

Dossier: Social Movements, Digital Transformations and Changes in the Mediterranean Region

# Global and Arab Media in the Post-truth Era: Globalization, Authoritarianism and Fake News

**Aziz Douai**

Associate Professor

Ontario Tech University, Canada

The coronation of “post-truth” as the international word of the year in 2016 signified the convergence of social media influence as a news source and, according to Oxford Dictionaries, “a growing distrust of facts offered by the establishment.”<sup>1</sup> The post-truth era refers to “circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”<sup>2</sup> Some have described post-truth as a murky concept with hybrid qualities, and not simply the opposite of “truth.”<sup>3</sup> Australian political scientist John Keane described it as a form of “gaslighting,” an “organized effort by public figures to mess with citizens’ identities, to deploy lies, bullshit, buffoonery and silence for the purpose of sowing seeds of doubt and confusion among subjects.”<sup>4</sup> Some examples of this phenomenon are Donald Trump’s bluster and wholesale criminalization of Mexican immigrants, Filipino President Rodrigo Duterte’s coarse and aggressive bombast or Brazilian far-right President Jair Bolsonaro’s homophobic rhetoric. In addition, politicians and members of the media have raised public alarm regarding the phenomenon of “fake news” and its sway over both the 2016 US presidential election and Brexit.

The ongoing digital information revolution has disrupted the existing media/information ecosystem at local, national and global levels. In addition to subverting

traditional hierarchical models of information/knowledge dissemination and consumption, it fuelled anxieties about the quality of the information in the post-truth era. In the West, there is an increase on discourses about the epistemic “crisis of democracy” and the “misinformation society,” increasingly hiding under the guise of anti-globalization, anti-immigrant and populist politics. Furthermore, foreign influence and propaganda have also been blamed for exacerbating fake news, post-truth politics and epistemic or democratic crisis discourses. Outside North America and Europe, however, misinformation and lack of trust in the media and the establishment do not constitute a wholly new phenomenon. Authoritarian regimes around the world have long been involved in the dissemination of misinformation and propaganda. For this reason, the post-truth politics debate in global and Arab media should shift attention to authoritarianism and political upheavals which primarily drive much of the disinformation encountered in the Arab media ecosystem. In this article, I discuss post-truth politics and the rise of fake news and examine their implications on global and Arab media.

## Post-Truth Politics and Fake News

The “post-truth era” describes a unique moment in political history where politicians and populist leaders, as well as polarized audiences, challenge the notion of “truth” and the institutions society has crowned as “arbiters of truth.”<sup>5</sup> The political climate of 2016

<sup>1</sup> “‘Post-truth’ declared word of the year by Oxford Dictionaries.” *BBC News*. 16 November 2016 [www.bbc.com/news/uk-37995600](http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-37995600).

<sup>2</sup> “Word of the Year 2016 is...” *Oxford Dictionaries*. 2016 <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016>.

<sup>3</sup> KEANE, J. “Post-truth politics and why the antidote isn’t simply ‘fact-checking’ and truth.” *The Conversation*. 23 March 2018 <https://theconversation.com/post-truth-politics-and-why-the-antidote-isnt-simply-fact-checking-and-truth-87364>.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> HARSIN, J. “Regimes of post-truth, post-politics, and attention economies.” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 8, no. 2 (2015): 327-333.

witnessed the triumph of the Brexit campaign to pull the United Kingdom out of the European Union and the election of Donald Trump as the President of the United States. Trump wielded social media as a political tool to decimate his political opponents – e.g. coming up with demeaning labels for republican contenders, such as “Lyin’ Ted” or “Low Energy Jeb” (Bush) – and used Facebook Live and Twitter platforms to circumvent mainstream media. He popularized the term “fake news” to refer to mainstream media reports that contradict his administration’s narratives or could be perceived as critical of his policies. Only a few days after taking his presidency, Trump and his press secretary Sean Spicer falsely claimed the crowd attending his inauguration ceremony to be the “largest audience to ever witness an inauguration, both in person and around the globe.” Trump acolytes defended these disproven claims and suggested their “alternative facts” weighed more than published evidence of aerial photographs and crowd-size experts contradicting initial and highly exaggerated estimates. In both science and common parlance, facts indicate verifiable observations, an “objective” reality we construe as “truth”; as opposite, “alternative facts” veer off from that “truth” or, at a minimum, present us with an alternative reality. In this sense, the deployment of fake news refers to ideologically motivated denigration of unsympathetic mainstream news media coverage and to the contestation of the notion of “truth” itself.

In contrast to the above understanding, the scientific conceptualization this article adopts defines fake news as false or “fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent. Fake news outlets, in turn, lack the news media’s editorial norms and processes for ensuring the accuracy and credibility of information. Fake news overlaps with other information disorders, such as misinformation (false or misleading information) and disinformation (false information that is purposely spread to deceive people).”<sup>6</sup> As such,

fake news does not entirely constitute a new social phenomenon because it implies the wielding of information as a means of psychological influence, similar to propaganda, or as a way to generate economic benefits through “click-baits.”<sup>7</sup> Fears about the rise of fake news, however, were rekindled after social media amplified blatantly false news stories attacking Hillary Clinton and supporting Donald Trump in the 2016 US presidential elections. More ominously, fake news threatened to generate violence in society among those likely to fall for it. For example, the “pizzagate” conspiracy story influenced an armed man to storm a Washington D.C. pizza parlour for allegedly being the site of a child sex ring led by Hillary Clinton and her minions. At the centre of both public and academic concerns arose the fear that fake news stories could further erode democratic governance through increasing distrust of political elites and public institutions, including news media.<sup>8</sup>

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Fake news upends the traditional role of news media organizations as “arbiters of truth,” in accordance with the values of mainstream journalism, and corroborates the advent of what Victor Pickard termed the “misinformation society.”<sup>9</sup> In a discussion of the professional ideology of journalism, Mark Deuze explains how the principles of “objectivity,” “autonomy,” and “public service,” among other norms and prac-

<sup>6</sup> LAZER, D. M. et al. “The science of fake news.” *Science* 359, no. 6380 (2018): 1094-1096.

<sup>7</sup> HABGOOD-COOTE, J. “The term ‘fake news’ is doing great harm.” *The Conversation*. 27 July 2018 <http://theconversation.com/the-term-fake-news-is-doing-great-harm-100406>. See also SILVERMAN, C. AND ALEXANDER, L. “How teens in the Balkans are duping Trump supporters with fake news.” *BuzzFeed News*. 3 November 2016 [www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/how-macedonia-became-a-global-hub-for-pro-trump-misinfo](http://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/how-macedonia-became-a-global-hub-for-pro-trump-misinfo).

<sup>8</sup> DAHLGREN, P. “Media, knowledge and trust: The deepening epistemic crisis of democracy.” *Javnost-The Public* 25, no. 1-2 (2018): 20-27.

<sup>9</sup> PICKARD, V. “Media failures in the age of Trump.” *The Political Economy of Communication* 4, no. 2 (2017). <http://polecom.org/index.php/polecom/article/viewFile/74/264>.

tices, have long informed the ethos of the profession.<sup>10</sup> Generally speaking, journalists like to perceive their role in society as advocating the public's interest in acting as "watchdogs," collecting and disseminating information in an impartial and ethical manner. Their credibility and legitimacy, therefore, rest on society's belief in the autonomy and objectivity in the verification of facts informing journalism's truth-seeking and truth-telling ethos. These venerated professional norms, however, have been the subject of much tension and pressure from increasing monopolization and commercialization of the media in the United States and globally. The post-truth era and fake news environment exposes deep structural flaws in our existing information ecosystem as media institutions buckle under pressures of "a lack of financial support for accountability journalism, the dominance of infrastructures of misinformation (i.e., the "Facebook problem"), and regulatory capture – whereby agencies harmonize their actions to serve the commercial interests of the very businesses they purportedly regulate."<sup>11</sup> Casting doubt on the values of public service journalism exacerbates the problem of fake news and drowns out the voices of high quality journalism.

The digital information ecosystem disrupts the old hierarchical model of knowledge/information transmission despite offering unprecedented opportunities for the acquisition and dissemination of news and information. On the one hand, the Internet and social media platforms empower regular citizens and individuals to create, gather, access and share information without the mediation/control of legacy media corporations. In this sense, the Internet undermines the power of traditional gatekeepers and information brokers, and society ends up with what Manuel Castells describes as diffused "self-mass communication"<sup>12</sup> systems, instead of traditional mass communication systems in which knowledge/information workers ascertain the veracity of facts and judge what is newsworthy. New technology

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companies, such as Google and Facebook, are the new gatekeepers and algorithms now rule the information landscape.<sup>13</sup> Social media platforms have inverted the old paradigm of "All the News That's Fit to Print" to "The Daily Me" of all news and information that primarily fit with users' personal worldviews and confirm their social and political dispositions. Complicating matters further is the incredible rapidity at which false information and fake news are diffused online. A team of MIT researchers compared the dissemination of thousands of true and false stories and concluded that "falsity travels with greater velocity than the truth" on Twitter and other social media platforms.<sup>14</sup> The researchers concluded that false rumours spread farther, deeper and faster than the truth due to the unique and novel nature of social media content that attracts attention and encourages information-sharing behaviours. The post-truth era thus heralds the convergence of the widespread distrust of institutions with digital media environments in which bots and human behaviour are equally responsible for the spread of false information online. In addition, the ubiquitous nature of advertising, sponsored and clickbait content further stokes global fears about the vulnerabilities in our information digital ecosystem, as well as renewed scrutiny over the global and local media's role in providing high quality, credible, verifiable facts and information to counter such threats.

<sup>10</sup> DEUZE, M. "What is journalism? Professional identity and ideology of journalists reconsidered." *Journalism* 6, no. 4 (2005): 442-464.

<sup>11</sup> PICKARD, V. "The Big Picture Public Debate on the Misinformation Society." *Public Books*. 28 November 2017 [www.publicbooks.org/the-big-picture-misinformation-society/](http://www.publicbooks.org/the-big-picture-misinformation-society/).

<sup>12</sup> CASTELLS, M. *Communication power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> LEWIS, S. C., & WESTLUND, O. "Big data and journalism: Epistemology, expertise, economics, and ethics." *Digital journalism* 3, no. 3 (2015): 447-466.

<sup>14</sup> VOSOUGHI, S.; ROY, D. and ARAL, S. "The spread of true and false news online." *Science* 359, no. 6380 (2018): 1146-1151.

## Global Media and Post-Truth Politics

The post-truth era, marked by the erosion of trust in democratic institutions and the defiance of mainstream media's credibility, has plagued the global media environment, as globalization and new communication technologies intensify the scramble to influence the international news agenda and reach wider/new audiences. Some critics have argued that globalization privileges powerful corporate media conglomerates from advanced economies ("North" over "South"),<sup>15</sup> perpetuating the "hegemony" of Western media/news agencies on the flow of information and news around the world, and fostering "cultural imperialism" or "dependency" among nations of the Global South.<sup>16</sup> English as the *lingua franca* of globalization, moreover, unfairly promotes US-based and other anglophone media corporations. Other scholars have suggested that globalization and new communication technologies have facilitated a new global marketplace for news and information and created a diverse "global public sphere."<sup>17</sup> For example, satellite television fostered "multi-directional flows" of information and news – instead of traditional one-way flows of news from the West to the rest. By "global media," I broadly refer to transnational media outlets and voices that attract a wider cross-section of international audiences. This category includes both private/corporate-owned international media outlets (e.g., CNN, Fox News...) and public/government-owned media (e.g., BBC, Al-Jazeera, Russia Today, CCTV, France 24...).<sup>18</sup> It should be noted that, in addition to newsgathering agencies (e.g., Reuters), social media platforms (e.g., Facebook and Twitter) and internet-enabled news also influence global news flows, international politics and global governance. The ongoing communication revolution began with the boom of international news satellite television at

the dawn of the new millennium that transformed global media and journalism practices around the world. The 24-hour satellite television news cycle creates an insatiable demand for news and information around the world. The "breaking news" ethos of satellite/cable television blends coverage of significant events, such as political upheavals and natural disasters, with a high dosage of infotainment. At the level of international news, the endless news cycle pressured government officials to act and (at least appear to) respond to "breaking news" immediately and decisively,

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a phenomenon labelled as the "CNN Effect." Instead of cool, impartial journalistic analysis, US news media personalities, like former Fox News host Bill O'Reilly, ushered in brazen personal opinion, journalistic involvement and questionable "truth-claims."<sup>19</sup> The questionable substance of breaking news and unceasing public relations gimmicks corrode public trust in the media.<sup>20</sup> According to 2016 Gallup polling data, US audiences' trust in the news media sank to new lows with only "32% saying they have 'a great deal' or 'a fair amount' of trust" in the media.<sup>21</sup> Glob-

<sup>15</sup> MCCHESENEY, R. *Rich media, poor democracy: Communication politics in dubious times*. Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2000.

<sup>16</sup> YONG JIN, D. "Reinterpretation of cultural imperialism: Emerging domestic market vs continuing US dominance." *Media, Culture & Society* 29, no. 5 (2007): 753-771.

<sup>17</sup> For a recap of this debate, see RAI, M. and COTTLE, S. "Global mediations: On the changing ecology of satellite television news." *Global Media and Communication* 3, no. 1 (2007): 51-78.

<sup>18</sup> SABRY, T. "What is 'global' about Arab media?" *Global Media and Communication*, no. 1 (2005): 41-46.

<sup>19</sup> PETERS, C. "No-spin zones: The rise of the American cable news magazine and Bill O'Reilly." *Journalism Studies* 11, no. 6 (2010): 832-851.

<sup>20</sup> THOMPSON, D. "Why do Americans distrust the media: Donald Trump, anti-elite sentiment, and the dark side of media abundance." *The Atlantic*. 16 September 2016 [www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/09/why-do-americans-distrust-the-media/500252](http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/09/why-do-americans-distrust-the-media/500252).

<sup>21</sup> SWIFT, A. "Americans' trust in mass media sinks to new low." *Gallup News*. 14 September 2016 <https://news.gallup.com/poll/195542/americans-trust-mass-media-sinks-new-low.aspx>.

ally, the expanding 24-hour, 7-day media cycle has led to a rising tide of “soft news” and “global infotainment.” Amongst other detrimental effects, Daya Thussu argues that Western-based media corporations’ global dominance promotes the “Murdochization of news”— i.e. infotainment over public service journalism – in India and other parts of the developing world.<sup>22</sup>

### The 24-hour satellite television news cycle creates an insatiable demand for news and information around the world. The “breaking news” ethos of satellite/cable television blends coverage of significant events, such as political upheavals and natural disasters, with a high dosage of infotainment

Populist leaders have exploited global news’ political and economic imperatives to spread false rumours and unsubstantiated claims that befuddle citizens and sow doubts about objective reality. During the Brexit campaign, for instance, British politician Boris Johnson and the “leave camp” falsely claimed that the UK disbursed £350 million per week to the European Union (EU), a claim *The Guardian* described as “devious and bogus,”<sup>23</sup> but which nevertheless stoked British public doubts about the economic

merits of staying within the EU. Donald Trump’s 2016 election campaign and presidency have been riddled with falsehoods, such as his claim about Mexican immigrants being criminals and rapists, and his promise that Mexico will pay for the border wall, which mainstream media was eager to cover. Fact-checking organizations, such as FactCheck.org and the Poynter Institute’s PolitiFact, have kept a running count of false claims Trump peddled since he took the helm of the US presidency. The amount of those claims reached a whopping 8,718 in 759 days as of 17 February 2019, according to Washington Post’s fact checker Glenn Kessler.<sup>24</sup>

Internationally, some populist leaders went beyond propagating falsehoods and rumour to wielding the threat of fake news to justify authoritarian measures that muzzle the press.<sup>25</sup> Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has already sounded the alarm about the cynical use of false news by “predators of press freedom.”<sup>26</sup> In 2017, the Cambodian Prime Minister described journalists as “an anarchic group” and accused foreign media of endangering “peace and stability.”<sup>27</sup> The Burmese army used the excuse of fake news to justify censorship laws and reject claims of ethnic genocide against Rohingya Muslims.<sup>28</sup> Rodrigo Duterte, the President of the Philippines, denied accusations of extra-judicial killings of opponents and civilians and denounced news website Rappler’s reporting on these incidents for being “a fake news outlet.”<sup>29</sup> From the Philippines and Turkey to Hungary and the Czech Republic, the 2018 RSF report indicated, a general climate of media hostility became prevalent. “The unleashing of hatred towards journalists is one of the worst threats to democracies,”

<sup>22</sup> THUSSU, D. K. “The Murdochization of news? The case of Star TV in India.” *Media, Culture & Society* 29, no. 4 (2007): 593-611.

<sup>23</sup> LICHFIELD, J. “Boris Johnson’s £350m claim is devious and bogus. Here’s why.” *The Guardian*, 18 September 2017 [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/sep/18/boris-johnson-350-million-claim-bogus-foreign-secretary](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/sep/18/boris-johnson-350-million-claim-bogus-foreign-secretary).

<sup>24</sup> KESSLER, G.; RIZZO, S. and KELLY, M. “President Trump made 8,158 false or misleading claims in his first two years.” *The Washington Post*. 21 January 2019 [www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/01/21/president-trump-made-false-or-misleading-claims-his-first-two-years/?no\\_redirect=on&utm\\_term=.70cb7f3cd907](http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/01/21/president-trump-made-false-or-misleading-claims-his-first-two-years/?no_redirect=on&utm_term=.70cb7f3cd907).

<sup>25</sup> HABGOOD-COOTE, J. “The term ‘fake news’ is doing great harm.” *The Conversation*. 27 July 2018 <http://theconversation.com/the-term-fake-news-is-doing-great-harm-100406>.

<sup>26</sup> REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS. *Predators of press freedom use fake news as a censorship tool*. 16 March 2017 <https://rsf.org/en/news/predators-press-freedom-use-fake-news-censorship-tool>.

<sup>27</sup> PHNOM, P. “Cambodia’s Hun Sen says he and Trump object to ‘anarchic’ media.” Reuters. 28 February 2017 [www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-cambodia/cambodias-hun-sen-says-he-and-trump-object-to-anarchic-media-idUSKBN16700Q](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-cambodia/cambodias-hun-sen-says-he-and-trump-object-to-anarchic-media-idUSKBN16700Q).

<sup>28</sup> PARRY, R. L. “Rohingya ethnic cleansing is fake news, says Burma army.” *The Sunday Times*. 15 November 2017 [www.thetimes.co.uk/article/rohingya-ethnic-cleansing-is-fake-news-says-burma-army-580hbxw6r](http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/rohingya-ethnic-cleansing-is-fake-news-says-burma-army-580hbxw6r). See also: HUTCHINSON, S. “Gendered insecurity in the Rohingya crisis.” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 72, no.1 (2018): 1-9.

<sup>29</sup> YAP, C. “Duterte decries ‘fake news’ as critics warn of media crackdown.” *Bloomberg*. 17 January 2018 [www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-01-17/duterte-hits-fake-news-as-critics-warn-of-media-crackdown](http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-01-17/duterte-hits-fake-news-as-critics-warn-of-media-crackdown).



RSF Secretary-General Christophe Deloire asserted. “Political leaders who fuel loathing for reporters bear heavy responsibility because they undermine the concept of public debate based on facts instead of propaganda. To dispute the legitimacy of journalism today is to play with extremely dangerous political fire,” he warned.<sup>30</sup>

## Populist leaders have exploited global news’ political and economic imperatives to spread false rumours and unsubstantiated claims that befuddle citizens and sow doubts about objective reality

The post-truth politics global media environment spurred a new push for government-funded global propaganda as an instrument of foreign policy to influence international politics and advance geopolitical interests. Russia Today (RT), a Russian government-sponsored international television outlet, has been operating since 2005 as “a global, round-the-clock news network.” According to its official website, RT “creates news with an edge for viewers who want to Question More. RT covers stories overlooked by the mainstream media, provides alternative perspectives on current affairs, and acquaints international audiences with a Russian viewpoint on major global events.”<sup>31</sup> In reality, however, coverage of international news in the Kremlin-backed RT seems to be primarily driven by conspiracy theories and anti-mainstream voices that together “legitimize Russian domestic and foreign policies and, in turn, delegitimize

policies of the American government.”<sup>32</sup> RT’s coverage of the war in Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Syrian civil war, Brexit or the 2016 US presidential elections, for instance, displayed unabashed “willingness to disseminate partial truths or outright fictions” in support of the Kremlin with little regard to traditional norms of objective, factual reporting.<sup>33</sup> A RAND Corporation report described the contemporary Russian model for propaganda as “‘the firehose of falsehood’ because of two of its distinctive features: high numbers of channels and messages and a shameless willingness to disseminate partial truths or outright fictions.”<sup>34</sup> RT has been accused of fomenting EU scepticism and giving unfettered platforms to Brexit leader Nigel Farage, France’s Marine Le Pen and other far-right forces.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, state-owned China Central Television (CCTV) and other news outlets benefit from the post-truth global news environment to influence Chinese and non-Chinese overseas – e.g. rebuffing international complaints about state repression of Turkic-speaking Uighur Muslims<sup>36</sup> and other human rights abuses in Tibet – and to generally project a benign image of China’s rise as a global power.

The information revolution has had an impact on news-gathering and dissemination techniques, with the increasing use of big data and artificial intelligence to *manufacture* and customize/personalize daily news online. Furthermore, the Internet provides fertile grounds for breeding and amplifying state-sponsored fake news and propaganda campaigns, with websites like the US-based Info Wars and Russia’s Sputnik International becoming a global source for conspiracy theories. Social media and Internet firms, like Cambridge Analytica, stoked fears about the harvesting of users’ private data to wage psychological warfare and influence campaigns all over the world.<sup>37</sup> However,

<sup>30</sup> PRESS FREEDOM INDEX. Hatred of journalism threatens democracies. *Reporters Without Borders*, 2018 <https://rsf.org/en/rsf-index-2018-hatred-journalism-threatens-democracies>.

<sup>31</sup> RUSSIA TODAY (n.d.). “About RT” [www.rt.com/about-us/](http://www.rt.com/about-us/).

<sup>32</sup> YABLOKOV, I. “Conspiracy theories as a Russian public diplomacy tool: The case of Russia Today.” *Politics* 35, no. 3-4 (2015): 301-315. See also BLOOMFIELD, S. “Ofcom Should be Looking Again at Putin’s TV News Channel.” *The Guardian*. 24 April 2014 [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/24/ukraine-russia-putin-news-reporting](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/24/ukraine-russia-putin-news-reporting).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> PAUL, C. and MATTHEWS, M. “The Russian ‘firehose of falsehood’ propaganda model.” *Rand Corporation* (2016): 2-7.

<sup>35</sup> WINTOUR, P. and MASON, R. “Nigel Farage’s relationship with Russian media comes under scrutiny.” *The Guardian*. 31 March 2014 [www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/mar/31/nigel-farage-relationship-russian-media-scrutiny](http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/mar/31/nigel-farage-relationship-russian-media-scrutiny).

<sup>36</sup> APPS, P. “Commentary: China’s Muslim minority faces a modern Orwellian nightmare.” *Reuters*. 14 May 2018 [www.reuters.com/article/us-apps-china-commentary/commentary-chinas-muslim-minority-faces-a-modern-orwellian-nightmare-idUSKCN11F27B](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-apps-china-commentary/commentary-chinas-muslim-minority-faces-a-modern-orwellian-nightmare-idUSKCN11F27B).

<sup>37</sup> PROKOP, A. “Cambridge Analytica shutting down: the firm’s many scandals, explained.” *Vox*. 21 March 2018 [www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/3/21/17141428/cambridge-analytica-trump-russia-mueller](http://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/3/21/17141428/cambridge-analytica-trump-russia-mueller).

headlines like Vox's "Social media is rotting democracy from within: How social platforms enable far-right politicians' campaigns to undermine democracy,"<sup>38</sup> could risk tipping societies and democracies into the brink of a moral panic about social media-based news.

### Arab News Media and the Pursuit of Truth

The 17th Century English poet John Donne wrote that "no man is an island," a statement that best describes the current interdependence among local, national, regional and global media systems in which Arab media interact. Unsurprisingly, the Arab media landscape reflects ongoing global trends in which mainstream, traditional journalism values and democratic institutions are being given a hard time. I use the term "Arab media" to describe a wide range of media structures and news cultures in the Arabic speaking world. Arab media are increasingly diverse and hybrid as they encompass private and state-owned outlets, partisan press, pan-Arab and transnational media (e.g., Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya television channels) and both traditional and new communication platforms. Despite apparent rich diversity, the Arab media landscape remains dominated by authoritarian governments hostile to press freedom. The 2018 Freedom House report indicates persistent press repression in a region where only one country (Tunisia) ranked as "Free." Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon and Morocco were classified as "Partly Free" while the rest of the Arab countries remained "Not Free." The historical evolution of Arab media has created a scene largely dominated by information on political and foreign affairs, especially in print media, which might be attributed to the region's status as a hotspot of endemic conflicts.<sup>39</sup> To claim that fake news, disinformation, misinformation and propaganda in Arab media are the outcome

of the post-truth era is to ignore decades of low credibility and distrust from Arab citizens vis-à-vis their local media. Some epic examples of misinformation in Arab media include coverage of the defeat of Arab armies in the 1967 war against Israel and the First Gulf War, two major upheavals that exposed Arab media lies and highlighted the credibility of foreign media outlets like the BBC and CNN.<sup>40</sup> Arab citizens had very little, if any, trust in government-controlled media until satellite television channels with modern, professional outlooks took root in the region.<sup>41</sup> Still, Arab satellite television has arguably been complicit in states' disinformation enterprises. When Al-Jazeera and other Arab satellite television channels did not contradict blatant propaganda of Iraqi Information Minister Mohammed Saeed al-Sahaf at the outset of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, they facilitated the circulation of misinformation and fake news in the Arab information ecosystem and public debate.<sup>42</sup>

### The post-truth politics global media environment spurred a new push for government-funded global propaganda as an instrument of foreign policy to influence international politics and advance geopolitical interests

Conspiracy theories about the machinations of Israel, the Jewish Lobby, and the US and Western quest against Arabs routinely find air and credence in Arab audiences and media outlets. For example, a 2011 Pew Research Centre (PRC) opinion poll found 9/11 conspiracy theories to be very strong in the region, with less than 30% of respondents believing

<sup>38</sup> BEAUCHAMP, Z. "Social media is rotting democracy from within: How social platforms enable far-right politicians' campaigns to undermine democracy." *Vox*. 22 January 2019 [www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2019/1/22/18177076/social-media-facebook-far-right-authoritarian-populism](http://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2019/1/22/18177076/social-media-facebook-far-right-authoritarian-populism).

<sup>39</sup> MELLOR, N. *The making of Arab news*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005.

<sup>40</sup> FANDY, M. "Arab media: Tools of the governments; tools for the people?" *United States Institute of Peace*. August 2005 [www.usip.org/sites/default/files/arab\\_media.pdf](http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/arab_media.pdf).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> ZAYANI, M. and AYISH, M. I. "Arab satellite television and crisis reporting: Covering the fall of Baghdad." *International Communication Gazette* 68, no. 5-6 (2006): 473-497. See also: DEPRANG, E. "'Baghdad Bob' and His Ridiculous True Predictions." *The Atlantic*. 21 March 2013 [www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/03/baghdad-bob-and-his-ridiculous-true-predictions/274241/](http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/03/baghdad-bob-and-his-ridiculous-true-predictions/274241/).

the attacks to have been perpetrated by Muslims/Arabs.<sup>43</sup> The rise of the Islamic State (IS) has been the subject of many Arab conspiracy theories with prominent media personalities accusing the US or Al-Jazeera television channel of creating the terror organization,<sup>44</sup> doubting the veracity of the gruesome videos IS posted online, or otherwise blaming Shia sects for manufacturing it.<sup>45</sup>

## The Internet provides fertile grounds for breeding and amplifying state-sponsored fake news and propaganda campaigns, with websites like the US-based Info Wars and Russia's Sputnik International becoming a global source for conspiracy theories

The post-Arab Spring media landscape, infused by social media platforms, has exposed severe political fractures and intense media/information wars among rival Arab powers. Governments can no longer conceal domestic turmoil and discord with other Arab regimes since the “self-mass communication” and networking affordances of digital and social media platforms challenge traditional controls on the flow of information. Misinformation and rumour on social media further aggravate internecine Arab conflict in contrast to “the appearance of domestic social concord and the illusion of solidarity among Arab states’ points of view,”<sup>46</sup> which traditional Arab media promulgated in past decades. When Qatar’s official News Agency (QNA) was hacked and a fake news story

planted about an alleged speech given by the emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, a major diplomatic crisis was sparked in the Gulf between Qatar, on the one hand, and the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Egypt, on the other. According to the BBC, the unverified story, which alleged that the emir praised Iran and Islamist groups such as Hezbollah, the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, “unleashed a media free-for-all. Within minutes, Saudi and UAE-owned TV networks – Al-Arabiya and Sky News Arabia – picked up on the comments attributed to al-Thani. Both networks accused Qatar of funding extremist groups and of destabilizing the region.”<sup>47</sup> The diplomatic rift further mobilized fake news, and prompted the *weaponization* of social media as a tool of information warfare and cyberwar, as revealed by the hacking/leaking of UAE ambassador’s confidential emails, and the use of social networks to silence dissenting voices. In addition, Arab states have used the threat of fake news to justify a number of laws that curtail freedom of press and speech and further facilitate the crackdown on political dissent. Social media and the information revolution have supported activism but they have also become tools of political suppression and dissemination of fake news. Canadian-based Citizen Lab and Amnesty International have documented Saudi and other Arab governments’ cyberwarfare arsenal, including the use of Israeli firm NSO Group spyware and other cyber-surveillance technologies to infiltrate and capture human rights activists and political dissidents and disseminate false information.<sup>48</sup> David Ignatius, from *The Washington Post*, observed that Saudi Arabia’s “cybergarrison” and “obsession with social media” came as a response to the Arab Spring uprisings, eventually ensnaring and leading to the murder of reporter Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul, Turkey, on 2 October 2018. Al-Arabiya’s and Sky News Ara-

<sup>43</sup> TRAGER, E. “Why is the Middle East still in thrall to 9/11 conspiracy theories?” *The New Republic*. 3 September 2011 <https://newrepublic.com/article/94546/middle-east-radical-conspiracy-theories>.

<sup>44</sup> MACKEY, R. “Borne by Facebook: Conspiracy theory that US created ISIS spreads across Middle East.” *The New York Times*. 27 August 2014 [www.nytimes.com/2014/08/27/world/middleeast/isis-conspiracy-theories-include-a-purported-american-plot.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/27/world/middleeast/isis-conspiracy-theories-include-a-purported-american-plot.html).

<sup>45</sup> YOUSSEF N. “These are the Arab media conspiracy theories about ISIL.” *Quartz.com*. 7 April 2015 <https://qz.com/372809/these-are-the-arab-media-conspiracy-theories-about-isil/>.

<sup>46</sup> FANDY, M. Arab Media. (2005).

<sup>47</sup> PINNELL, O. “The online war between Qatar and Saudi Arabia.” *BBC News*. 3 June 2018 [www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-44294826](http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-44294826).

<sup>48</sup> MARCZAK, B., SCOTT-RAILTON, J. and DEIBERT, R. “NSO Group Infrastructure Linked to Targeting of Amnesty International and Saudi Dissident.” *The Citizen Lab*. 31 July 2018 <https://citizenlab.ca/2018/07/nso-spyware-targeting-amnesty-international/>. See also: MARCZAK, B. et al. “The Kingdom Came to Canada: How Saudi Linked Digital Espionage Reached Canadian Soil.” *The Citizen Lab*. 1 October 2018 <https://citizenlab.ca/2018/10/the-kingdom-came-to-canada-how-saudi-linked-digital-espionage-reached-canadian-soil/>.



bia's coverage of the Khashoggi murder appeared to closely align and evolve alongside the Saudi government's official narrative, going from initial denials to subsequent retractions and admission of responsibility.<sup>49</sup> In the words of Robert Mahoney, Deputy Executive Director of the Committee to Protect Journalists, "Saudi control of Arab media, lamented by Khashoggi, shapes coverage of his death" with, of course, the exception of Al-Jazeera and a few independent media voices.<sup>50</sup> The Khashoggi case demonstrates that fake news and misinformation in Arab media still remain within the purview of governments, with social media platforms acting as viral amplifiers of state-sponsored propaganda and disinformation.

## Conclusion

The adage that "the first casualty of war is the truth" applies with equal strength to the disruptive nature of digital/social media on politics and the media in what has been dubbed the post-truth era. Concerns about fake news and misinformation emanate from the convergence of old and new fears about the *new* media and the ubiquitous nature of information. In the West, the post-truth era has been characterized by a loss over who determines what is the truth and growing distrust of the establishment and mainstream media instigated by hostile powers and populist leaders, which can only forebode an ill future for democracy. While fears about post-truth and fake news may be overblown, they raise legitimate

questions and reveal underlying concerns about globalization.

**Governments can no longer conceal domestic turmoil and discord with other Arab regimes since the "self-mass communication" and networking affordances of digital and social media platforms challenge traditional controls on the flow of information**

Globally, valid concerns about post-truth and fake news have been exploited by authoritarian governments. Some authoritarian leaders have used fake news as a foil to attack the credibility of independent media. Others have used it as an external threat to justify undemocratic, oppressive laws. When it comes to Arab media, the debate about fake news and post-truth politics should be understood in the context of an authoritarian comeback rather than malign foreign influence. Unlike the epistemic or democratic crisis discourse informing the debate in the West, the post-truth climate in global and Arab media focuses on state-sponsored propaganda, resurging authoritarianism and political upheavals, which constitute the primary drivers of global and Arab mis/disinformation.

<sup>49</sup> TERRY, P. E. "Untangling Truth, Facts, and Opinions: Why Simple Tenets of Science Have Become Uneasy." *American Journal of Health Promotion* 33, no. 3 (2019) <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0890117119831864>. See also: KNIPP, K. "The Khashoggi case: Arab media omit uncomfortable facts." *Deutsche Welle*. 22 November 2018 [www.dw.com/en/the-khashoggi-case-arab-media-omit-uncomfortable-facts/a-46400506](http://www.dw.com/en/the-khashoggi-case-arab-media-omit-uncomfortable-facts/a-46400506).

<sup>50</sup> MAHONEY, R. "Saudi control of Arab media, lamented by Khashoggi, shapes coverage of his death." *The Committee to Protect Journalists*. 30 October 2018 <https://cpj.org/blog/2018/10/saudi-control-of-arab-media-lamented-by-khashoggi-.php>.