Research Article

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Political fact-checking in the Middle East: What news can be verified in the Arab world?

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Abstract: This study examines the news selection processes followed by fact-checking organizations in the Middle East, specifically Egypt, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates, and gatekeeping such organizations face while working under authoritarian rule. By reviewing fact-checked news posted on the Facebook pages of six Arabic language organizations: Da Begad, HereszTruth, Fatabyyano, Matsad2sh, MisbarFC, and Saheeh Masr, this study manually analyzes about 5,000 fact-checked news stories to understand the extent of political fact-checking performed on Arab presidents, heads of government, and rulers, along with the most verified news topics. Results show that organizations in the Middle East rarely fact-check Arab rulers or refute their claims, while their news selection process prioritizes human interest topics. The study suggests that Arab fact-checkers resort to self-censorship due to gatekeeping influences that impact the region's media climate.

Keywords: Gatekeeping; News selection; The Middle East; Fact-checking organizations.

1 Introduction

At a 2014 Global Summit for fact-checking, an Egyptian activist described the beginning of one of the first fact-checking initiatives in the region, a promise tracker called MorsiMeter to review the first 100 days in office of Egypt's former president Mohamed Morsi. Graves (2018) notes MorsiMeter founder saying:

What got us into fact-checking, I guess the whole story starts the day after the Arab Spring, when people became insanely optimistic and everyone started thinking about how we can contribute and bring about some sort of impact, we stood up there and we thought the only thing we think we're really good at is technology, so we decided to build a line of tools that helps to empower the average citizen (p. 622).

The MorsiMeter, however, was a brief experiment. Due to political pressure, the website shut down in 2014 (Flamini, 2019). Shaped by the global fact-checking movement, several dedicated fact-checking organizations in different parts of the Middle East emerged since the short independent MorsiMeter. Nevertheless, as Shoemaker and Vos (2009) said, "news is as different in the Middle East and the United States as are governments or economies" (p. 97). As such, one can assume fact-checking in the Middle East will be influenced by the region's politics and culture, and will also be different compared to counterparts in the U.S.

Fact-checking organizations in the Middle East are considered a recent phenomenon and studies rarely focus on reviewing the news they investigate. This study addresses such lack of research by providing a thorough analysis of fact-checking in the Arab region using gatekeeping theory and the news values method. All fact-checking organizations examined in this study are Arabic-speaking, based in the Middle East, and focus on the region's news. The study aims to answer two main questions: First, how does gatekeeping influence fact-checking in the Arab region? And second, what type of stories do fact-checking organizations focus on sharing on Facebook?

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Before presenting this study's results, this paper begins with an examination of the fact-checking movement in the U.S. and its spread to the Arab region, highlighting the region's repressive media environment. Moreover, I will explain a theoretical framework on gatekeeping and news values, including previous connections that have been made between gatekeeping and journalism. The review will also touch on gatekeeping activities in the Middle East to understand the nature of information control in the region. Finally, the literature review examines the definition of new values, focusing on research describing factors that identify newsworthiness.

2 Literature Review

2.1 The emergence of a need for fact-checking

As the dissemination of fake news and disinformation during elections in the European Union, Brazil, India, and the 2016 U.S. elections (Moshirnia, 2020) received significant attention, fact-checking gained considerable attention and became, for some, a solution to the problem (Ceron, de-Lima-Santos, & Quiles, 2021). This is represented by a noticeable increase in fact-checking organizations (Young, Jamieson, Poulsen, & Goldring, 2018). Even before 2016, fact-checking organizations created a 300% increase in fact-checked stories from 2008 to 2012 (Graves & Glaisyer, 2012). The fact-checking movement grew in the U.S. with the establishment of more organizations that are holding politicians accountable. They have become a valuable part of the political landscape in the U.S. (Uscinski & Butler, 2013). Importantly, this rise of this fact checking movement inspired more dedicated fact-checking organizations around the world. Following organizations and groups in Asia and Latin America, several Middle Eastern organizations began taking part in this process. Many interesting aspects make reviewing fact-checking efforts in the Middle East noteworthy. Unlike fact-checking in the U.S., the political, cultural, economic, social, and religious complexities in the Middle East can have a more considerable impact on the topics organizations decide to debunk, thus shaping the fact-checking landscape of the region.

Though it is hard to say whether fact-checking originated in the United States, the movement has significantly developed there, with leading fact-checkers rejecting the 'he said, she said' neutral journalism for reporting political news (Dobbs, 2012). Describing fact-checking, Graves & Glaisyer, (2012) point out the differences between verifying public political claims and the conventional internal fact-checking process followed by journalists before publishing a story.

One common-sense way to distinguish the work of dedicated fact-checkers is to say they focus on reported speech—on what's inside quotation marks. In contrast, internal fact-checking at traditional news outlets is mainly designed to ensure the reporter got the quote right (p. 8).

At the same time, Coddington, Molyneux, and Lawrence (2014) think fact-checking is journalistic. Generally, facts are central to political fact-checking and traditional journalism (Pingree et al., 2013), yet fact-checking gives extra attention to judging such facts (Coddington, Molyneux, & Lawrence, 2014). As Graves (2013) describes this genre, fact-checkers do not just rely on reporting a fact "but publicly decide it" (p. 18). In a similar sense, Elizabeth (2014) states that fact-checkers examine verifiable facts without advocacy or partisanship.

Discussing the fact-checking process's core steps, Mantzarlis (2018) illustrates three steps: claims, evidence, and judgment. Primarily, fact-checkers need to select facts that they suspect are false to begin the verification process while avoiding opinion pieces (Dobbs, 2012). The second step is to select evidence to review and rate the claim (Amazeen, Thorson, Muddiman, & Graves, 2015). Such evidence can be a mixture of official documents from governments and nonpartisan sources, along with information from related experts. Finally, according to their interpretation of the evidence found, fact-checkers provide a judgement (Coddington et al., 2014).

Understanding the effectiveness of fact-checking is still up for debate. Early and recent studies note specific corrective effects on audiences after debunking stories (Cappella & Jamieson, 1994), which can improve political awareness and decrease belief in misinformation (Fridkin, Kenney, & Wintersieck, 2015; Nyhan & Reifler, 2015; Weeks, 2015; Wood & Porter, 2019). Nonetheless, other studies have pointed out that a backlash can occur when fact-checking existing beliefs, causing individuals to stick to false facts (Anderson, Lepper, & Ross, 1980; Garrett & Weeks, 2013; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). On Twitter, Shin, Driscoll and Bar (2016) also found that posting the debunking of a rumor

by a fact-checking website may not force users to stop using rumors in general. Moreover, Marres (2018) criticized a less reviewed aspect of fact-checking, which is the algorithmic selection tools used by platforms like Facebook to detect ‘fake news’. Marres argues that algorithmic selection helps spread specific content and produces a network bias, allowing only specific content to circulate. Overall, Marres argues that the way fact-checking operates currently through dividing the world into facts and lies increases polarization.

Marres’ discussion follows the lines of Uscinski and Butler’s (2013) criticism of fact-checking. In their view, fact-checking supports a shallow understanding of a complex world. Uscinski and Butler argue that facts cannot be self-evident like fact-checkers make them seem and highlight a few points to back their argument. First, in terms of selecting what to fact check, since it is impossible to review every political claim made, the scholars believe that, like journalists, fact-checkers decide on which facts to verify based on their ideology or bias. This, they argue, will eventually lead to flaws in the fact-checking process. Second, Uscinski and Butler suppose that by selecting which evidence to include in the verification process, fact-checkers decide what is true. In other words, the criteria used in itself can lead to certain judgements. Additionally, their study discusses the problems with verifying causal claims, one that asserts a relationship between facts. Issues can also be found when checking claims regarding future events, which are impossible to check.

Overall, Oeldorf-Hirsch, Schmierbach, Appleman, and Boyle (2020) conclude in their study that fact-checking services may not always succeed in correcting perceptions “due to variations in user trust and the clarity of communication with the audience” (p. 686). However, Margolin, Hannak and Weber (2018) find that political fact-checking can lead rumor spreaders to share more accurate information or possibly encourage platform operators to remove false content or at least flag such content (Moshirnia, 2020). On an individual basis, research conducted by Amazeen et al. (2018) reveals that people who are exposed to a correction by an external fact-checking organization were “significantly more accurate in their assessment of the controversial statement than those who did not see a correction” (p. 39). Spivak (2010) also states that the best evidence for the influence of fact-checking is the presence of strong complaints from politicians when they receive negative reviews.

When looking at fact-checking outside the U.S., it is vital to point to how the fact-checking movement’s growth led to the evolution of the genre outside traditional journalistic practice. International fact-checking is not explicitly limited to journalists. As Stencel (2016) highlights, internationally, fewer than half of fact-checkers have a journalistic background, compared to 90% in the U.S. Many fact-checkers can “include activists, political reformers, and cause-oriented journalists” (Graves, 2018, p. 617). This different angle regarding fact-checkers can suggest other possible differences when comparing the global movement and its various media and political environments to the American one. Stencel (2016) discusses how, unlike the U.S., international fact-checkers are rarely partisan, specifically in countries with a less independent media environment.

On the other hand, Graves (2018, p. 624) believes that there are only a few organizational differences within the global movement. He describes fact-checking as a “discursive boundary object” that can hold different meanings to different communities “but robust enough to maintain an identity across these boundaries” (Dunbar-Hester 2013, p. 503; Star & Griesemer 1989). Much like traditional journalism, where concepts do not have identical meanings across global newsrooms, fact-checking globally differs (Waisbord, 2013, p. 190).

3 Arab Media and fact-checking

As mentioned above, fact-checking in the Middle East is still considered new. More research will be required to understand the movement’s characteristics in the Arab region, particularly in regard to the media environment they operate in, where State regimes have used several methods to influence information circulation, including attacking journalists and news organizations (Galal & Shehata, 2020). The case of the MorsiMeter highlighted above and the political pressure it faced is a good example that illustrates the influences that can affect fact-checking in the Arab region.

In *News around the world: Content, practitioners, and the public*, Ali (2012) address media censorship in Jordan, and highlights how the Ministry of Culture and Information plays a daily role in press censorship. Amendments to Jordan’s press and publication laws, in addition to cybercrime laws, allow the Jordanian government to block online news media, hold outlets accountable for comments made by readers (Mahadeen, 2020), and jail media professionals

and citizen journalists (Reporters Without Borders, 2019). Such censorship restrictions are one of frequent examples that lead Arab journalists and editors to practice self-censorship to avoid challenges with the authorities (Amin, 2002). Self-censorship is defined here as “the act of intentionally and voluntarily withholding information from others in the absence of formal obstacles” (Bar-Tal, 2017, p. 41).

Jordanian fact-checking organization Fatabyyano (the name is a divine command from the Quran that means to investigate) operates in Amman as part of the International Fact-Checking Network’ IFCN’, a unit of the Poynter Institute, which is dedicated to bringing together fact-checkers worldwide (Flamini, 2019). It is also part of Facebook’s third-party fact-checking program (Facebook fact-checker, 2020). Nevertheless, the organization’s founder has spoken about the dangers of fact-checking politics in the region, which has led Fatabyyano to refrain from certain political news and direct their efforts towards vague politics to avoid such challenges (Flamini, 2019).

The Egyptian media system is also an important example to shine a light on, especially when it comes to discussions on ‘fake news’ and fact-checking given that the Egyptian government weaponizes the term ‘fake news’ to impose repressive conditions on media outlets and journalists (Sadek, 2019). The Egyptian press freedom and media landscape has been heavily deteriorating since 2014 due to laws, legislations, and government practices that have imposed harsh restrictions (Elkilany, 2020). In addition to having no press freedom, the country has passed legislation that punishes the spread of ‘fake news’ (Fatma, 2019), without adequately defining the term, weaponizing ‘fake news’ as a way to prosecute dissidents and journalists (Record number of journalists, 2020). In 2019, 31 journalists were jailed for allegedly spreading fake news, while 34 were jailed in 2020 (Record number of journalists, 2020). The country is now ranked 166 out of 180 countries in Reporters Without Borders’ *2020 World Press Freedom Index* (Biggest jailers of journalists, 2020). To control the online climate, Egypt has been steadily applying several censorship and regulation strategies through legal frameworks, like introducing the Cybersecurity Council in 2014 to monitor cyberspace (Hassib & Alnemr, 2021). Similarly, an amendment of the 2016 Law on Regulating the Press and Media allows the government to censor content by blocking websites that could threaten national security (“TIMEP Brief”, 2019). Such power has supported the government’s efforts to block over 500 news and media websites in 2017, in addition to arresting Facebook page administrators (“Blocked Websites List”, 2020). Egypt’s oppressive efforts to control media outlets has subsequently led producers and journalists to practice self-censorship (Abdulla, 2016). Interestingly, many fact-checking organizations and groups are focused on Egyptian news, making the Egyptian fact-checking and online media climate a valuable case for this study.

The UAE government has also been known to be involved in repressive activities that include blocking websites and jailing dissidents for spreading false information (Stork, 2019). In 2016, the World Press Freedom classified the UAE as a country that severely represses freedom of expression and opinion (“Report on the situation of journalists”, n.d.). Saudi Arabia has followed the same approach, particularly after being in the spotlight following journalist Jamal Khashoggi’s murder, by threatening citizens who spread ‘fake news’ about the murder with prison and fines (Novak, 2018).

More generally, media ownership is certainly a relevant aspect for Arab fact-checking organizations that can give a glimpse of the climate organizations enter. While most organizations sampled either do not state their ownership or represent themselves as independent volunteer groups, others declare commercial ownership. Though this does not reveal enough information about ownership leanings, transparency regarding media ownership is noteworthy given that it can be a factor affecting editorial choices (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). In one survey, half of the 601 Arab journalists who responded consider media ownership as one of the most challenging journalistic practices (Pintak & Ginger, 2009). The Egyptian government, for example, owns and regulates more than half of popular media, with twelve media outlets linked to the Egyptian intelligence services (“Sisification of the Media”, n.d.). Similarly, most domestic media outlets in the UAE are state-owned companies (“United Arab Emirates – Media”, n.d.). Jordan is not significantly different. Though there are private print and online media outlets and no presence of laws for media ownership in the country, the Jordanian government imposes its control on outlets through ownership and part-ownership, in addition to control through advertising revenue, given its position as the biggest advertiser in the country (Mahadeen, 2020).

With all this in mind, similar organizational structures and repressions that affect the way journalists and editors investigate news, can also reflect directly or indirectly on emerging fact-checking organizations leading them to self-censorship. As media entities constantly aim to avoid censorship and prosecution, Arab fact-checking organizations may be aware of how such repression can also affect them. The study argues here that this political context is a key factor that could lead organizations to ignore fact-checking political leaders due to repercussions in the form of arrests, fines or blocking their online presence.

4 Gatekeeping, news selection, and the fact-checking world

Choosing claims to check is the first step a fact-checker takes to begin verifying news (Graves, 2016). The news selection process that guides organizations in the Middle East can be impacted by individual biases (Vos & Heinderyckx, 2015) or institutional and structural factors (Robinson, 1970) or both. Therefore, analyzing fact-checked news published by these organizations through the gatekeeping theory lens can show a particular information filtering approach (Shoemaker, 1991) that certainly affects the whole news selection methodology.

White (1950) was the first to articulate gatekeeping as it relates to journalism and communication, which led to a growing body of literature defining the concept and exploring why some news gets published while others go unseen (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). White describes it as a subjective discourse that is “based on the ‘gate keeper’s’ own set of experiences, attitudes and expectations” (p. 390). Donohue, Tichenor, and Olien’s (1972) more expansive gatekeeping definition includes “all form of information control” (p. 43). However, Shoemaker and Vos (2009) describe gatekeeping as the ongoing process of “culling and crafting countless bits of information into the limited number of messages that reach people each day, and it is the center of the media’s role in modern public life” (p. 1). Similarly, they describe the gatekeeping process as what determines “the way in which we define our lives and the world around us” and eventually affecting “the social reality of every person” (p. 3). Likewise, Barzilai-Nahon (2009, p. 1) defines gatekeeping as:

The process of controlling information as it moves through a gate or filter . . . and is associated with exercising different types of power (e.g., selecting news, enforcing the status quo in parliamentary committees, mediating between professional and ethnic groups, brokering expert information).

The work of Shoemaker and Vos (2009) also explains the factors that can lead to shaping news as they illustrate research that takes gatekeeping theory outside selection and individual judgements. Gatekeeping can start from the moment information is received by communication organizations, as such informational channels can have gatekeepers such as those who initially transmit messages. White (1950) uses the character of Mr. Gates, a news processor, to show how a gatekeeper can make specific selections, focusing on “what stories were chosen from the copy coming into the newsroom” without highlighting “the incoming flow of news itself” (Tiffen, 2015, p. 181). Nevertheless, other interpretations of Mr. Gates’ gatekeeping refer to earlier influences from news services and gatherers who provided Mr. Gates with information (Hirsch, 1977; McCombs & Shaw 1976; Halloran, Elliot, & Murdock 1970). Shoemaker & Vos (2009) present five levels of analysis supporting gatekeeping research. Such levels include: (1) an individual level, examining a person’s personality (Lewin, 1951; White, 1950) along with background and values (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). (2) Routines (Cassidy, 2006) that media employees practice. (3) An organizational level which includes each organization’s internal elements. (4) Social institution level, which focuses on external characteristics surrounding organizations and their members (Donohue, Olien, & Tichenor, 1989). (5) The social system engaging with ideology and culture.

Organizations and the mass media can act as a cultural gatekeeper for society (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Such gatekeeping “filters the available products, ensuring that only a sample of the available ‘universe’ is ever brought to the attention of the general public” (Hirsch, 1977, p. 5). For example, in a newspaper, news content can be based on the paper’s policy and the ideology of its editors (Reisner, 1992). It can also be affected by the organization’s size, which may determine the number of rules journalists need to follow when selecting news (Bergen & Weaver, 1988; Demers, 1994; Traves, 1978). Shoemaker, Eichholz, Kim, and Wrigley (2001) also present a different view than White (1950), describing the effects of an organization’s routines and structure on a journalist or editor’s characteristics. Such influences may indeed be impacting the work of fact-checkers, starting from initial decisions regarding selecting news to the evidence used to reach a judgement. Overall, gatekeeping research shows less individual power within journalists’ hands, with the social and organizational institutions playing a larger role (Schudson, 2001).

Another important factor that is essential for this study is the role of governments in gatekeeping. Describing this, Shoemaker and Vos state:

Even in a late-capitalist society where markets, rather than governments, are seen as the most legitimate means of regulating the media, the government nevertheless influences gatekeeping. Government institutions and actors have a variety of means at their disposal. They engage in news management or public relations efforts, but they also set and apply various laws, policies, and regulations aimed at the media. (p. 88)

Government gatekeeping has been noted all over the world, from Great Britain and Spain (Sanders, Bale, & Canel, 1999) to India (Thussu, 2002), and journalists report that it is becoming harder to engage in investigative journalism (Schuman, 2013). As illustrated above, authoritarian countries in the Middle East use legislative and practical measures to control the media (Galal & Shehata, 2020); such acts can be considered government gatekeeping, and can be linked to the absence of critical media in such countries (Nakhleh, 2019).

The social system level of analysis is also a vital factor when it comes to gatekeeping. “A country’s broadcasting system mirrors national character, expressing a particular political philosophy and cultural identity” (Head, 1985, p. 2). Similarly, Hallin and Mancini (2004, p. 46) suggest that news media cannot be understood without understanding political and economic interests, among other social structure elements. Ideology is another essential factor in shaping news content, seeing that gatekeepers will select news agreed on by elites and non-elites (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Authoritarian societies disseminate different content than media organizations in liberal, communist or socially responsible societies (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). For example, Ravi’s (2005) examination of the Iraq War coverage in newspapers from five different countries reveals various cultural values in each country, directly affecting the news angles newspapers covered. However, Shoemaker and Vos point out the difficulties in adequately evaluating social systems since scholars cannot be objective due to their location within their own system (p. 98).

Overall, this study’s theoretical framework rests on the concepts of gatekeeping. Though the study explores a few gatekeeping concepts, the main focus here is on gatekeeping from the organizational, social institution, and social system levels as elaborated by Shoemaker and Vos (2009). To explain more, gatekeeping in this study is seen as the result of influences that aim to control information flow. Such influences come from an organization’s internal policies (Reisner, 1992), governments, and social structure elements like ideology and culture (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Since new types of news organizations and journalistic practices emerge, gatekeeping and news selection processes develop (Vos, 2015). Consequently, scholars must continue to document and review how such evolution changes the news we see. As fact-checking organizations and methods gain attention, it is essential to continue reviewing the work currently being produced by such organizations, especially in regions in the early stages of fact-checking, like the Middle East. Moreover, this research, as far as I know, is the first empirical study to provide a detailed analysis of the work of fact-checking organizations in the Middle East. This is valuable as most studies on fact-checking focus on the U.S. and liberal democracies, while fact-checking in autocratic and partially democratic regions like the Middle East needs proper examination.

5 Method

Exploring the type of topics, people, issues, and areas fact-checked, this study aims to first understand the effects of gatekeeping on devoted fact-checking organizations that are primarily focused on and based in the Middle East. It does so by examining the frequency of verifications of Arab Countries’ presidents, heads of governments, and rulers. Second, studying news selection practices conducted to know the themes and topics these organizations are focused on. Thus, this study seeks to answer the two below research questions:

RQ1: How often do fact-checkers in the Middle East fact-check Arab presidents, heads of governments, and rulers?

RQ2: What type of stories do fact-checking organizations focus on sharing on Facebook?

The study’s sample includes six organizations: Da Begad, Fatabyyano, HeresTruth, Matsda2sh, Misbar and Saheeh Masr. The selection of these organizations is based on their popularity on Facebook and the high amount of content they each create (Figure 1). Additionally, they represent a diverse range of individual and organizational ideological backgrounds related to Arab political and media systems that focus on ‘fake news’, specifically in Egypt, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). To situate each fact-checking outlet to explain the reasons behind its inclusion in the sample, I will provide a brief background before explaining the method for assessing.

Figure 1: A column chart distributing Facebook page likes.

5.1 Da Begad

Inspired by the changes in Egypt's media environment due to the Arab Spring, Da Begad, meaning 'Is this real?', was launched in 2013. It was launched as an independent organization with no political affiliations by a group of volunteers in Egypt to fact-check hoaxes on social media in the Middle East (Taha, 2018). As per Fouad (2019) Da Begad is considered a leading fact-checking group due to its speed in verifying information and comprehensive coverage of topics (Fouad, 2019). The group is registered with the Ministry of Supply and Internal Trade in Egypt (Da Begad, n.d.). According to their editorial guidelines and process, Da Begad does not focus on one specific type of news but fact-checks a range of topics from political topics to cultural ones and many others, all without leaning towards a specific political view (Da Begad, n.d.). Their verification process consists of two parts, first, selecting suspected 'fake news' received from followers through their social media pages or website, or by looking into trending news on social media as long as the news was shared more than 300 times (Da Begad, n.d.). The organization does not discuss which topics they focus on reviewing but prioritizes social media virality. After deciding on a claim to verify, one or more fact-checker begins investigating and their conclusions are discussed by an internal group of fact-checkers. Finally, editors check the final judgement to ensure it is objective and in clear language. The group presents itself as apolitical, yet it faced digital attacks from Muslim Brotherhood supporters in Egypt in 2013 (Fouad, 2019), while the country was led by Mohamed Morsi, one of the leaders of the Brotherhood who served as the fifth President of Egypt (Knell, 2012).

5.2 Matsda2sh

Another group that appears to have followed Da Begad's footsteps is Matsda2sh, meaning 'Do not believe' (Fouad, 2019). Though the group is also limited to Egyptian news, they have gained more than 650,000 followers, making them significant in the fact checking landscape (Matsda2sh, n.d.). Focused on "fighting fake news and misinformation" (Matsda2sh, n.d.), the initial examination of Matsda2sh in this study notes the consistent coverage of a range of news topics related to Egypt. With no website, but popular Facebook and Instagram pages, there is little to no additional information regarding its editorial guidelines and organizational structure.

5.3 HereszTruth

Like Matsda2sh, there is no detailed information regarding the internal policies of the fact-checking organization HereszTruth. As a Facebook page only (HereszTruth, n.d.), the group seems to be performing the same activities as other

mentioned fact-checking groups but with a broader focus. They are not limited to Egyptian news but extend to different parts of the Middle East and other parts of the world. Their broader focus and popularity, with over 200,000 followers, also led to their inclusion in the study's sample.

5.4 Fatabyyano

Fatabyyano is the only organization in the IFCN that publishes in Arabic (Flamini, 2019a) and is part of Facebook's third-party fact-checking program (Facebook fact checker in ME, 2020). Starting as a Facebook page in 2014, *Fatabyyano* established itself as a trustworthy and credible independent platform specialized in fact-checking news in the Middle East and North Africa (Flamini, 2019a; *Fatabyyano*, n.d.). The organization is a limited liability company registered with the Companies Control Department at the Ministry of Industry and Trade in Jordan (*Fatabyyano*, n.d.). *Fatabyyano* aims to fact-check disinformation in the Arab region and build "a critical mentality for Arab readers that reviews everything before sharing." They require its employees and interns to be politically independent with no previous political activities with parties or other sides (*Fatabyyano*, n.d.). The group covers religious, social, medical, technological, scientific and political news. Their fact-checking methodology includes several steps, including receiving fact-checking requests, verification and classification, fact-checking, editing, hunting mistakes, proofreading, graphic designing and publishing (*Fatabyyano*, n.d.).

5.5 Misbar

Misbar's is a recent fact-checking organization with a different organizational structure from the others in this study ("Arabic fact-checking site goes online", 2020). Misbar is a not-for-profit that was born in 2019 out of a larger social media platform named Baaz, to fill the gap in fact-checking in the Middle East (Arab fact-checking, 2020). The not-for-profit assures that it does not allow its mother company to perform "any influence over content or ratings," adding that "decisions on which facts to check and what to rate them are determined solely by Misbar's independent editorial team" (Misbar, n.d.). They also state that their financial support comes directly from Baaz. With offices in Jordan and the United States, and editors from different parts of the world, the organization also does not allow employees to be involved in any political activities or activism (Misbar, n.d.). Their research and writing process includes finding verifiable viral claims from "all ends of the political spectrum," verifying claims through systematic research, and rounds of writing and editing to publish judgments. Misbar's team chooses a label to judge claims based on eight labels: fake, misleading, true, myth, selective, suspicious, commotion, and satire (Misbar, n.d.).

5.6 Saheeh Masr

Finally, despite also only covering Egyptian news, Saheeh Masr was included in this sample due to its clear focus on political topics. Saheeh Masr focuses on fact-checking statements "made by politicians, government officials, public figures and others who have an impact on public opinion in Egypt" (Saheeh Masr, n.d.). These publicized characteristics are considered unique compared to other featured fact-checking groups. Compared to Saheeh Masr, the other groups tend not to limit their work to political fact-checking. This is because limiting work only to political fact-checking could likely lead to issues with the authorities as well as to be labelled by followers as belonging to certain political ideologies. Despite not publishing their research and editorial process, Saheeh Masr describes its code of ethics, which includes considerations for news investigators, sources, and language use (Saheeh Masr, n.d.).

The above initial exploration of the six organizations highlight differences in their editorial and news selection processes. For example, Saheeh Masr states their focus on verifying political news, but *Fatabyyano* avoids such news. Additionally, organizations like Da Begad, Misbar and *Fatabyyano* publish their detailed fact-checking process and ownership, while the rest do not. In terms of employees, organizations like HereszTruth, Saheeh Masr, and Matsda2sh also did not publish information regarding team members. However, the remaining organizations, *Fatabyyano*, Da Begad, and Misbar, display their team members' backgrounds. While it is challenging to make factual statements

regarding the lack of journalistic backgrounds within such teams, most members come from various non-journalistic education and experience. Misbar was the only exception, with several editors who work or worked in journalism. This echoes Stencel's (2016) views that less than half of fact-checkers outside the U.S. possess a journalistic background.

Using a mixed qualitative and digital approach to analyze the sample's content, I first extracted a large Facebook dataset on 18 November 2020, the date the study began, through the social monitoring platform CrowdTangle (CrowdTangle Team, 2020). The dataset included all posts published by each organization ($n=12,535$). Afterward, an initial exploration of the dataset was conducted to determine a narrowed sample to analyze. As a result, a final sample was selected ($n=4,999$) spanning from 1 September 2019 to 1 September 2020. This specific period was chosen based on periods when all selected fact-checking organizations were active, as two of the organizations were established in early and mid-2019, while one group was not consistently active in 2019. This period also represents a reasonable dataset that when analyzed fully can provide answers to the above research questions.

I designed a codebook, based on a few of the main categories of news stories included in previous research on news values (Shoemaker & Cohen, 2012; Harcup & O'Neill, 2017; Al-Rawi, 2017). News values were first highlighted in studies by Østgaard (1965) and Galtung and Ruge (1965) to identify specific news factors that confirm valuable information. News values define what is newsworthy (Bednarek, & Caple, 2014) by describing the newsworthy "aspects of actors, happenings and issues as existing in and constructed through discourse" (p. 137). Despite the value shown in using this concept in a few empirical studies (Kepplinger, 2008; O'Neill & Harcup, 2009), news values scholarship reveals the ongoing debate regarding the factors and their number (Eilders, 2006; Harcup & O'Neill, 2001). De Vreese (2005) describes the concept of news factors not as a theory but as a method to explain and analyze media structures. Staab (1990) summarizes the main issues with theoretical and methodological angles of news factors in four dimensions: the status of the concept of news factors, the difficulty in defining an event, the validity of the concept of news factors, and its degree of universality (p. 38, 39). From a wider angle, and not considering organizational impacts within news organizations, news values does not explain how competing news organizations have different priorities when covering international news (Tiffen, 2015).

From 26 main types of news and other subtypes, I selected seven major topics relevant to Facebook posts made by fact-checking organizations. Moreover, the categories slightly changed to fit the study. These changes were based on a preliminary examination of the final sample that revealed content related to topics like culture, religion, and hoaxes. These topics and similar ones were added to the categories' subtypes. The news stories types I initially examined include: (1) politics (internal/regional/international), (2) internal order (violence/war/terrorism/conflict/protest), (3) social relations (religious groups, class relations, sexual relations), (4) disasters (accidents/epidemics/natural disasters), (5) sports (national/international), (6) human interests (human suffering, hoaxes, rumors, myths, celebrities, animals, food), (7) general information (news/utility/practical value), and (8) other (Table 1).

Before the initial exploration of the data, the removal of posts fact-checking Qatari rulers was considered, as the recent diplomatic crisis between the country and Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE (Suliman, Smith, & Gubash, 2021) might present a bias in the data. However, the initial exploration of the sample only demonstrated a minimal number of posts fact-checking Qatari rulers.

The focus in this study is given to the most important overarching topic in each news story. The analysis included reviewing each post's textual, visual and audio-visual features. This method can also be seen as a weakness in the news values method, given that one topic can have two or more categories. However, though Shoemaker and Cohen (2006) explain differences between news and newsworthiness, they do not explain how their coding is conducted. Two coders independently examined a representative 10% of the sample ($n=490$), and intercoder reliability was measured to test the codebook's accuracy. Given the type of nominal data gathered, Krippendorff's alpha, or coefficient, was used (Freelon, 2010). Krippendorff asserts that it "is customary to require $\alpha \geq .800$. Where tentative conclusions are still acceptable, $\alpha \geq .667$ is the lowest conceivable limit" (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 429). Coders reached an agreement of $\alpha \geq 0.771$ for news categories. The rest of the data was manually coded accordingly. As for the second part of the study the emphasis was given to which posts presented fact-checking of Arab rulers. Decisions were made based on whether posts fact-checked statements claimed or allegedly claimed to be by presidents, heads of governments, and rulers. For example, in the case of Egypt, statements made or allegedly made by President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly.

Table 1: Topic of news items.

Number	News item
1.	Politics (Internal & international, economic, political figures)
2.	Internal order (War, violence, terrorism, crime)
3.	Social relations (Religious groups, class relations, sexual relations)
4.	Disasters/accidents/epidemics (Corona, natural disasters)
5.	Sports
6.	Human Interest (human suffering, hoaxes, rumours, myths, celebrities, animals, food)
7.	General information (informative, instructional, educational)
8.	Other

6 Results & Discussion

This study uses gatekeeping theory and news values method to explore the work of six popular fact-checking organizations in the Middle East. Given the repressive conditions Arab media outlets work in, I focus first on answering this study's first question by examining the extent of fact-checked statements made by leaders of countries, specifically presidents, heads of governments, and rulers to reveal self-censorship and gatekeeping influences. Gatekeeping and news selection go side by side (Kepplinger, 2011), and the political environment domestic media outlets find themselves in can impact the way they frame news (Clausen, 2003; Fahmy, 2005; Kim & Kelly, 2008). Therefore, determining the frequency of political fact-checking of Arab rulers can be beneficial for this study.

Answering the first question, the study interestingly shows that only 94 posts, less than 2% of the total data fact-checked claims by Arab rulers (Table 2). Misbar fact-checked rulers the most with 49 posts, followed by Matsad2sh which fact-checked rulers 18 times. Saheeh Masr was third with 16 posts, and HereszTruth (8), Fatabyyano (3) had the lowest number of posts fact-checking rulers. Da Begad was last as the group did not verify any claims by rulers.

Regarding the study's second question about the main news topics covered by the six fact-checking organizations, results (Table 3) reveal that the most covered topic is human interest (35.6%), ahead of political news (27.1%). When looked at separately, political news topics gained moderate coverage, specifically from Saheeh Masr, which received the highest percentage (67.3%) of political news fact-checking, while Matsad2sh was second (36.5%), followed by Misbar (25.1%). Da Begad (20.2%), HereszTruth (12.8%), and Fatabyyano (7.5%) posted the least political-fact-checking.

News topics related to disasters were the third most covered topic (11.1%), specifically news related to coronavirus, before general information (9.3%) and internal order (6.8%). Unrelated topics labelled as other (4.8%), sports (2.9%), and social relations (2.4%) amounted to the smallest portion of news topics.

As shown in the results, while covering political news in the region is becoming harder, fact-checking organizations do verify political news. Yet, the verified news rarely considers presidents, heads of government, and rulers in the region. The analysis in this study presents a low number of 94 (1.8%) news stories that fact-checked rulers from various Arab countries out of 4,999 sampled stories. Additionally, for the countries this study focuses on, Egypt, Jordan, and the UAE, results revealed limited fact-checking of rulers. Only 19 posts fact-checked Egyptian president Abdelfattah Elsis, while prime minister Mostafa Madbouly was fact-checked in 8 posts. Crown Prince of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, was the only UAE ruler fact-checked in the sample, but was only verified 5 times. For Jordan, King Abdullah II bin Al-Hussein was fact-checked once.

Examining how often fact-checking organizations verify their own national leaders, or leaders of countries these organizations are focused on or based in, the data analysis demonstrated differences in fact-checking regional and national leaders (Table 4). The purpose of such analysis is to determine if, for example, a Jordanian organization like Fatabyyano verifies Jordan's leader, King Abdullah II bin Al-Hussein. Da Begad and HereszTruth were excluded from this analysis as the first had no political fact-checking posts and the focus or base of the second was unknown. Findings suggest that Saheeh Masr, an organization focused solely on Egypt, had the most posts focusing on national leaders

Table 2: Political fact-checking performed by Da Begad, Fatabyyano, HereszTruth, Matsad2sh, Misbar and Saheeh Masr.

Political fact-checking	Da Begad	Fatabyyano	HereszTruth	Matsad2sh	Misbar	Saheeh Masr	Total
	Frequency (Percentage)	Frequency (Percentage)	Frequency (Percentage)	Frequency (Percentage)	Frequency (Percentage)	Frequency (Percentage)	Frequency (Percentage)
1. Posts fact-checking leaders	0	3 (0.3%)	8 (5.6%)	18 (2.2%)	49 (2.1%)	16 (3.2%)	94 (1.8%)

Table 3: Topics distribution performed by Da Begad, Fatabyyano, HereszTruth, Matsad2sh, Misbar and Saheeh Masr.

Topics	Da Begad	Fatabyyano	HereszTruth	Matsad2sh	Misbar	Saheeh Masr	Total
	Frequency (Percentage)	Frequency (Percentage)	Frequency (Percentage)	Frequency (Percentage)	Frequency (Percentage)	Frequency (Percentage)	Frequency (Percentage)
1. Political	50 (20.2%)	75 (7.5%)	18 (12.8%)	286 (36.5%)	582 (25.1%)	345 (67.3%)	1,356 (27.1%)
2. Internal Order	12 (4.9%)	78 (7.8%)	8 (5.7%)	30 (3.8%)	206 (8.9%)	7 (1.4%)	341 (6.8%)
3. Social Relations	10 (4%)	64 (6.40%)	2 (1.4%)	13 (1.7%)	27 (1.2%)	2 (0.4%)	118 (2.4%)
4. Disasters	37 (15%)	222 (22.2%)	18 (12.8%)	55 (7%)	162 (7%)	59 (11.5%)	553 (11.1%)
5. Sports	8 (3.2%)	6 (0.6%)	0	31 (4%)	92 (4%)	7 (1.40%)	144 (2.9%)
6. Human Interest	123 (49.8%)	414 (41.5%)	95 (37%)	205 (26.2%)	926 (40%)	17 (3.30%)	1,780 (35.6%)
7. General Information	4 (1.6%)	59 (5.9%)	0	152 (19.4%)	180 (7.8%)	72 (14%)	467 (9.3%)
8. Other	3 (1.2%)	80 (8%)	0	11 (1.4%)	142 (6.1%)	4 (0.8%)	240 (4.8%)

(15), followed by Matsad2sh with a close ratio between fact-checking national leaders (8) and regional leaders (10). UAE-based Misbar mainly focused on regional leaders (48) compared to posts discussing national leaders (3), while Fatabyyano's small amount of political fact-checking only considered regional leaders (3).

Moreover, the minimal fact-checking performed on these leaders does not particularly imply that organizations are aiming to hold leaders accountable, as some verifications mainly revise false alleged claims by leaders. The examples below highlight the ways in which fact-checking organizations verify leaders in the region.

In one of Fatabyyano's three political posts fact-checking Arab leaders, the organization judged false news stating that Lebanon's Prime Minister Saad Hariri said Egypt's medical and food supplies sent to his country were expired (Fatabyyano, 2020). The same claim was also labelled as fake by Matsda2sh (Matsda2sh, 2020), an organization with only 18 (2.2%) similar stories fact-checking political leaders. Another example from Misbar, which had 16 (3.2%) posts fact-checking leaders, shows the organization denying news stating that Tunisia's former prime minister Elyes Fakhfakh said that the Tunisia government spied on citizens during coronavirus lockdowns (Misbar, 2020). On the other side, Saheeh Masr's few verifications of Arab leaders (1.8%) were more critical, refuting claims by Egyptian president Abdelfattah Elsis. Saheeh Masr fact-checked a claim by Elsis in which he says that no citizens protested the current political situation in Egypt, labelling the claim as inaccurate (Saheeh Masr, 2019). Similarly, a statement by Elsis regarding the number of refugees in Egypt was also labelled inaccurate (Saheeh Masr, 2020a). However, it is important to note the Saheeh Masr had only 16 posts verifying Egyptian leaders, despite their focus on fact-checking Egyptian politicians.

Table 4: Political fact-checking of national and regional leaders performed by Fatabyyano, Matsad2sh, Misbar and Saheeh Masr.

National/Regional leaders		Fatabyyano	Matsad2sh	Misbar	Saheeh Masr
		Frequency (Percentage)	Frequency (Percentage)	Frequency (Percentage)	Frequency (Percentage)
2.	National leader	0	8 (1%)	3 (0.13%)	15 (3%)
3.	Regional leader	3 (0.3%)	10 (1.2%)	46 (2%)	1 (0.19%)

To discuss this study's second question further, I delve into details regarding the news topics found in the dataset. Human interest was the most posted topic by fact-checking organizations, suggesting an editorial emphasis on checking and debunking myths, urban tales, and hoaxes. Additionally, news about disasters was the third most fact-checked topic after politics. It is important to note here that the sample covers most of the year 2020, which witnessed a large number of reports about coronavirus and most topics in this category were about fact-checking news related to the pandemic and its repercussions around the world.

It is also worth mentioning that out of the top 20 posts that received the most interactions on Facebook, eleven were published by Fatabyyano and eight by Misbar. HereszTruth had one post. Eight of the posts that received the most interactions were labelled as human interest stories, six labelled as disasters, three were political, two labelled as other, and one was sports. Due to space limitations, below I only illustrate three examples from the top 20 most liked posts that highlight the fact-checking of disaster, human interest, and political stories.

In the first example, Fatabyyano fact-checked news claiming that the coronavirus vaccine will transplant an electronic chip in those who will be vaccinated to follow and control them (Fatabyyano, 2020a). The claim, which was linked to Bill Gates, was labelled false by Fatabyyano and received over 25,000 likes and reactions, 865 comments, and 868 shares (Fatabyyano, 2020a). As per the study's codebook, the story's main theme is the coronavirus pandemic, thus falls under disaster news. A second example from Misbar highlights misleading human interest stories. A post which received over 13,000 likes and interactions, 723 comments, and 305 shares verified rumors claiming that Algeria issued new currency in Arabic and English during the country's Independence Day in 2020 (Misbar, 2020a). A third example, also from Misbar, fact-checked false political news showing a video of former U.S. president Donald Trump destroying his office in reaction to his country's economic collapse (Misbar 2020b).

7 Conclusion

This study examines the work of fact-checking organizations in the Arab region, reviewing the effects of self-censorship and gatekeeping influences on their news selection process. Through a content analysis of Facebook posts published by these organizations and using news values theory, general similarities in methodology between fact-checking organizations in the Middle East and their more counterparts in the U.S. can be noted. However, findings also reflect the variations in the media landscape organizations in the Arab region operate in, and how these differences specifically impact their political fact-checking work. While gatekeeping affects even the most democratic countries (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009), the exploration of government, organizational, and social level gatekeeping reveals that these influences have a significant impact on Arab organizations. The work of fact-checking organizations suggest a different approach when conducting political fact-checking.

In summary, Arab fact-checking organizations rarely fact-check political leaders in their countries, which points to self-censorship, likely performed by media organizations in the region to avoid harsh response from authoritarian governments. It is extremely rare for fact-checkers in Egypt, Jordan, and the UAE to verify claims made by rulers. Organizations also barely fact-check their own national leaders and resort to fact-checking regional leaders. Furthermore, the exploration of news selection priorities for fact-checking organizations reveals a higher frequency of human interest topics focusing on rumors, hoaxes, myths and urban tales. Over the past decades, political news became a priority for media outlets in the region, exceeding soft human interest and cultural news (Ayish, 2002). Yet, fact-checking organizations represent a different focus that prioritizes human interest news over political news. It is

also worth noting that the data did not reveal clear partisanship evidence or suggest that fact-checking organizations aim to directly reinforce state-propaganda. Organizations are mostly affected by the repressive media climate in the Arab region and mainly refrain from fact-checking leaders.

Regarding the study limitations, only six fact-checking organizations and groups were examined, with their news selection practices. Future studies examining fact-checking in the Middle East should consider reviewing more groups' work to understand other news selection guidelines that are followed. The study also only explores the work of such organizations through their Facebook pages during a certain period of time. Other social media channels in addition to the organizations' websites, need to be explored further. Comparisons between the work of fact-checking organizations during different periods can also be valuable. Finally, fact-checking in the Middle East region is still considered a new movement and this study only focuses on organizations in Egypt, Jordan, and the UAE. As it develops, more angles can be helpful to examine in the future to understand the movement's characteristics.

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