

From Emancipation to Confusing the Nation: Social Media and Figurations of Disinformation a Decade After the Arab Uprisings

NERMIN ELSHERIF*
Utrecht University, The Netherlands

TASNIEM ANWAR¹
Vrije Universiteit, The Netherlands

This study examines how digital disinformation occurs through the creation and sustenance of figures or cultural tropes. It focuses primarily on the figure of the e-committees, a phenomenon that refers to online fake accounts mobilized by various political actors to tarnish their opponents and propagate their own ideologies online. Based on a frame analysis of Egyptian news articles published between 2011 and 2021, we trace the emergence of this figure in the wake of the 25th of January revolution, its development over time, and its impact on (dis)information. We illustrate how the framing of e-committees contributes to an atmosphere of chaos and confusion about the digital realm, and how such framing tactics can be understood as a practice of digital authoritarianism. The study proposes a novel theoretical and methodological approach to studying disinformation from a cultural studies perspective that is centered around the role of every day media messages.

Keywords: disinformation, social media, Middle East, fake news, Egypt

In November 2017, a famous Egyptian radio presenter, Shereef Khairy,² who once framed himself as a “revolutionary activist,” proudly declared on Facebook that he was participating in the World Youth Forum, an annual state-sponsored conference that started after President Sisi’s ascent with the goal of “marketing Egypt as a democratic nation” (*Mada Masr*, 2017). According to his Facebook post, Khairy facilitated workshops about using “electronic committees” to serve the nation in fighting its enemies. As we will demonstrate in the study, the electronic committees (*al-lijān al-iliktrūniyah*), or the electronic militias (*al-mylyshyāt al-iliktrūniyah*), are two terms used interchangeably in Egyptian media to refer to the widely

Nermin Elsherif: n.e.m.elsherif@uu.nl

Tasniem Anwar: t.anwar2@vu.nl

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² Name changed to preserve anonymity.

organized networks of fake social media accounts mobilized by various political actors to tarnish their opponents and propagate their own ideologies. These terms which haunted public debates from the early days of the 2011 revolution, have rarely been given the scholarly attention they deserve.

The electronic committees—hereafter referred to as e-committees—are not unique to Egypt; they are globally prevalent under other titles, known as “buzzers” in Indonesia (Sastramidjaja, 2022), “sock puppets” in the United States (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018), and “troll factories” in Europe (Aro, 2016). They are akin to “cyber troops” that are “government, military, or political party teams committed to manipulating public opinion over social media” (Bradshaw & Howard, 2017, p. 3). Throughout the past decade, multiple political actors have e-committees for their own propaganda, including the Egyptian state. The development of these e-committees raises questions about the relationship between political mobilization and the digital sphere. To understand this, our study asks: How did Egyptian news media represent the figure of the e-committee over time?

By examining how e-committees are framed and figured in relation to digital disinformation campaigns, we contribute to the growing scholarship on fake news and public manipulation with a case study from a key postcolonial authoritarian context. Theoretically, we contribute to this field by proposing a conceptual approach to examine disinformation from a cultural studies perspective that investigates how confusion and manipulation are systematically instilled into the everyday life through newspaper framings. Our conceptual approach reinvigorates the feminist technoscience concepts of figurations that were developed by Donna Haraway (1997) and later expanded by Adi Kuntsman (2009). Figurations are concerned primarily with how a specific cultural trope is *given form*, or *multiple forms* in public discourse through material and semiotic practices.

Methodologically, we examine how the figure of the electronic militia has been shaped by Egyptian media outlets, from state-owned newspapers like *al-Ahram*, to privately owned newspapers like *al-Shorouk*, and digital news websites such as SasaPost. By focusing on how this figure of e-committees that inhibits new media is constructed within print media, we contributed to a cross-media approach that problematizes the distinctions between old media and new media and refuses to examine disinformation as an exclusively digital phenomenon. Our goal is to investigate how media outlets have covered and represented e-committees over time as sources of (dis)information that transverse online and offline media environments, fostering an atmosphere of confusion, chaos, and suspicion among the publics of Egypt and the region. The study resists technodeterministic discourses, such as the “Facebook revolutions” that have long characterized media scholarship on the region and uncritically celebrated the emancipatory potentials of these platforms (Aouragh & Alexander, 2011). It interrogates how social media became tools of demobilization that contributed to the annihilation of the revolution. In what follows, we elaborate on using figuration as a conceptual framework. Then, we outline our methodological approach in detail.

Theoretical Approach: Figurations of Disinformation

The current debates on digital disinformation are mainly centered around three main research approaches. The first highlights the role of the “political economy” of these technologies (Benkler et al., 2018). It questions the affordances and infrastructures of hybrid media systems that allow disinformation

and look into the economies behind these “network propaganda” campaigns that aim at “misleading people to achieve political ends” (Benkler et al., 2018, p. 24). This approach gained prominence after the Cambridge analytical scandal had fueled anxieties about transnational interference in electoral processes. The second research approach examines the political implications of disinformation and the dangers it presents, mainly to Western democracies (Iosifidis & Nicoli, 2021). In this approach, notions such as “network authoritarianism” were developed to understand how nation-states do not merely censor online dissent, but more often “compete[s] with it, making an example out of online dissenters in order to affirm the futility of activism to a disillusioned public” (Pearce & Kendzior, 2012, p. 284). The third approach is concerned with proposing policies to combat disinformation (Saurwein & Spencer-Smith, 2020). Although these three approaches are instrumental in understanding how digital disinformation works, they largely dismissed the cultural dimension of disinformation, particularly in the Global South where democratic transitions are still in the making.

Few studies examine how technologies of disinformation are set up in everyday life, and fewer are concerned with how cultural figures and tropes play a major role in the growing sense of mistrust and bewilderment. We aim to contribute to this gap in literature by building on and introducing the concept of “figurations” as a conceptual and methodological approach to examining digital disinformation from a cultural studies perspective.

Donna Haraway (1997) first proposed figurations as a means of understanding the complexity of technoscientific culture, particularly cyborg figures that combine human and nonhuman elements and exist within the technological ecosystems of late capitalism. To her, “figures do not have to be representational and mimetic, but they do have to be tropic [. . .] Figurations are performative images that can be inhabited” (Haraway, 1997, p. 11). Haraway argues that figures have both material and semiotic dimensions. They exist within and through a specific infrastructure. At the same time, they fulfill a semiotic function. Claudia Castañeda (2002) later developed this argument, highlighting how the compilation of historical texts and events gives form figures. Through examining 19th- and 20th-century medical and legal texts, Castañeda (2002) demonstrates how the figure of “the child” is constructed. Along the same lines, the digital ethnographer Adi Kuntsman (2009) used figurations to outline how specific cultural tropes migrated from one specific location, historical moment, and medium, to the other. In the book, *Figurations of Violent Belonging* Kuntsman (2009) examines the multiple reemergences and reinterpretations of 19th-century Russian literary figures in the online/offline stories of queer Russian immigrants in Palestine/Israel of the early 2000s. Kuntsman’s adaptation of the concept moves beyond what a figure *is* to what a figure *does*, by researching how figures are constructed through material and semiotic practices over time.

Examining the e-committees through the theoretical lens of figurations, we argue, has two main advantages. First, it allows us to move beyond understanding trolling as either a digital practice or a digital economy. Second, figurations point to the need to trace the historical roots of discursive representations and tropic characters. As such, we propose a cultural studies approach to digital disinformation that is centered around figurations which allows us to take rumors, fables, and conspiracy theories seriously. In this study, we propose combining figurations as the conceptual approach, with framing as an interdisciplinary method that has been influential in communication studies. Framing, first envisioned by Erving Goffman (1986), examines how people create meanings for specific events or situations. We argue

that the amalgamation of the different frames of e-committee that were produced by various newspapers at different historical moments gave form to its figuration as a tool of disinformation.

Methodology: Tracing the Figure of the E-committee Across Media Frames

In this study, we conduct a qualitative frame analysis of newspaper coverage that focused on e-committees and the conspiracy theories around them. As Robert Entman's (1993) argues: "[t]o frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, [. . .] to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment for the item described" (p. 52). Journalists and newspaper owners construct frames by mobilizing familiar stereotypes, cultural codes, and narratives that hold a strong significance in a specific culture (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Among the various approaches to conduct frame analysis, we followed Pan and Kosicki's (1993) suggestion to examine syntactical, script, thematic, and rhetorical structures within news discourses on e-committees. The syntactical structure focuses on how the headline of the news piece is structured and what leads, episodes, backgrounds, and closures it presents. The script structure interrogates how the story is told through a beginning, climax, and end, highlighting how characters are presented dramatically and what collective emotional frames are evoked. The thematic structure analyzes the implicit hypothesis that every news piece suggests. Finally, the rhetorical structures scrutinize the linguistic and stylistic choices made by journalists in relation to their intended effects on audiences (Pan & Kosicki, 1993).

Our corpus includes 110 newspaper pieces and articles published between 2011 and 2021, to understand how the imaginary of social media—and its figures—has changed throughout a decade, from a tool of emancipation and public mobilization to a conspicuous technology that aims at confusing and demobilizing the nation. We have searched the websites of Egyptian newspapers for the keywords: "electronic committees" (al-lijān al-iliktrūniyah), "electronic militias" (al-mylyshyāt al-iliktrūniyah), "fourth generation wars" (hurūb al-jil al-rābi'), "social media" (wasā'il al-tawāsul al-ijtimā'i), and "digital danger" (al-khatar al-iliktrūni).³

We gathered this corpus from six different newspapers whose ownership and political orientations varied to represent three main categories of Egyptian journalism: (1) state-owned newspapers, (2) privately owned newspapers that were established by businesspeople who held fluctuating relationships with Mubarak's regime. Most of these are currently controlled by business conglomerates associated with the Egyptian Intelligence services since 2017, and finally (3) independent digital news outlets that, despite their ongoing censorship, stand as the few last platforms for independent journalism. In our sampling, we focused on the most prominent and widely distributed newsletters of every category. For example, instead of querying all governmental newspapers such as *al-Akhbar* (the News) and *al-Gomhouriyah* (the Republic),

³ We have focused on Arabic newspapers and digital news outlets with a considerable number of readership and whose websites were searchable for older articles. We started with Naomi Sakr's (2013) extensive list of Egyptian newspapers. We avoided newspapers such as *Al-Wafd* (the Delegation) and *al-Ghad* (Tomorrow) that are owned by political parties. We queried Google for the names of the newspapers plus the keywords. We relied on the websites of these newspapers, with the exception to *al-Ahram*, for which we have searched using the East View Global Press Archive repository: <https://gpa.eastview.com/alahram/>

we focused on the most representative of this genre, *Al-Ahram* (the Pyramids), from which we examined a total of (n = 26) articles. *Al-Ahram* is Egypt's oldest newspaper that, since the ascend of the Free Officers to power in 1952, had been under the complete control and ownership of the state becoming the official voice of the regime⁴ (Sakr, 2013).

From the second category of privately owned newspapers, we considered articles from *al-Youm al-Sabe'* (the Seventh Day, n = 28) and *Al-Watan* (the Homeland, n = 30). *Al-Youm al-Sabe'* was launched in 2008 by the construction tycoon Mohammed al-Amin; it stands as one of the most prominent examples of the limited media liberalization during the late Mubarak when a relationship of clientelism emerged between wealthy media investors and the regime to signal a gradual shift from state-controlled military authoritarianism toward neoliberal authoritarianism (Guaaybess, 2021). *Al-Watan* was established in 2011 along with CBC and Al-Nahar Television networks by roughly the same handful of businessmen who acquired more power during the Mubarak era and attempted to intervene in shaping public opinion after the revolution (Guaaybess, 2021). In 2017, both *al-Youm al-Sabe'* and *al-Watan* were acquired by Eagle Capital—a business front for the Egyptian Intelligence services that played a role in massive media reacquisition deals, which monopolized film production companies, satellite television channels, newspapers, news websites, and even small social media production companies that were once privately owned (Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression [AFTE], 2018; Badr, 2021; Ramadan, 2020). Within the same category, our corpus also included pieces from newspapers like *al-Shorouk* (Sunrise, n = 16) and *al-Masry al-Youm* (the Egyptian Today, n = 4) which are still privately owned and not officially merged with the Egyptian Intelligence conglomerate. This does not mean that these two newspapers operate with complete editorial freedom; they too are subject to the rising censorship (Badr, 2021; Shawky, 2020). *Al-Shorouk* was established in 2009 by Ibrahim al-Moallem, the heir of a renowned publishing house who invited many of the oppositional voices and intellectuals to write in his paper (Sakr, 2013). Meanwhile, *al-Masry al-Youm* was first launched in 2004 by the businessmen Ahmed Bahgat and Naguib Sawiris, all of which also enjoyed ties with Mubarak's regime; the newspaper is characterized by its capitalist liberal reformist views (Badr, 2021).

Finally, the third category that we considered was that of news websites such as Mada Masr, which, despite the ongoing blocking in Egypt, continues to be one of the few platforms for independent investigative journalism (Shawky, Mohsen, & Nagy, 2020). Mada Masr itself did not include articles that refer to the e-committees. Instead, we were able to sample four investigative pieces from the Istanbul-based news website SasaPost (n = 4) that adopts a decentralized editorial strategy enabling emerging writers and citizen journalists to submit their articles. SasaPost was established in March 2014; its coverage caters mostly to younger web-surfing Arabs and bloggers in a progressive and even secular language, yet a careful examination of its political line, subtle ideological messages, and Qatari funding suggests that it may be part of the Muslim Brotherhood media networks (Yavuz, 2020).

⁴ Except the one year of the Muslim Brotherhood in power (June 2012–2013) when the ruling party was attacked by the state-owned media and the other independent media outlets that fashioned itself as "secularist" (El-Issawy, 2014; Guaaybess, 2021).

Data Analysis: The Evolution of E-committees From Amateur Networks to Multimillion Enterprises

Our analysis resulted in defining eight different frames that change over time. We have situated these frames in their broader historical contexts and structured them around three key phases. First is the period between 2011 and mid-2013 in which the e-committees had an amateur character. Second is the period between 2013 and early 2019, which coincides with the disposal of President Morsi and the consolidation of President Sisi's military regime, stopping right at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis manifests in Egyptian politics. Third is the 2019–2021 period in which e-committees developed into transnational multimillion enterprises. After these sections, we present a discussion in which we connect the analyzed developments to the literature on digital authoritarianism and politics more broadly.

Amateur Accounts and Competing Rivals (2011–mid-2013)

In the wake of the 25th of January revolution, and while Mubarak's government decided to shut down the Internet, hoping that the protestors will leave the squares, his media institutions were trying to figure out how to infiltrate and control the new media spaces of Facebook and Twitter. Once the connection was restored on February 5, Egyptian social media users were hailed by pro-state propaganda online mainly from recently created accounts with pseudonyms like "Lover of Egypt" (Herrera, 2014, p. 119). Media scholar Hanan Badr (2013) argues that this was one of the earliest moments in which the term "electronic committees" started to surface. Interestingly, the earliest reference of e-committees in Egyptian newspapers points to Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP) as the first political actor to use such technology. On February 26, 2011, and only 15 days after Mubarak had stepped down, the headline in *al-Youm al-Sabe'* read: "The Annulation of the-Committees of the National Democratic Party (NDP) in Solidarity with 25th of January [Revolution]" (Al-Sayed, 2011). The piece implied the young members of Mubarak's ruling party (NDP) were sympathetic to the revolution and its youth, and thus had taken this decision independently from the party leaders. The piece did not offer any detailed information on the e-committees of the NDP beyond that the party "had created this committee recently, and had officially announced its presence after the terrorist attacks of al-Qidiseen church in early January to the attempts to ignite a sectarian divide between Muslims and Copts" (Al-Sayed, 2011, para. 1). However, this peculiar framing of e-committee remains quite isolated, without other newspapers picking up similar frames.

Frame One: Watch Out for the Internet

During 2011, and after the fall of the regime, state-controlled Egyptian media adopted divergent tactics from downplaying the protests in the beginning to underscoring the national and the societal dangers that are brought by the youth and their demands (Greenberg, 2019). At the end, most of the journalists and editors of the state-owned media were related to the NDP, yet they were not able to hold on to their anti-revolutionary rhetoric in this revolutionary moment (El-Issawy, 2014). Our data analysis shows that the Internet in general had been blamed for the instability of the country. This rhetoric was not only present in news pieces covering political topics but rather seeped into other sections. In its "Woman and Child" section, *Al-Ahram* addressed Egyptian mothers with an article titled: "The Internet . . . The Ticking Bomb in Every Household" (S. Fathi, 2011). The article frames the Internet as a dubious, uncontrollable space in

which teenagers are allured to oppose their parents and break societal norms (Figure 1). It provides a series of cautionary tales about porn consumption, run-away teenagers, and young men and women who get recruited by religious fundamentalist groups. In a paternalistic and patriarchal tone, the article offers advice and precautionary measures written by behavioral experts who call for the importance of surveilling Internet content and communications by both the state and the parents.



Figure 1. The Internet . . . The ticking bomb in every household (Fathi, 2011).

Throughout 2011, the e-committees are scarcely mentioned in independent Egyptian newspapers except for a few mentions of the figure in op-eds by prominent intellectuals and revolutionary activists (n = 4). For example, in the *al-Shorouk* article titled "The Nobles of Tahrir and the Slaves of the Disposed," the author entertains some of these rumors; telling a secondhand story about a group of youth hired by pro-Mubarak political actors who were considered part of the "deep state" (*al-felouf*) to manage a set of fake accounts that tarnished and trolled political opponents (Qandil, 2011). This group complained that their freelance employers promised them a daily wage of 350 Egyptian pounds (58 USD) and later refused to pay them for their work. Their work consisted of setting up accounts under pseudonyms to propagate counterrevolutionary narratives and conspiracy theories. Evidently, from its title, the article adopts a moralistic frame that casts the human figures behind this troll factory as the slaves of Mubarak. In these early pieces, the figure of the e-committee was bound to the desperate attempts of the remnants of the old regime who tried to tarnish the reputation of the revolution. As such, the hostility against e-committees was also a hostility against the counterrevolutionary camp.

Frame Two: To Each Their Militia

On November 7, 2012, *al-Shorouk* published an op-ed titled "Salafism and Electronic Committees," in which the journalist attempts to historicize the phenomenon of the e-committee (Sami, 2012). The article shows that the e-committees have been central to four competing political actors: the pro-democracy activists who gathered around figures like Dr. Mohamed ElBaradie, the Muslim Brotherhood, the old remnants of the regime (feloul), and the Salafis:

The oldest e-committees are those of al-Baradie. They emerged spontaneously after his return to Egypt in February 2010. They were powered by early bloggers activists who wanted to defend him [ElBaradie] against the massive smearing campaigns orchestrated by Mubarak's media. After the 25th of January, the Muslim Brotherhood established their own e-committees to campaign for the constitutional referendum, the parliamentary elections, and the presidential election. Meanwhile, the e-committees of the old regime (al-feloul) worked fiercely towards defaming the revolution and the revolutionaries. They defended Mubarak and supported General Ahmed Shafiq for presidency. [. . .] the last type of e-committees, that of the Salafis with all their different sects. (Sami, 2012, para. 3)

In this framing, the author implies that e-committees are simply the organized support of one political actor against others. It is a tool for political campaigning. However, this pluralistic framing of e-committees did not last long.

Frame Three: Battle in the Online Trenches

Newspapers started to frame the e-committees are part of the ongoing "fourth generation war," which are information wars aiming to attack "not the physical borders and infrastructure of a country, but rather the minds of its youth" as described by the *al-Ahram* article (al-Afifi, 2013, p. 23). Its headline read: "Electronic Militias: Replacing Traditional Armies" (Figure 2). Articles as such have advanced a militarized war rhetoric that highlights how the danger of e-committees goes beyond Egyptian politics and extends to different parts across the globe. The script structure of this article situates the work of e-committees in postrevolutionary Egypt in the same trajectory of other events, such as the cyberattacks of the Palestinian Ezz al-Din al-Qassam brigades over the websites of American banks, and the cyberattacks of Russia over Estonia.



Figure 2. Electronic militias: Replacing traditional armies (al-Afifi, 2013)

The militarization of the figure of the e-committees in Egyptian press went hand in hand with the growing hostility between the state-owned and privately owned media outlets on the one hand, and the Muslim Brotherhood on the other. Scholars have highlighted how this fierce media war was the result of a power struggle between the “deep state” that is represented by the media apparatus with its strong ties to Mubarak’s regime and the new Islamic rulers who tried, but did not always succeed in attracting Egyptian audiences (El-Issawy, 2014; Greenberg, 2019; Sakr, 2013). The privately owned media with both its counterrevolutionary wing and its liberal reformist one feared what they considered as the “Brotherhoodisation of Media” (akhwanat al-islam)—that is, the Brotherhood attempts to reshape society through controlling media discourses (El-Issawy, 2014, p. 41).

Frame Four: The Dangerous Brotherhood Online

As the turbulent events of 2012 unfolded, and the Supreme Council for Armed Forces (SCAF) that once took over the responsibility of managing the country’s bloody transition to democracy handed power to the first democratically elected President Mohamed Morsi in June of the same year, the figuration of e-committees in Egyptian press became almost exclusively framed as a Muslim Brotherhood phenomenon. For

example, the independent newspaper *al-Watan* had published six different news pieces on the same day, March 31, 2013, to highlight how the Brotherhood manages its e-committees to smear their opponents and manipulate public opinion. The front-page headline read: "The Plan to Confront the Independent Media: A News Agency that Broadcasts the Brotherhood's Ideas and Defends the Group" (Hamed, 2013). The investigative piece unraveled the details of a new media program in which the Brotherhood was to train 700 young calibers on citizen journalism to contribute to *al-Naba'*, a news network that relies primarily on using social media platforms. Other headlines of this issue from *al-Watan* included: "Ikhwani Kiddo' A Facebook Page to Smear the Opposition and Journalists," which offered an investigation about specific Facebook pages specialized in producing harsh satirical content to troll and ridicule the Brotherhood's political opponents through the same comments copy-pasted (*Al-Watan*, 2013a).

Unlike the earlier anonymous framings of the e-committees, the articles in this issue identified the people by their names. The titles read "The Former Editor-in-Chief of the Brotherhood's Reveals: Al-Shater Manages his E-Committees as 'Isolated Islands'" and "In Photographs: *Al-Watan* Unravels the Person behind the Brotherhood's E-Committees" (Abouel-leel, 2013; *Al-Watan*, 2013b). In this framing, al-Shater—a wealthy businessman and the first assistant to the MB leader (al-murshid)—appears as the mastermind behind the e-committees that he had developed from separate networks of amateur trolls to a systematic media smearing apparatus. Another article of the same issue of *al-Watan* suggested how he was involved in creating the media apparatus of the Brotherhood long before the revolution and the emergence of e-committee. Titled "'Rassd' the Electronic Wing of al-Shater," the article interrogated the history of Rassd (Monitor), a news RSS network founded by the Brotherhood, and later offered the service of sending its subscribers news on the mobile phones (*Al-Watan*, 2013c). It suggests that the Brotherhood's e-committees are not only limited to networks of fake social media accounts but it is rather a bigger new media apparatus that includes news agencies.

It is worth mentioning that these journalistic observations were later confirmed by the scholarly investigations of Herrera and Lotfy (2012) who carefully examined the tactics of the Brotherhood e-committees that aimed at giving ordinary social media users the impression that the "public opinion" was leaning to a particular discourse. Herrera (2014) had also noted how the Brotherhood built upon its already existing social media networks⁵ (p. 134). For example, she outlines how the famous Facebook page Rassd, that was once established to monitor and report the violations of the 2010 parliamentary elections, was rebranded in the aftermath of the 25th of January revolution to take its current transmedial form.

During President Morsi's year in power (June 2012–2013), we have analyzed a total of 21 pieces from *al-Shorouk*, *al-Ahram*, and *al-Youm al-Sabe'* all echoing the same framing of the e-committees as a weapon in the hands of Muslim Brotherhood who were on a mission to "capture" the minds of Egyptian youth, to "crush" their opponents, and to "alter" the identity of the Egyptian society. We have observed how this narrative intensified in the lead up to the mass demonstrations of June 30, in which millions of Egyptians

⁵ For more about the development of the Muslim Brotherhood from a small collective of preachers in the 1920s Egypt to a transnational political power, see Al-Arian (2014). For more on the evolution of Brotherhood's media apparatus from print media to audiocassettes and social media, see Mellor (2018).

took to the streets once more asking Morsi to step down and enabling the Egyptian military and a handful of opposition figures to remove the president and prosecute the Brotherhood (Hellyer, 2016).

Setting the Scene for an Institutional Presence (mid-2013–2018)

In the months that followed the ousting of the Muslim Brotherhood, several terrorist attacks targeted churches and state amenities (Hellyer, 2016). Most of these attacks were blamed on the Brotherhood and its followers. Amid this bloody transition, the figuration of the e-committee acquired an unparalleled prominence; they became a recurrent theme in many talk shows and newspapers. After June 2013, the framing of the Brotherhood and its e-committees as militarized technologies increased incrementally. Instead of being framed as the “looming danger,” they became the “ultimate enemies of the nation,” “traitors,” and the main source of disinformation online. Sixteen articles have suggested how the e-committees of the Brotherhood were involved in an advanced form of cyber warfare, either by attacking and hacking the Facebook account of the Ministry of Interior affairs as *al-Watan* reported (Barakat, 2013), or by propagating information from Israeli media for “distorting the image of the Egyptian military” as *al-Youm al-Sabe’* announced (Tantawi, 2013, para. 1). Besides this continuous frame of militarization, two new frames emerged. The first encouraged the state and its supporters to use e-committees as a technology to defend the nation against the Brotherhood and other conspirators. The second proposed a legislative solution for the problem of the Brotherhood’s e-committees, advancing claims on the need for the state to assert its sovereignty over the cyberspace.

Frame Five: E-committees in Defense of the Nation

In November 2016, and amid the first severe economic crisis that followed the devaluation of the Egyptian pound, the independent newspaper *al-Shorouk* published two short pieces discussing how the Egyptian state had appropriated the technology of e-committees for its own goals. The pieces were based on scenes from the talk show presented by the famous journalist Ibrahim Issa. The first article, titled “The State Spends Millions over E-committees,” highlighted how “the Egyptian citizen had been subjected to an unprecedented disinformation campaign [since the devaluation]” and that “the state is paying e-committees in order to lie and mislead, creating an artificial and unreal public opinion that has nothing to do with the reality of the streets” (Issa, 2016a, para. 1). Issa (2016b) follows up this discussion, arguing that it is inappropriate for the Egyptian state to use the “immoral tools of the Brotherhood” and to address its citizens through e-committees (para. 1). It became evident then that the Brotherhood is not the only actor employing e-committees. These allegations were confirmed in the same month when a series of leaked messages from closed Facebook group named “The Union of State Supporters” were leaked and went viral online. The Facebook group was initiated by Mr. Khairy’s—the once revolutionary activist discussed in the opening of the paper—who actively recruited members to his group and tasked them with smearing those he considered the enemies of the nation.⁶ “Enemies of the nation” refer here to both members and supporters of the Brotherhood, as well as revolutionaries who opposed the current regime. When confronted with these leaked messages in mass media, Mr. Khairy did not nullify these accusations. On the contrary, he admitted proudly and self-righteously that he is the head of this digital

⁶ The screenshots were leaked by another regime supporter who disagreed with Khairy. The private group at that time included 14,000 members; now they amount to 91,000 members.

campaign that aims at serving the nation by discrediting its opponents; especially as the country was going through a rough economic crisis that made citizens “susceptible” to such messages. Mr. Khairy’s leaked scandal was celebrated by the mass media.

On November 27, 2016, *al-Youm al-Sabe’*—which was then under the complete control of Egyptian Intelligence—published a news piece titled: “The Union of State Supporters’ Initiates a Facebook Campaign ‘The Army has a people to Protect it’” (Gamal, 2016). The article included a series of screenshots from a post issued by a Facebook page with the same title, calling on Egyptians to support their army against the terrorists and the Muslim Brotherhood. The post, written in a propagandistic rhetoric, echoed some of the earlier framings of the fourth-generation war, and highlighted that the only way to evade the tragic fate of the neighboring countries (referring without direct mention to Syria) is through uniting as a people behind the Armed Forces. The article praises this social media campaign and calls upon the readers to join it by using the hashtag #al-askariyah al-Misriyah Sharaf (Egyptian Militarism is honorable), and changing their profile pictures into a unified image of a soldier. In other words, what was intended to be a scandal about propaganda and disinformation became celebrated as a patriotic act. It comes as no surprise then that one year later, in the first round of the Youth Forum 2017, Mr. Khairy would proudly promote a public workshop about the use of e-committees in the service of the nation. From this moment on, the e-committees were framed by Egyptian press as a two-faced figure. One that is associated with the Brotherhood and other political dissidents who are portrayed as manipulative and untrustworthy sources. The other is associated with the state and its supporters who use this technology for their own patriotic ends.

Frame Five: Law Is the Solution

In 2018, the figure of the e-committees was used in other framings that emerged over the Egyptian press to consolidate the state’s control over media. *Al-Shorouk* headlines in January of that year read: “The [Parliament’s] Communications Committee: The Government Submits a Project to Combat ‘Electronic Crime’” (Fathi, 2018). The details of this bill have mobilized all of the prior framing of the e-committees from the moral panics that parents had about the Internet, to the looming dangers of the Brotherhood and their fake news. According to the newspaper, the bill aimed at forcing Google, Facebook, Twitter, and other search engines to censor porn to save family values. In August, another headline read: “Al-Sisi Issues a Law to Combat Electronic Crime . . . Blocking Websites that Threaten National Security,” announcing the decree of law 175/2018, which defined “electronic crimes” as well as their material evidences, penalties, and repercussions (Napoleon, 2018). Famously known as the New Media Bill, this legislation is considered a regressive move toward closing the public sphere; it considered any social media user with more than 5,000 followers as a media entity subject to the laws and regulations of mass media, and resulted in the systematic blocking of hundreds of news websites whose content challenges the state narrative (Shawky et al., 2020). This legislation, as well as the calls for reinstating the Ministry of Information that was officially dissolved during 2011, emerged as a solution to what was perceived by the pro-state media outlets as a state of “media chaos” (Shawky, 2020). These measures were celebrated with articles such as “Judges Praise the Anti-Cybercrime Law: ‘Society Needs it,’” where experts described these legislations as progressive steps that will finally allow Egypt to enforce control over her digital borders (Al-Menshawly, 2018). In this rhetoric, legislation is seen as the solution for all the dangers of the e-committees.

A Transnational Enterprise (2019–and after)

From 2019 onward, the pro-state Egyptian press continued to recycle some of the earlier framings of the e-committees, often combining two or more frames at the same time. A new feature, however, was the intense focus on the transnational financial ventures behind their making. *Al-Youm al-Sabe'* warned their readers with titles such as "Bloggers Expose the Hypocrisy of the Brotherhood's E-committees," and "Beware of the Brotherhood's E-committees . . . an Ex-member Reveals: The Group Relies on Massive Funds to Propagate Rumors and Spread Chaos" (Kamel, 2019; Reda, 2019). What these news pieces implied was how undemocratic the Brotherhood was internally, and how their e-committees were financed by Turkey, Qatar, and other undefined NGOs based in the United States and the United Kingdom. They also stressed some of the main tactics to detect these networks of fake accounts from the repeated use of Quranic verses and religious metaphors, the copy-paste strategies, and the obscure profiles. Our examination of the full corpus of news pieces highlighting those two different framings appeared in this period. First, the statist e-committees as global players in regional politics. This builds on the aforementioned two-faced figure, yet now the transnational relevance of the work of e-committees becomes more evident. Second, the frame of e-committees as the work of the Brotherhood continues to serve as a scapegoat for all of the government's corruption and mistakes.

Frame 7: E-Committees as Regional Players

While the pro-state Egyptian media repeatedly framed the Brotherhood's e-committees as part of Turkish-Qatari conspiracy without presenting any viable proofs or sources for such claims, emerging oppositional media such as SasaPost reversed these allegations. In an article titled "The Story of the Egyptian Company that Facebook Shutdown," SasaPost presented an investigation based on the Facebook press release of 2020 in which the company's cybersecurity team announced the detection of networks of fake accounts originating from Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia (Hussin, 2019). These networks spread political propaganda content for the current ruling regimes via impersonating the identity of public figures and posing as local entertainment pages that also produced miscellaneous content. They were all related to two marketing firms; New Waves in Egypt, and New Waves in UAE (Gleicher, 2019) The investigative journalist of SasaPost built upon the findings of these reports and traced the ownership of these "New Wave" dubious marketing firms to an ex-Egyptian Army officer who resigned in 2013 to start a new media empire. The journalist highlights how these new media companies serve various clients, including celebrities, popular singers, football teams, and e-commerce platforms. He stresses how these networks are not independent from the state but rather intertwined with it. A month later, SasaPost published another investigation titled "Dot-Dev' the Company that Twitter Cursed: Egyptian with Emirati Money," this time focusing on the fake Twitter accounts that are spreading propaganda for the current Egyptian, Emirati, and Saudi regimes (SasaPost, 2019). The authors build upon the earlier investigations to unravel a network of other shell companies operating for politicians and entertainment celebrities alike.

Frame 8: Blame It on the E-Committee

A media frenzy against the Muslim Brotherhood's e-committees took place a few days after the controversial whistleblower Mohamed Ali took over Facebook to ask the Egyptians for a million people to

march on September 20, 2020, to remove the current regime and reclaim the revolution (Haruyama, 2020). On September 7, 2020, six news piece(s) appeared in *al-Youm al-Sabe'* focused extensively on the e-committees with long headlines such as "Parliamentary Warnings to Citizens Not to Believe Everything Promoted on Social Media: Ignoring the E-committees is the best response. . . . Awareness is Our Weapon" (Sobh, 2020). In this frame, the ordinary Egyptians are either represented as the vulnerable target of this war, or they are called upon as victorious, honorable citizens who defend their nation by striking blows to e-committees and the Brotherhood. Awareness is sought as the ultimate weapon to defend the nation against the chaos, rumors, and distortions of the e-committees. All of these news pieces derive their credibility from the presence of an "expert," whether a parliamentary representative, a scholar, or a journalist who asserts these statements. As such, the figure of the e-committee is figured in pro-state Egyptian media to convince the reader that any political mobilization is part of a bigger conspiracy theory against Egypt.

The excessive use of the term e-committee by the press turned this figure into an empty signifier referring to one thing, many things, and nothing at the same time. Any viral hashtag that opposes the government is immediately framed, as the headline of *al-Youm al-Sabe'*, claimed as "Merely the Work of E-committees" (Abdelrahman, 2020). This indicates how the figuration of the e-committee is deployed to annihilate and discredit not only known opposition parties, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, but any opposing discourse or critique of the government is framed as "fake news."

Given the adoption of the new media laws in 2018, this figuration of the e-committee is not inconsequential. Being part of an "e-committee" has now become a legal charge that is used to arrest and detain opposition parties and any whistleblowers. For example, amid the COVID-19 crisis, a video appeared on Facebook showing the death of four patients because of the lack of oxygen tanks in al-Husseiniya Hospital. As horrific as it was, the video was widely circulated as evidence of the failure of the health system and the absence of basic medical resources. In a matter of hours, the young man who captured and published the video was arrested and charged with being part of one of the Muslim Brotherhood e-committees. *Al-Ahram* framed this incident as an "electronic crime" that "threatens Egypt's national security" as it "shakes the trust of the people in their leadership" (Ghobashi, 2021, p. 15). The author insisted that the whole video is "fabricated" and based on an "invented, unrealistic incident" (Ghobashi, 2021, p. 15). The video-maker was called for an investigation by the Egyptian prosecutor, but there were no further news updates about him, so it remains unclear whether he was discharged or not.

Discussion: The Effects of Figurations of Disinformation

In the three stages of the development of the figuration of the e-committee over the last decade in Egypt, different frames of interpretation were evoked. An underlying theme recurring in all these framings is that of the "national enemy," which renders the Internet as an inherently dangerous place and delegitimizes online voices that are critical of political abuse. E-committees have been figured through many frames, ranging from mysterious groups in the realm of rumors to evil conspirators that attack national security, to tools of the state itself. Hassib and Shires (2021) argued that the Egyptian government has "manipulated uncertainty" to its advantage through cybersecurity policies and digital tactics. We expand on

this by proposing that creating confusion and ambiguity serves a political purpose; it is an authoritarian tactic to manipulate the public.

This builds on the concepts of “networked authoritarianism” and “digital authoritarianism” discussed previously. If the purpose of digital authoritarianism is to “sabotage accountability and thereby threaten democratic processes” through fostering secrecy and disinformation (Michaelsen & Glasius, 2018, p. 3797), then the figuration of the e-committee had been its main tool in the Egyptian media. Our analysis indicated that the looming presence of the figure of the e-committee has led to the dismissal of any discourse that critiques the state as “fake news.”

Through our analysis, we observed that Egyptian newspapers have framed the problem of disinformation by centering on the figure of the e-committee as a source of danger and a reason behind the nation’s maladies. The trajectory of reporting on e-committees reflects an understanding of the digital space as an outlet where scandals, rumors, and conflicting information about events circulate freely and with the intention to deliberately confuse and disinform the public. In the midst of this chaotic and ambiguous online environment, where the sources and interests behind information are often uncertain, it is the government that presents itself as the only reliable source of information to the public. In combination with the strict censorship laws, such framings create further disengagement and withdrawal from citizens in political mobilization or activities in the digital sphere.

Conclusion

In this article, we analyzed that the figure of electronic committees arguing that it is a technology of disinformation and public manipulation that serves digital authoritarianism. Following the evolution of this figure from 2011 to the present day, we have highlighted how figures like the e-committees emerged in national newspapers and how such figurations influence the discourse about digital information and propaganda on social media, a decade after the Arab uprisings. Our analysis shows that the figure was first attributed to multiple political parties and surrounded by rumors. Although this figure has significantly changed to a tactical scapegoating of specific groups, we also observe continuities in framing the Internet as a war zone that needs to be firmly regulated by the state. We have tied these framings to political events, varying from calls to protests to economic crises.

By adopting the theoretical lens of figurations to study how disinformation occurs through the everyday circulation of media texts, we highlighted how digital authoritarian practices are not only sudden measures imposed by the state over the Internet but are entangled with political, digital, and economic developments within that state. Figurations allow for a more context-specific analysis of digital politics than other theoretical approaches that focus exclusively on media economics or media infrastructure. We propose that “figuration,” more than merely “framing” pushes the researcher to engage with the fluidity of how a phenomenon is presented and how such figures become connected to political events and circumstances. By further developing “figurations” as a conceptual tool, we offer novel insights into how digital and political processes can be researched beyond Western democracies.

However, further research is needed to grasp what the effect of the figuration of e-committees is on the Egyptian publics. How are citizens able to navigate (dis)information, political boundaries, and censorship? And could such a confusing media landscape lead to political withdrawal altogether? Figurations open up new avenues for understanding changing relations in a period of political transition, as well as grasping the complexity of novel digital political activities. This is particularly important in postrevolution societies, still haunted by political dreams and aspirations.

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