur in various commercial enterprises. He was the presented as the Brotherhood's original candidate for the 2012 Presidential election, but was disqualified by the commission. He was considered to be behind many of the programmes the Morsi government would pursue.
- El-Shazly, Mona** Mona El-Shazly is a presenter on Ashera Masa'an (10 PM) on Dream TV

- Sinai soldiers** Egypt's tumultuous Sinai peninsula witnessed two particularly noteworthy events during Morsi's tenure. In the summer of 2012, 16 soldiers were killed in an attack, with the assailants never ascertained. This crisis was seized upon by the newly elected president Morsi to forcefully retire several SCAF generals, with whom he had been engaged in a power struggle. Almost a year later, soldiers were once again attacked in Sinai, this time with 7 soldiers taken kidnapped. They were eventually released, though the circumstances of their release were undisclosed. Both incidents were subject to speculations, such as whether the Brotherhood had orchestrated these events to coincide with political interests.
- Supreme Council of the Armed Forces** Ruling military council that took over running the country after Mubarak's removal from office
- Tahrir Square** Tahrir Square was the site of massive Cairo protests and has since become metonymous for the Egyptian 2011 Uprising
- The Uprising** On January 25, 2011, a grassroots demonstration to express discontent with the Mubarak regime precipitated over the next 18 days into continuous protests across the country, leading Mubarak to step-down and a military council to take over as interim government. The "revolutionaries" who took part in this movement continued to be important symbolic and political figures, though they were largely sidelined from the formal political establishment, blamed often on their supposed "youth" and "idealism".
- Youssef, Bassem** Bassem Youssef brought political satire to Egyptian television with his smash-hit show, El-Bernameg (The Programme), modeled on Jon Stewart's The Daily Show. The show first aired on YouTube, was picked up by ONTV, then moved to CBC

Appendix 6: Ethics approvals



Use of Human Participants - Ethics Approval Notice

Research Ethics

Principal Investigator: Dr. Ajit Pyati
 File Number: 103166
 Review Level: Full Board
 Approved Local Adult Participants: 0
 Approved Local Minor Participants: 0
 Protocol Title: Exhuming the bones of contention: Contested politics, media and knowledge in post-Revolution Egypt
 Department & Institution: Information and Media Studies/Faculty of Information & Media Studies, Western University
 Sponsor:
 Ethics Approval Date: November 26, 2012 Expiry Date: August 31, 2013

Documents Reviewed & Approved & Documents Received for Information:

Document Name	Comments	Version Date
Western University Protocol		
Other	Recruitment script for e-mail, created as required [103166: Admin Req 1]	2012/11/13
Other	Recruitment script for telephone, created as requested [103166: Admin Req 2]	2012/11/13
Revised Letter of Information & Consent	Verbal consent form, created as required [103166: Admin. Req. 2]	2012/11/13
Revised Letter of Information & Consent	Letter of information with required modifications [103166: Board Req. 3,5,6,7,8,9]	2012/11/13
Revised Letter of Information & Consent	Consent form with required modifications [103166: Board Req. 7]	2012/11/13

This is to notify you that The University of Western Ontario Research Ethics Board for Non-Medical Research Involving Human Subjects (NMREB) which is organized and operates according to the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario has granted approval to the above named research study on the approval date noted above.

This approval shall remain valid until the expiry date noted above assuming timely and acceptable responses to the NMREB's periodic requests for surveillance and monitoring information.

Members of the NMREB who are named as investigators in research studies, or declare a conflict of interest, do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on, such studies when they are presented to the NMREB.

The Chair of the NMREB is Dr. Riley Hinson. The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 0000941.

Signature

Ethics Officer to Contact for Further Information

Grace Kelly	Janice Sutherland
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Western University, Support Services Bldg Rm. 5150 London, ON, Canada N6A 3K7
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Principal Investigator: Dr. Ajit Pyali
 File Number:103166
 Review Level:Delegated
 Approved Local Adult Participants: 0
 Approved Local Minor Participants: 0
 Protocol Title: Exhuming the bones of contention: Contested politics, media and knowledge in post-Revolution Egypt
 Department & Institution: Information and Media Studies\Faculty of Information & Media Studies,Western University
 Sponsor:
 Ethics Approval Date:December 20, 2012 Expiry Date: August 31, 2013

Documents Reviewed & Approved & Documents Received for Information:

Document Name	Comments	Version Date
Revised Western University Protocol	This revision seeks to add Toronto as a research site, recruiting participants of Egyptian descent and applying the same protocols in Canada prior to conducting the (already approved) fieldwork in Egypt.	

This is to notify you that The University of Western Ontario Research Ethics Board for Non-Medical Research Involving Human Subjects (NMREB) which is organized and operates according to the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario has granted approval to the above referenced revision(s) or amendment(s) on the approval date noted above.

This approval shall remain valid until the expiry date noted above assuming timely and acceptable responses to the NMREB's periodic requests for surveillance and monitoring information.

Members of the NMREB who are named as investigators in research studies, or declare a conflict of interest, do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on, such studies when they are presented to the NMREB.

The Chair of the NMREB is Dr. Riley Hinson. The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.


Signature

Ethics Officer to Contact for Further Information

Grace Kelly 	Janice Sutherland 
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- Honours and Awards:** Province of Ontario Graduate Scholarship
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- Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)
Doctoral Award
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- Related Work Experience** Lecturer
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2014
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The University of Western Ontario
2010-2011
- Teaching Assistant
The University of Western Ontario
2010-2012
- Publications:**
- Pyati, Ajit K. and Ahmad M. Kamal. (2012). Rethinking community and public space from the margins: A study of community libraries in Bangalore's slums. *Area*, 44(3), 336-343
- Pyati, Ajit K. and Ahmad M. Kamal. (2012). NGO-developed libraries in India: Impacts, models, and new possibilities. *Libri*, 62(3), 291-303
- Kamal, Ahmad M. and Jacquelyn Burkell. (2011). Addressing uncertainty: When information is not enough. *Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science*, 35(4), 174-187
- Rubin, Victoria L., Patrick T. Gavin and Ahmad M. Kamal. (2011). Innovation in public and academic North American libraries: Examining white literature and website applications. *Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science*, 35(4), 397-422