Fake News in Saudi Arabia: A Qualitative Study on

How Saudi Journalists Address Fake News

Published on Social Media

by

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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of fake news on social media has become a concern for many countries due to its adverse effects on various areas, such as the economy, politics, health, and society. In light of the growing use of social media in Saudi Arabia, numerous media outlets actively utilize social media platforms to collect and disseminate news and information. As a result, Saudi journalists have faced various challenges, including the spread of fake news. Therefore, this study explores how Saudi journalists define and verify fake news published on social media and the challenges they face. Furthermore, this study explores journalists' role perceptions in society concerning spreading fake news and how they can promote media literacy to the audience.

This study employed in-depth qualitative interviews with 14 journalists from various Saudi printing and online newspapers. The thematic analysis of the interviews showed that Saudi journalists define fake news in several ways, encompassing three essential elements: source, content, and timing. In addition, the study found that journalists primarily use traditional verification practices to verify fake news published on social media, followed by new verification practices. The findings showed that Saudi journalists face challenges at all levels of the hierarchy of influence model. Moreover, the findings identify three different roles journalists perceive in society regarding fake news published on social media: disseminators, populist mobilizers, and interpreters. Lastly, the study found that journalists lack media literacy knowledge but are willing to cooperate with other government institutions to promote and distribute media literacy among the public.

This dissertation is dedicated to my lovely wife for her patience and compassion. I would not have been able to achieve this without your support and encouragement throughout my journey.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

"Falsehood flies, and the Truth comes limping after it; so that when Men come to

be undeceiv'd, it is too late; the Jest is over, and the Tale has had its Effect."

– Jonathan Swift (1710)

Noted Anglo-Irish author Jonathan Swift worked as an editor for a newspaper called *The Examiner*, in which he wrote about the influence of false information and how it spreads faster than truth. At that time, the methods of publishing and collecting news and information for journalists and editors were limited and undeveloped compared to our current ones. Today, we live in a global village, as Marshall McLuhan described it, thanks to exponential technological advancements in transportation, communication, and media (McLuhan, 1963).

Social media is one of the most prominent technological means contributing to spreading fake news and misinformation in our current era. One study conducted by MIT researchers found that false news disseminates much faster on Twitter than on real news. The study concluded that across all categories of information, falsehood has diffused significantly faster, deeper, and more widely than truth (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018).

There is no disputing the fact that the use of social media has become an integral part of the dissemination of news and information. Thus, for most people, social media platforms have become the primary source of daily news and information. The Pew Research Center found that most Americans get their news from social media platforms

rather than traditional media, such as newspapers, radio, and television (Walker & Matsa, 2021). Consequently, journalists and media professionals have embraced social media platforms, actively participated in them, and benefited from them to maintain audiences and deliver the news (Alharethi, 2020; Weaver, Willnat, & Wilhoit, 2019; Brems et al., 2017; Hermida, 2012).

Several factors have led to a significant change in the circulation and dissemination of news and information on social media. The first factor is that social media enables information and news to be disseminated quickly, easily, and widely. Another factor is that social media has reduced the gatekeeping process until it is almost non-existent, which allows information to reach audiences without any filtering (Shin et al., 2018). Lastly, using social media allows ordinary citizens to participate in news and information publishing alongside journalists, a practice is known as citizen journalism (Mutugi, Nyamboga, & Matu, 2020).

These factors have contributed to spreading fake news and inaccurate information in social media, posing a challenge not only for newspapers and journalists but also for governments and countries across the globe. As a result, scholars have begun studying fake news and its impact on audiences. For instance, some have studied the impact on American voters of political fake news spread during the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Others have examined the implications of fake news for democracy in a digitized public sphere (Maldonado, 2019). From a social perspective, some researchers have explored what makes audiences trust news on social media (Sterrett et al., 2019).

Furthermore, some scholars have studied the impact of fake news on public health during the Coronavirus pandemic (Rocha et al., 2021), while others have examined the economic impact of fake news on consumers' behavioral intentions in relation to the advertised brands in social media (Visentin & Pichierri, 2019). These studies and others have examined the issue of fake news on social media by focusing on audiences in several fields. However, very few have focused on the role of journalists and media professionals in combating fake news on social media.

Some recent studies have found that the proliferation of fake news on social media is a daily challenge for journalists (Balod & Hameleers, 2021). Fake news has been identified as the greatest challenge for the news media, as stated in Cision's 2017 State of the Media Report for the United States and Canada (Saldaña & Vu, 2022). Moreover, a recent study by the Pew Research Center found that many journalists in the United States are concerned about fake and made-up news and have no faith in how industry leaders respond to the problem (Atske, 2022). In light of all this, the current study has been designed primarily to address this issue.

An overview of fake news and journalists

Fake news content has been a part of news media history for many decades (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018; Hirst, 2017). In fact the history of fake news dates back to 1896, to the Spanish War, when the term "yellow journalism" or "freak journalism" first appeared in the press (Molina, Sundar, Le, & Lee, 2021). More recently, fake news has been used to describe satirical television programs that depict political and news events (Ha, Andreu Perez, & Ray, 2019).

Only a few studies have investigated how journalists address fake news on social media and have done so from a variety of perspectives. Some studies have investigated knowledge of fake news, with scholars providing various definitions of fake news. For instance, Housh (2018) defined fake news as "content that is deliberately false and published on websites that mimic traditional news websites" (p. 1). Others have focused on the intentions of fake news, noting the presence of "news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers" (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 213). In addition, various terms associated with the concept of fake news have now become widespread, including propaganda, parody, trolls, hoax, satire (Verstraete, Bambauer, & Bambauer, 2017), misinformation, disinformation, mal-information, and non-information (Jahng, Eckert, & Metzger-Riftkin, 2021).

The literature on fake news makes it clear that there is no specific, agreed-upon definition of fake news among academics, researchers, and media practitioners. This lack of a specific definition is considered one of the most critical challenges facing the press and journalists (Gelfert, 2018). For instance, one study found that fake news is defined and interpreted differently among journalists in Kenya. Scholars have also noted that various media organizations define fake news differently. The study concluded that the ability of journalists to detect fake news is affected by differences in definitions. Scholars argue that news that one journalist perceives as false may be considered accurate by another (Mutugi, Nyamboga, & Matu, 2020).

A study conducted in the United States found that journalists have offered two different definitions of fake news. The first definition was based on their point of view as

journalists: they defined fake news as disinformation disseminated on social media that favors a specific ideology, intending to misguide or manipulate people by creating the impression of legitimate news sources. The second definition was based on their understanding of how the public defines fake news: the journalists believed that some audience members use the term "fake news" to refer to news they disagree with or news they find unacceptable (Jahng, Eckert, & Metzger-Riftkin, 2021).

In addition to studies that focused on the definition and understanding of fake news by journalists, the literature also includes some studies on the political challenges that journalists face when confronting fake news. There have been instances of politicians using the term "fake news" as a weapon to attack and discredit journalists. Since the 2016 U.S. elections, politicians have used the term "fake news" to describe any negative news that differs from or counters their positions (Dempsey, 2017). Donald Trump used the term "fake news" to accuse news outlets and journalists of lying and misreporting during the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Flood, 2018). Furthermore, journalists in the Philippines have indicated that the government commonly supports false news accusations to incite distrust toward the mainstream media and to silence journalists (Balod & Hameleers, 2021). In addition to politicians, journalists also face the challenges of being attacked by the public when correcting fake news that contradicts the public's beliefs and attitudes. Researchers have discovered that journalists face a backlash and retaliation when they correct fake news on social media (Saldaña & Vu, 2022).

The literature on fake news has also explored how journalists verify fake news on social media. Scholars have suggested that journalists may have difficulty verifying

online sources (Lecheler & Kruikemeier, 2016). Journalists, for example, face considerable challenges when it comes to ensuring the reliability and verifiability of content produced by user-generated social media, including multimedia messages (Zhang & Li, 2020). Scholars also found that journalists must gain expertise in discovering, verifying, and filtering user-generated content on social media (Wardle et al., 2014).

However, studies have also shown that journalists rely on traditional journalistic approaches—verifying sources, thinking critically, and being knowledgeable about topics outside journalism—to verify information (Himma-Kadakas & Ojamets, 2022). On the other hand, some studies found that journalists employ several online tools to conduct research and verify social media content (Brandtzaeg et al., 2016), while others have shown that journalists rely on internet-based tools to verify online visual content (Jahng et al., 2021).

The literature also discusses the role perceptions of journalists in responding to fake news on social media. A social role is defined as an individual's expected attitude and behavior within a group, organization, or society (Mellado, Hellmueller, & Donsbach, 2016). Scholars have developed a variety of typologies for categorizing role perceptions, which are widely used in journalism studies. Researchers have identified several journalistic roles: neutral and participant (Cohen, 1963), the gatekeeper and the advocate (Janowitz, 1975), interpretive, disseminator, adversarial, and populist-mobilizer (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986, 1996). Journalists' role perceptions are essential to understanding their behaviors since these perceptions influence their perceptions and actions (Vu, Trieu, & Nguyen, 2020).

In a Western context, studies have found that journalists in Britain and Australia focus on the watchdog role because they live in democratic societies (Schapals, 2018). In the United States, researchers have also found that journalists perceive themselves as adopting an interpreter role in relation to transparency and accountability (Vu & Saldaña, 2021). In non-Western contexts, scholars have discovered that Filipino journalists have been reinforcing their watchdog and dissemination roles, as they perceive that journalism's credibility is under threat (Balod & Hameleers, 2021).

The literature has shown that societal, organizational, and individual factors influence journalists' role perceptions (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). In order to study the challenges and role perceptions of journalists regarding fake news, scholars have utilized gatekeeping theory, which was introduced by Kurt Lewin in 1947. More specifically, studies on fake news and journalists selected the Hierarchy of Influences Model developed under the gatekeeping theory by Shoemaker and Vos (2009). This model aims to understand the complex factors influencing media content, including news content. The model comprises five levels in the hierarchy of analysis: individual level, routine level, organizational level, social institutional level, and social system level (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). For instance, a study of journalistic practices and information patterns during natural disasters was conducted by scholars using the hierarchy of influences model. Its findings suggest that journalistic professionalism at the individual level is essential when dealing with fake news stories. Journalists indicated that organizational policies play a significant role in how fake news practices are handled in newsrooms (Kwanda & Lin, 2020).

The literature on fake news addressed another perspective regarding media literacy and its role in combating false content on social media. Several studies have underlined the importance of journalists' role in promoting media literacy among audiences. In recent years, media organizations and journalists have been urged to promote media literacy (Balod & Hameleers, 2021). According to Kanižaj (2019), the promotion of media literacy could benefit the journalistic community from various perspectives. The researcher provided two reasons why journalists should promote media literacy: (1) investing in future readers and (2) empowering audiences to recognize the quality and professionalism of journalism by resisting misinformation and fake news.

Journalists in Saudi Arabia

In Saudi Arabia, the press has gone through many stages, most of them marked by government sponsorship and financial support (Al-Jameeah, 2009; Awad, 2010). During these stages, the practices of Saudi journalists have been influenced by a combination of internal and external factors (Al-Jameeah, 2009; Awad, 2010; Almaina, 2019), among them political challenges (Martin, 2010; Rugh, 2004). For example, a study found that journalists avoid writing about topics that may conflict with the country's authorities (Almaina, 2019).

Culture and religion also play a significant role in influencing Saudi journalists. Research has shown that cultural and religious factors influence the issues discussed and published in newspapers (Al Maghlooth, 2013; Awad, 2010; Al-Jameeah, 2009). Almaina (2019) recently identified differences in the impact of cultural factors among age groups regarding publishing controversial topics. This is because Saudi society has

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changed significantly in recent years as a result of the social and religious reforms adopted by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

It is also important to note that Saudi journalists face economic challenges. Due to the global financial crisis, newspaper advertising revenues have decreased, making it difficult for newspapers to pay adequate salaries and provide the necessary resources for their employees. The result is that Saudi newspapers now rely on part-time journalists, and these comprise 54% of the press organization's workforce (Almaina, 2019).

Moreover, Saudi journalists face organizational challenges within their news outlets. The policies within a news organization shift when the editor-in-chief changes, which affects journalists' work (Al Maghlooth, 2013; Awad, 2010; Almaina, 2019). Saudi journalists also face work-related pressures, including deadlines and financial constraints (Almaina, 2019).

Recently, journalists in Saudi Arabia and their colleagues in Middle Eastern countries have faced a new challenge related to the proliferation of fake news on social media. Several governments in the Middle East have deemed fake news a severe problem. As a result, many countries of the Arab world, such as Egypt, Bahrain, Tunisia, UAE, and Qatar, have enacted laws against spreading fake news on social media (Ungku, 2019). In Saudi Arabia, the government has warned anyone who posts fake news on social media to be imprisoned for up to five years and a heavy fine of approximately $800,000 (Al-Khudair, 2020).

The aim of the study and the research questions

As mentioned above, the literature includes few studies examining how journalists address fake news published on social media, and those are mostly limited to Western, African, or Asian contexts. These studies examine how journalists address fake news from various perspectives and in various contexts. However, there is currently no data on journalists addressing fake news published on social media in the Middle East and Saudi Arabia specifically. Furthermore, a review of previous studies reveals the need for further studies focusing on journalists addressing fake news circulated on social media in media systems where the environment of press and media freedom differs from that in Western countries.

Therefore, this study aims to explore how Saudi journalists address fake news published on social media. To achieve this goal, several objectives have been addressed. The first is to determine the definition of fake news published on social media among Saudi journalists; the second is to find out how Saudi journalists verify fake news spread on social media; the third is to identify the challenges they encounter when combating fake news distributed on social media; the fourth is to explore Saudi journalists' perceptions of their role in society in response to fake news; and the fifth is to identify the potential role of Saudi journalists in promoting media literacy so that audiences can combat fake news on social media.

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: How do Saudi journalists define fake news as it is used on social media?

RQ2: How do they verify fake news published on social media?

RQ3: What challenges do they encounter or expect to encounter in debunking fake news?

RQ4: What do they perceive their roles to be in response to fake news on social media, and how do they translate them into action?

RQ5: What roles might or do Saudi journalists have in promoting media literacy to their audiences?

In order to answer these research questions, the current study employed a qualitative research approach to explore how Saudi journalists address fake news on social media. Data for this study were collected using an in-depth, semi-structured interview method (Seidman, 2006; Kvale,1996). I interviewed 14 Saudi journalists who work as editors and reporters for printing newspapers in major regions of Saudi Arabia and Saudi online newspapers. All participants in the study have a range of experience in journalism ranging from five to 35 years.

All interviews were conducted virtually using the innovative video conferencing platform Zoom. After obtaining the IRB permission, the semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted over a period of three months, from July to September 2022. Furthermore, I analyzed the collected data using the thematic analysis method, defined as "a method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning ('themes') within qualitative data" (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297).

The importance of the study

By understanding how journalists address fake news published on social media in a non-western media ecosystem, this study contributes to the literature regarding

journalists' perceptions of their role and of fake news topics. The study results will contribute to news media organizations' understanding of how Saudi journalists handle and perceive their roles in combating fake news on social media. This study's results will provide journalists, mass communication departments, and colleges in Saudi Arabia with recommendations on how to better prepare their students to work in the field. Additionally, the study findings contribute to the media literacy literature by providing information on how journalists can work with the public to promote media literacy.

The structure of the dissertation

The dissertation is organized into five chapters: Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Findings, and Discussion. The introductory chapter offers an overview of the study and its context; it also discusses the study's purpose, objectives, and research questions, and explains the study's significance and structure. The second chapter is the Literature Review, which provides an overview of the key topics related to the research objectives and questions. This chapter discusses six major topics to provide a contextual framework for the study. It comprises the following main topics: Saudi Arabia's press, fake news, social media and journalism, role perceptions in journalism, media literacy and the role of journalists in it, and gatekeeping theory and its models, specifically the influence hierarchy model.

The methodology chapter provides details about the research design and the research paradigm. It also includes the researcher's positionality, the method used, data collection, sampling, and data analysis, and discusses the research's trustworthiness. The study's findings are discussed in the fourth chapter, where the patterns and themes that

emerged during the data analysis are presented. The fifth chapter, the discussion chapter, elaborates on the findings presented in the fourth chapter; it includes further explanations and links them to previous studies to answer the research questions. The chapter also discusses the implications and limitations of the study and lists recommendations for future studies.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study explores how Saudi journalists address fake news published on social media. The study objectives are to determine how they define fake news circulated on social media, their procedures for verifying fake news circulated on social media, to identify the challenges they encounter when combating fake news on social media, to explore their role perceptions in society in response to fake news, and to identify the potential role that they might have in promoting media literacy for the audience to combat fake news spread on social media.

The purpose of this chapter is to review the scholarly studies that will help inform and enrich the research questions addressed at the end of this chapter. This chapter will review the most important topics related to the research objectives. This chapter will discuss six significant topics to contextualize the study.

The chapter will begin by providing a brief overview of Saudi Arabia to understand the environment in which Saudi journalists work. Then, I will discuss journalism in Saudi Arabia and the factors that affect the work of Saudi journalists. I will only review the literature on journalists working in print and online newspapers. As this study focuses on journalism, I will not discuss other media types, such as radio and television.

In this chapter, I will review the literature on fake news. Then, I will discuss its concept and other terms related to fake news. Moreover, I will discuss the types of fake news and their impact on the work of journalists and media professionals and exclude

other groups, such as the public. Also, I will discuss journalists' use of social media and the routine of news and verification in social media. Afterward, I will review studies investigating how journalists verified fake news on social media. Then, I will discuss the literature on role perceptions in journalism, focusing on journalists' role perceptions regarding fake news. I will also discuss the definition of media literacy, its approaches, its relation to journalism, and the journalist's role in promoting to the audience. Additionally, I will conclude the literature review by reviewing gatekeeping theory and its models. Finally, I will intensely focus on the hierarchy of influence model used in this study to understand the challenges journalists face while verifying fake news on social media.

Saudi Arabia and Journalism

Overview of Saudi Arabia. A brief history of Saudi Arabia is essential at the beginning of the literature review chapter in order to place this study in its appropriate context and to provide a general understanding of the background and environment in which Saudi journalists - the sample of this study - live and work.

Saudi Arabia, founded in 1932, is located in the center of the Middle East region. As the largest country in the region, Saudi Arabia has an area of about 2,000,000 km 2 and is the largest of the Arab Gulf states in the Arabian Peninsula (Wynbrandt, 2010). More specifically, Saudi Arabia is situated in the southwestern corner of the continent of Asia. The Kingdom is bordered to the north by Kuwait, Iraq, and Jordan, to the south by Yemen and the Sultanate of Oman, to the east by the Arabian Gulf, Qatar, UAE, and Bahrain, and to the east by the Red Sea. There are 13 administrative regions in Saudi

Arabia, each of which is divided into several governorates ("About Saudi Arabia | Ministry of Foreign Affairs," 2022).

The population of Saudi Arabia in mid-2019 was about 34,218,169 people; young people under the age of 30 represented 67 % of the total Saudi population. The proportion of males is about 19,739, while the proportion of females is about 14,479 of the total population. The literacy rate in Saudi Arabia is about 95.33%, while the illiteracy rate is around 4.7, according to the General Authority for Statistics in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (2021).

Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of Islam, where "Islam plays a central role in defining the culture and acts as a major force in determining the social norms, patterns, traditions, obligations, privileges, and practices of society" (Al-Saggaf & Williamson, 2004, p.1). Furthermore, Saudi Arabia is home to the two holiest cities in Islam, Mecca and Medina, which pilgrims visit throughout the year from all over the world. The official language used in the country is Arabic ("About Saudi Arabia | Ministry of Foreign Affairs," 2022).

The religious leaders in Saudi Arabia play a significant role in the country's internal and international decision-making processes. Historically, the Saudi state and religious leaders have had a close relationship since the founding of the first Saudi state in 1747 by Imam Muhammad bin Saud and Sheikh Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab (Awad, 2010). According to Wilson and Graham (1994), "The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia remains a theocracy with little distinction made between religion and politics. The country's constitution is the Sharia or Islamic law, and the al-Saud take care to couch all

political decisions in religious terms" (p. 36, as cited in Awad, 2010). However, this relationship has waned recently between the government and the religious establishment since Mohammed bin Salman was appointed as Saudi crown prince to limit the powers of religious leaders (Dadouch, 2021). Mohammed bin Salman explained his decision by stating, "We want to lead normal lives, lives where our religion and our traditions translate into tolerance, so that we coexist with the world and become part of the development" (McLaughlin, 2017, Para. 3).

In Saudi Arabia, the political system is an absolute monarchy based on Islam, where the King holds the position of prime minister and commander of the armed forces. In 2015, King Salman bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud became the leader of Saudi Arabia following the death of his brother, King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud. The Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, works alongside the King to assist him in governing the country's affairs, assisted by ministers, as well as by a body of advisers known as the Shura Council ("Government | The Embassy of The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia," 2022).

Economically, Saudi Arabia occupies a significant position as it is home to about 16% of the world's oil reserves and is the largest exporter of crude oil. Moreover, as one of the leading countries in OPEC, Saudi Arabia plays a vital and leading role. However, Saudi Arabia has begun to diversify its sources of income by reducing government expenditures for official sectors and expanding the part of the private sector in various sectors such as health, education, and tourism (Forbes, 2021).

Along with religion, cultural traits, and family play a significant role in the lives of Saudi citizens who are subject to societal norms and religious principles. For example, in Saudi Arabia, family members are expected to obey the family rules, which may affect them financially, physically, and socially if they do not follow them (Awad, 2010). Furthermore, Saudi society is characterized by gender segregation in education, the workplace, and other aspects of daily life. In consequence, the segregation of gender has a significant impact on aspects of Saudi Arabian social and public life (Al-Saggaf, 2004). Recently, a set of societal reforms for women was implemented under the leadership of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, which included allowing women to drive, issue passports, and travel without the permission of their guardians in addition to granting them many rights that they did not have before (The Week Staff, 2021).

Journalism in Saudi Arabia. Before the establishment of Saudi Arabia, the western region of the Arabian Peninsula (Hijaz), which includes essential cities such as Mecca, Medina, and Jeddah, was under the authority of the Ottomans. They, the Ottomans, introduced the printing press to Makkah Al-Mukarramah (Mecca) in 1883, where the Official Gazette (*Al-Hejaz*) was issued in addition to other privately owned newspapers. However, in 1924, King Abdul-Aziz Al Saud seized Mecca, renamed the printing press's name (*Al-Amiri*) to the *Umm Al-Qura* Press, and began issuing the first newspaper in the Saudi era called (*Umm Al-Qura*). *Umm Al-Qura* newspaper is the official newspaper of the Saudi government. It is concerned with publishing new government decisions and royal decrees; it continues to this day. The journalism and newspapers in the Saudi era transited three essential stages: The Individual Pres, The

Merging Press, and The Institutional Press (Alshebaili, 2003; Alshebaili, 2002; Al-Hazmi, 2002).

Table 1

The stages of the press in Saudi Arabia

Press stage	Period
The Individual Press	From 1924 to 1959
The Merging Press	From 1959 to 1964
The Institutional Press	From 1964 till now

The individual press was the first stage, which lasted forty years, from 1924 to 1964. During this time, individuals received licenses to publish newspapers or magazines without complications. Several newspapers and magazines were issued at this stage, most of which were in the western region of Saudi Arabia (*the Hijaz*). Compared to other regions in Saudi Arabia, the Hejaz region had an open economy and a lower illiteracy rate than anywhere else. However, this stage was characterized by the abundance of newspapers and magazines and the lack of organization in issuing newspaper licenses. Many newspapers and magazines published in this era did not last much longer due to problems such as a lack of readers due to widespread illiteracy, a lack of funding, and World War II, which affected the import of paper used for printing (Alshebaili, 2003; Al-Hazmi, 2002; Awad, 2010).

The Saudi press has gone through another essential stage: the merging press. At this stage, two and more newspapers could merge to be issued in one newspaper in order

to solve the economic difficulties experienced by some newspapers and magazines. The Saudi government proposed the merger, but it did not intervene directly and left it to the owners of the newspapers. This stage led to the suspension of many newspapers and the merging other newspapers. However, this stage did not last long, as in the year 1964, the Press Institutions Law was issued, which led to the third stage (Awad, 2010; Al-Hazmi, 2002).

By the third stage, the press had become more organized and professional. In 1964, Saudi Arabia issued its first Press Establishments Law, which regulated the activities of press institutions. One of the primary purposes of this law, according to Alshebaili (2003), is to abolish individual ownership of newspapers that lack funding and professionalism. According to Alshebaili, another reason for issuing this law is the establishment of the Ministry of Culture and Information in 1963 and its role in organizing media activities within the country.

The first Press Establishments Law stated the cancellation of all previous licenses for individuals and the transition to the system of press institutions, which focused on ownership, management, and editing issues. This law resulted in nine press institutions, *Al Madina Press Establishment*, *Islamic Dawa Establishment*, *Al-Yamama Press Establishment*, *Okaz Organization for Press and Publication*, *Al Jazirah Press, Printing and Publication Establishment*, *Al-Bilad Press and Publication Establishment*, *Dar Al-Yawm Press and Publication Establishment*, and *Assir Press and Publication Establishment*. The Saudi government has supported emerging press institutions from the beginning. As part of this support, the government provided each

press institution with a plot of land to build its headquarters, as well as annual subsidies and subscribing to the press and reserving advertising space (Awad, 2010).

Several newspapers are issued outside the institutional press system. They are issued with funding from influential people and government agencies affiliated with the state. These newspapers include *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* in London and the English-language newspaper *Arab News* in Jeddah issued by the Saudi Research and Marketing Group. Furthermore, the Ministry of Culture and Information, in 1999, permitted the printing of foreign newspapers and magazines owned by Saudi businessmen with licenses issued outside the country to print in Saudi Arabia, such as *Al-Hayat* in Beirut (Awad, 2010).

Internet and online newspapers in Saudi Arabia. The government monitors the Internet and blocks certain websites to regulate internet access. In Riyadh, the Internet Services Unit (ISU) at King Abdul-Aziz City for Science and Technology monitors and filters the Internet for immoral or illegal content. For example, the Unit blocks websites that include pornographic materials and websites, web pages associated with terrorist and extremist groups, and pages that offend the Islamic religion or laws and Saudi regulations (Al-Saggaf, Himma, & Kharabsheh, 2008; AlJabre, 2013).

The emergence of the Internet in Saudi Arabia led to the tendency of traditional newspapers to have a presence on the Internet through their websites and the establishment of online newspapers by individuals. Therefore, the number of online newspapers operating in Saudi Arabia was more than 2000 individually owned newspapers, of which 750 were licensed. The high number of online newspapers in Saudi Arabia compared to printed newspapers was due to two crucial reasons: first, the

possibility of establishing an electronic newspaper without official approval or government requirements, and second, the low cost of its establishment compared to printed newspapers. However, many of these online newspapers have been shut down due to financial difficulties (Al Maghlooth, 2013).

Due to the increasing demand for online newspaper licenses, the Saudi government has started to regulate this sector. In 2011, the Ministry of Information issued a licensing requirement for anyone who intended to launch an online newspaper or electronic magazine. Furthermore, the Ministry of Information provided online newspaper owners six months to obtain the necessary licenses. Their failure to comply may result in their being held legally responsible, blocking the site. Consequently, the number of online newspapers was reduced, and the section of online newspapers was organized (Al Maghlooth, 2013).

Journalism laws in Saudi Arabia. Journalism in Middle Eastern countries can be understood through the four theories of the press, which explain how journalism is practiced in countries with differing political systems. Siebert and his colleagues proposed a theory in the 1950s, and it became popular among scholars. The theory consists of four modules: authoritarianism, libertarianism, social responsibility, and Soviet communism (Siebert et al., 1956). The authoritarian theory can best explain the press in Arab countries. The authoritarian theory is defined by Siebert et al. (1956) as "a theory under which the press, as an institution is controlled in its functions and operation by organized society through another institution-government" (p. 10). The theory suggests that governments use censorship and licensing to control the media. In addition,

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this theory indicates that media outlets, such as newspapers, radio stations, and television stations, are discouraged from criticizing the government or the political system (Siebert et al., 1956).

In Saudi Arabia, five journalism laws have been enacted to regulate the practice of journalism. The first journalism law was issued in 1929, consisting of 32 articles. It was derived from the Ottoman law used in the Hejaz region before the establishment of Saudi Arabia, with some amendments without adding any new provisions. The first journalism law was in effect for ten years before the second was adopted (Awad, 2010).

The second law consists of 62 articles, and an essential item in this law is to hold the author responsible for what the articles contain. With this development of the journalism law, editors-in-chief and writers were each responsible for articles. Later, this aspect of the law was modified to designate an editor-in-chief responsible for all published material. The second printing law continued for nearly twenty years, establishing the General Directorate for Broadcasting, Press, and Publication in 1953 and renamed the Ministry of Information in 1963 (Almaina, 2019).

The third journalism law was enacted in 1958 and consisted of 57 articles. Compared to its predecessor, this law did not introduce any significant changes. As a result of this law, the General Directorate for Broadcasting, Press, and Publication has become the Saudi press's primary source of information and activities. This directive was issued in 1964 to focus on newspaper ownership, cancel individual press licenses, and authorize the Ministry of Information to license all press organizations (Al-Shebeili, 2000).

The Fourth System was issued in 1982, which contained 64 articles with some modifications, the most prominent of which were, as mentioned,

(1) Confirmation of freedom of expression within Islamic law and the State constitution.

(2) Elimination of the prior restraints and censorship imposed on newspapers before printing (previously, newspapers used to send a draft copy of the paper to the General Directorate for Broadcasting, Press, and Publication for approval).

(3) Attribution of prime responsibility for any material published in each newspaper to the respective Editor-in-Chief. (Awad, 2010)

To date, the fifth journalism law has been in operation since 2000. This journalism law consists of 49 articles. This law established an association for Saudi journalists and permitted foreign newspapers and magazines to print in Saudi Arabia (Almaina, 2019; Awad, 2010; Alshebaili, 2003; Al-Hazmi, 2002). The critical articles in this law include the following:

- In article Eight, freedom of expression is guaranteed in all publications, provided the law of Shari'ah has been followed.

- In article Twenty-Four, it is stated that local newspapers will not be censored unless the President of the Council of Ministers deems it necessary.

- In article Thirty-One, it states that publications will not be banned except in cases authorized by the President of the Council of Ministers.

- In accordance with article Thirty-Three, the editor-in-chief of a newspaper or someone acting on his behalf is responsible for the content published in the paper, as well as the writer.

- In article Thirty-Five, it asserts that papers that publish incorrect news or attribute an incorrect statement to someone must correct mistakes and publish the corrected version free of charge upon request from the party associated with the mistake. (Almaina, 2019)

Factors that influenced journalists in Saudi Arabia. Understanding the factors that affect Saudi journalists' practices is crucial to contextualizing this study and understanding their work environment. Saudi journalists face similar obstacles and challenges when collecting and publishing information. Many studies have identified multiple factors that affect the practices of Saudi journalists. The factors include political, cultural, religious, economic, and organizational factors (Almaina, 2019; Alotaibi, 2016; Awad, 2010; Al-Jameeah, 2009).

Political factors. Media in Arab countries is often controlled by political authorities, unlike in democratic countries. As a result, politicians in Arab countries have a substantial influence over public media, including private media that do not receive government funding (Rugh, 2004). The Saudi government oversees all forms of media, including newspapers, radio, and television, through the Ministry of Information. For example, the Ministry of Information appoints newspaper editors-in-chief (Alemania, 2019). Therefore, some editors-in-chief impose more severe restrictions than the Ministry

of Information to avoid being held accountable or losing their positions (Al Maghlooth, 2014).

It has been noted that Saudi journalists tend to avoid discussing issues that conflict with the government's policies due to the government's influence over them (Rugh, 2004; Al-Kahtani, 1999). According to Almaina (2019), Saudi Arabian journalists avoid writing about topics that may appear to contradict government policies.

It is important to note that the level of press freedom in Saudi Arabia varies. Previous studies indicated that the margin of freedom of the press in Saudi Arabia has improved and that journalists could discuss previously prohibited issues (Alnassar, 2010; Awad, 2010; Al-Jameeah, 2009). In contrast, a recent study found no evidence of an improvement in press freedom. According to Almaina (2019), journalists receive constant verbal guidance from the Ministry of Information.

Saudi journalists face challenges when seeking information from official sources. According to Almaina (2019), Saudi journalists work in an environment where Saudi officials determine what information sources can and cannot be accessed. In addition, a study about online journalism by Alotaibi (2016) found that Saudi journalists experienced an information constraint because some official Ministries and institutions were not cooperating with them.

Cultural and religious factors. Religion and culture play a significant role in influencing Saudi Arabian journalists. The relationship between the two factors is interrelated and intertwined. According to Rugh (2004), Saudi Arabia's media is in harmony with the country's cultural and religious values. Furthermore, Rugh pointed out

that editors' perceptions are shaped by their social environments and cultural and religious backgrounds. The literature review also indicates that cultural and religious factors have influenced the issues discussed and published in newspapers (Al Maghlooth, 2013; Awad, 2010; Al-Jameeah, 2009). Additionally, Almaina (2019) found that religious and social groups exert pressure on the media and journalists regarding what is published. Most Saudi journalists participating in Almaina's study tend to agree that the cultural values of Saudi society play a significant role in determining what issues can be discussed and what cannot.

The cultural and religious influences on Saudi journalists vary according to their age. The study of Almaina (2019) discovered that cultural factors slightly influence the ages of participants. The study's results indicated that older journalists were more affected by cultural factors than younger journalists. This difference is attributed to the younger generation's openness to technologies and social media. As a result of the study, Saudi Arabian journalists could discuss sensitive issues, such as women's issues, without angering religious leaders or the society at large (Almaina, 2019). Indeed, social and religious influences have changed significantly in Saudi society in recent years as a consequence of the social and religious reforms adopted by the young Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Saudi Arabia's reforms are focused primarily on the youth, with young people under 30 comprising 67 percent of the total Saudi population, according to the General Authority for Statistics in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (2021).

Economic and organizational factors. Newspapers and press organizations have been impacted significantly by the Internet and digital media, which has raised many

economic concerns (Lewis, 2012). In addition, due to the economic crisis and oil price drop, newspaper advertising revenues have decreased in Saudi Arabia. This results in newspapers having difficulty providing resources for work and paying salaries to their employees. Due to this, Saudi newspapers heavily rely on part-time journalists, representing 54% of the press organization's employees (Almaina, 2019).

Saudi Arabian media organizations depend on various sources for their economic survival. According to Rugh (2004), Saudi newspapers heavily depend on government subsidies in the first place and on advertisers in the second. As a result, the government and advertisers significantly influence what Saudi journalists are permitted to publish and what they are not permitted to publish (Almaina, 2019).

According to several studies, the editors-in-chief of Saudi newspapers have complete control over the administration of the media organization. As a result, the organization's press policies change with the editor-in-chief change, which influences journalists' work (Almaina, 2019; Al Maghlooth, 2013; Awad, 2010). Additionally, time and money are other organizational factors that Saudi journalists face daily. Almaina (2019) asserts, for example, that Saudi journalists face deadlines and financial pressures related to their journalistic work.

Fake News and Journalism

The concept of "fake news" is not new in the field of journalism and media. Fake news as disinformation and inaccurate information, has been a part of the news media history for extended periods (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018; Hirst, 2017). It can be said that fake news has been around since 1896, during the Spanish War and with the advent of the

terms "yellow journalism" and "freak journalism" in journalism. It was well-known that yellow journalism published content devoid of evidence and factually incorrect, often for commercial reasons (Molina, Sundar, Le, & Lee, 2021). In 1938, a radio adaptation of Well's drama *The War of the Worlds* terrified roughly one million people, another example of widespread misinformation through the media. This broadcast was designed to entertain listeners by simulating an actual radio news broadcast to provide a realistic experience (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018). In addition, the term fake news was used to refer to satirical political and news TV programs such as *Jon Stewart's Daily Show* (Ha, Andreu Perez, & Ray, 2019).

Since the 2016 U.S. presidential election, fake news has gained attention among the public, researchers, media practitioners, and politicians (Hirst, 2017). With the advancement of communication and media technology, fake news has been able to spread and consume very easily and rapidly. In response to this growing problem, scholars and practitioners from various disciplines have begun to conceptualize the term "fake news." Although fake news has become popular in many countries and among practitioners, contemporary references appear different from earlier definitions.

Real news vs. fake news. A better understanding of fake news requires dividing it into two parts, fake and news. According to Merriam-Webster's dictionary, fake means "not true, real, or genuine" (2022). On the other hand, news has different definitions; some are general, while others are specialized. News generally refers to recent, notable, and exciting events (Richardson, 2007). Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines *news* as "a report of recent events" (2022).

News has been defined in a variety of ways in academic literature across a range of fields. Regarding news literacy, Vraga, Tully, Maksl, Craft, and Ashley (2021) define news as "any accurate information that facilitates decision-making on both personal and social issues, thus enabling people to more effectively engage with society" (p.3). In journalism, news is defined as a "daily negotiation among various actors occupying different niches in the information ecosystem" (Bennett,1997, p.108, as cited in Fleming, 2009). News is an integral part of journalism and a product of journalism, where journalism provides the public with independent, reliable, and accurate information to make their own decisions. It is true that news is socially constructed and that journalists interfere in it by placing or excluding information, but they make it up and do not fake it. Journalists' role is to convey truth to audiences by adhering to journalistic standards such as objectivity and accuracy (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018).

Accordingly, crucial questions arise about fake news and its relationship to real news. Lazer et al. (2018) explain this in their definition of fake news: "fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent. Fake-news outlets, in turn, lack the news media's editorial norms and processes for ensuring the accuracy and credibility of information" (p.1094). Tandoc, Lim, and Ling (2018) stated that "fake news hides under a veneer of legitimacy as it takes on some form of credibility by trying to appear like real news" (p.147).

Scholars and practitioners defined fake news differently, ranging from general to specific. Some scholars have defined fake news by focusing on the intent. For example, Gelfert (2018) defined *fake news* as false and misleading claims presented in the form of

news and deliberately designed to mislead. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) provided a similar definition of fake news "to be news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers" (p. 213).

Other scholars defined fake news by focusing on digital technologies. As Housh (2018) stated, fake news is "content that is deliberately false and published on websites that mimic traditional news websites" (p.1). Likewise, Klein and Wueller (2017) defined *fake news* as false information intentionally generated by individuals with malicious agendas based on distorted evidence and then widely circulated by social media users.

Mis-, dis-, mal-, and non-Information. In order to define the term fake news, it is essential to determine the terms that are used and related to it. Scholars have distinguished between these terms, *mis-information, dis-information, mal-information, and non-information*. Jahng, Eckert, and Metzger-Riftkin (2021) stated that mis-information and dis-information are sometimes used interchangeably. They define *dis-information* as "false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented, and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit," while *mis-information* is "false and inaccurate, but in contrast its intent to deceive is not present or unclear" (Jahng, Eckert, & Metzger-Riftkin, 2021, p.2). The difference that distinguishes between disinformation and misinformation is the intent to deceive (Lazer et al. 2018).

Park, Montecchi, Plangger, and Pitt (2020) provided definitions of mis-information, dis-information, mal-information, and non-information. However, they focused on two dimensions: the intention to deceive and harm. They pointed out that mis-

information occurs when there is the little level of intent to deceive and harm; while dis-information occurs when there is a high level of intent to deceive and harm. Likewise, non-information occurs when there is a high level of intent to deceive but little level of intent to harm; while mal-information occurs when there is little level of intent to deceive, but a high level of intent to harm.

Tandoc, Lim, and Ling (2018) noticed that the motivations behind producing fake news result from two drivers: financial and political or ideological. In the first motive, financial, readers are deceived by tricked titles on the Internet, attracting them to click on them, and these clicks turn into advertising dollars. As for the second motive, ideological, the aim of producing false news here is to distort public discourse or discredit certain personalities for political or ideological goals.

Maldonado (2019) stated that several factors need to be considered to explain fake news, and they tend to interact rather than work independently. The first factor is the epistemological factor and how the truth is being eroded, which means that the truth in the post-truth era has become multiple based on the multiplicity of worldviews and the lack of belief in one truth. The second factor is the technological factor and the impact of digitization on the production, dissemination, and consumption of fake news, where digital technology was characterized by accessibility and affordability that contributed to the flow, dissemination, and consumption of information on a large scale. The third is the demographic factor and the role of digital illiteracy in consuming and sharing fake news, as there is a relationship between age and the activity of sharing fake news. There is also another factor, which is the economic factor, as not all fake news has a political motive,

but an economic motive. Therefore, a new strategy for financial profit through the internet has emerged, "Clickbait," by providing exciting and shocking content to consumers. Another critical factor in understanding fake news is affective factor, where emotional motivation is essential in responding to fake news. By reinforcing their beliefs, those who want to promote fake news can make it seem true. Finally, the political factor, which is the recent rise of populism, contributed to the increase and spread of fake news. Populism creates a divide between a morally corrupt establishment and a virtuous people, and it encourages suspicion of inherited narratives and expert views such as journalists (Maldonado, 2019).

Types of fake news. Multiple terms have been used to refer to fake news, including propaganda, parody, trolls, hoax, and satire (Verstraete, Bambauer, & Bambauer, 2017). A study by Tandoc, Lim, & Ling (2018) analyzed 34 published academic studies that used the term "fake news" and how each study defines and implements the term. The studies were mainly in the context of the United States and the rest in Australia, China, and Italy. Moreover, most articles were from a journalistic perspective, and the rest were from different disciplines. Tandoc, Lim, and Ling (2018) have identified six ways in which previous studies have used the term fake news: news satire, news parody, news fabrication, photo manipulation, propaganda, and advertising. In addition, they determined two key dimensions to define these types: facticity and deceptive intent. Facticity refers to the extent to which fake news is based on facts, while deceptive intent refers to the motivation behind misinforming the public.

Satire is one of the types of fake news that the researchers referred to when reviewing previous studies. News satire refers to fake news programs that provide audiences with news updates using sarcasm and humor. *The Daily Show on Comedy Central* in the United States is one such example. The researchers mentioned that the previous studies had described political news satires as fake news, but their fakeness is only associated with their format. They mimic newscasts for humor, using exaggerated style, fake reporting, and audience laughter, but it uses actual events. Similarly*, parody*, another type of fake news, also relies on humor to attract an audience and use the simulated presentation of the mainstream news media. An example of parody is *The Onion* site, which is often confused with another news site. However, parody differs from satire in that it relies on fabricated news and unrealistic information (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018).

Another type of fake news is *news fabrication*, defined as "articles which have no factual basis but are published in the style of news articles to create legitimacy" (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018, p.143). Unlike the previous types, this type does not involve a tacit understanding between the author and the audience that the item is false. Instead, the author contributes to fabrication in bad faith and is motivated by various motives, including political and economic. In addition to news fabrication, photo and video manipulation is another type of fake news, as photo and video editing technology have developed rapidly in recent years. Photo and video manipulation is another type of fake news, as photo and video editing technology have developed rapidly in recent years. The photo and video are manipulated to change the context by adjusting, adding, or deleting

some elements, even the degrees of coloration or color balance (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018).

Propaganda is another type of fake news that occurs when a political entity generates news stories to influence public opinion. Propaganda aims to support entities and individuals, whether government or private. Although propaganda is often fact-based, it often promotes a specific viewpoint or aspect. Similar to propaganda, *advertising*, another type of fake news, is based on facts. Fake news has been used to describe several advertising materials disguised in the form of legitimate news reports and press releases published as news reports (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018).

Fake news and journalists. There is no doubt that the proliferation of digital communication technology has facilitated the spread of inaccurate information. This spread of inaccurate information has created worrying challenges for journalists and news media outlets in different parts of the world (Balod & Hameleers, 2021). According to Cision's 2017 State of the Media Report for the United States and Canada, fake news was the greatest challenge for the news media. Furthermore, the report identifies fake news as the industry's third most crucial challenge, following staffing and resources and bypassing traditional media by social networks and influencers (Saldaña & Vu, 2022). Likewise, a study by Pew Research Center found that journalists in the United States are concerned about fake and made-up news and lack faith in the industry's response to it (Atske, 2022).

One of the most critical challenges journalists face when practicing fake news detection is the lack of agreement among scholars and practitioners about what fake news

is (Gelfert, 2018). Scholars discovered, for example, in a study conducted in Kenya that journalists have provided different definitions and interpretations of the term "fake news." Additionally, they noticed that different media organizations have different definitions of fake news. Differences in definitions of fake news affect journalists' ability to detect fake news. According to the researchers, news perceived as fake by one journalist may be considered accurate by another (Mutugi, Nyamboga, & Matu, 2020).

As another challenge, some politicians have used the term fake news as a weapon to attack and discredit journalists. The term fake news was used by Donald Trump during the 2016 U.S. presidential election to accuse news media outlets and journalists of lying and misreporting (Flood, 2018). In a study of how *The New York Times* discredited fake news accusations from Donald Trump, Lischka (2019) found that the term fake news was used to denote mistrust, prejudice, or disagreement with the mainstream news media. The accusations against journalists are not limited to American journalists alone but are spreading worldwide. Filipino journalists, for instance, have indicated that accusations of fake news are common and backed by the government to cultivate distrust of the mainstream media and silence journalists (Balod & Hameleers, 2021).

In some cases, such accusations can pose even more significant challenges to journalists and media outlets in non-democratic countries. News organizations and journalists in non-democratic countries may be prosecuted, fined, and imprisoned for long periods. For example, the Kenyan government has prosecuted several television stations and fined them for distributing false news (Mutugi, Nyamboga, & Matu, 2020). As a result, fear of trial and punishment may cause journalists to feel frustrated and

restrain themselves from publishing materials that may result in their arrest (Balod &

Hameleers, 2021). Moreover, accusations of creating and publishing fake news against

journalists lead the public to distrust the major news media. Additionally, scholars found

that due to accusations of fake news, the mainstream news media had lost its audience to

other news media competitors (Mutugi, Nyamboga, & Matu, 2020).

Another challenge journalists face when exposing fake news on social media is

the public's attack on them for their corrections to fake news content that contradicts the

public's attitudes and beliefs. According to Saldaña and Vu (2022), "Journalists who

correct misinformation on social media may face backlash and retaliation when their

claims go against certain groups' beliefs" (p.835).

Additionally, much fake news circulated on social media may challenge

journalists and their profession. Fake news content, for example, may compete with the

public's interest in professional journalism (Tandoc, Jenkins, & Craft, 2018). Also, due to

the excessive content of fake news, journalists are required to invest more time and effort

in detecting it. For example, Balod and Hameleers (2021) found that Filipino journalists

sometimes publish content without verifying it properly due to the heavy workload of

exposing fake news. They also found that lacking time and resources, journalists

eliminated unverifiable information.

Further, due to the development of the tools used in spreading fake news,

journalists are required to improve their skills and learn new methods of responding to

fake news, increasing their workload. *The Wall Street Journal*, for example, has been

training journalists to detect fake news with advanced techniques and has developed

guidelines to detect fake news (Marconi & Daldrup, 2018).

Social Media and Journalism

  Journalists' use of social media. Journalism has undergone significant changes

over the past decade due to the rapid advancement of computer technology and the rise of

social media. In the modern age, several social media platforms have been developed,

such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tik Tok, Blogs, WhatsApp, and LinkedIn.

However, in today's world, social media has become an essential tool for journalists to be

successful. According to Weaver and Willnat (2016), most journalists perceive social

media to positively impact their work and make journalism more accountable to the

people.

  Journalists use new technologies, like social media, to adapt to existing practices

rather than change how they work. This process is called normalization; it occurs when

new technologies are adopted by journalists only to be incorporated into their routines

and norms (Singer, 2005). However, journalists differ in their use of social media and its

importance to their journalistic work. Therefore, Hedman and Djerf-Pierre (2013)

identified three types of journalists using social media: skeptical shunners, pragmatic

conformists, and enthusiastic activists. The first type is the skeptical shunners, journalists

who avoid anything to do with social media. They are a minority of journalists and are

often older journalists in print newspapers. They try to avoid social media and question

its uses and effects in journalism.

Furthermore, they resist the idea that social media will change journalism. The second type of journalist who uses social media is the pragmatic conformist. These journalists use social media regularly and are selective and judicious. They use social media due to various pressures from peers and work organizations. They are the vast majority of journalists from all age groups and workplaces. The third type of journalist who uses social media is the enthusiastic activist. They live an online life and use social media, Twitter, and others to a large extent in their daily lives. This type of journalist is common among young people and those who work on digital platforms. They believe that social media is changing the profession of journalism dramatically (Hedman & Djerf-Pierre, 2013).

Several scholars indicated that journalists worldwide increasingly use social media in their professional routines (Lasorsa, Lewis, & Holton, 2012; Hermida, 2012). In 2013, a study indicated that most journalists in the United States had adopted social media platforms as an essential tool in their everyday work routines (Willnat & Weaver, 2018). According to a recent survey conducted by Pew Research Center in 2022, 94 percent of journalists in the United States employ social media for their work. Additionally, the survey indicated that journalists of all age groups use social media for work purposes (Jurkowitz & Gottfried, 2022).

Globally, many studies found that journalists utilize a wide range of social media platforms, including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Blogs, and WhatsApp (Santana & Hopp, 2016; Saldaña et al., 2017; Jurkowitz & Gottfried, 2022). Journalists employ several social media platforms for their work according to the popularity of these

platforms in their countries. For example, in the United States, Twitter is journalists'

most popular social media platform for work-related tasks, followed by Facebook,

Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube (Jurkowitz & Gottfried, 2022). Similarly, a study

found that journalists in Latin America heavily use Twitter in their news work. The study

also indicated that journalists used YouTube and Google+ in order to disseminate their

journalistic work effectively (Saldaña et al., 2017). In Rwanda, scholars found that

journalists utilize WhatsApp platform, a mobile application for messaging (McIntyre &

Sobel, 2019). In Saudi Arabia, a study indicated that journalists rely on several social

media platforms for publishing and gathering news and information. In comparison with

other social media platforms, Twitter and WhatsApp have been used by most journalists

for a more extended period, indicating the importance of these platforms in the field of

media and journalism for them (Alharethi, 2020).

      Social media and news routines. Multiple studies have indicated that journalists

from different countries use social media in their journalistic work for a variety of

purposes, including news routines (Hermida, 2012; Saldaña et al., 2017; Willnat &

Weaver, 2018). *News routines* are defined as "patterned, routinized, repeated practices

and forms that media workers use to do their jobs" (Shoemaker & Reese,1996, p. 105).

      Social media is valuable to journalists for news production, including researching

news stories and publishing news articles. According to Willnat and Weaver (2018),

"Journalists generally see social media as a tool that can enhance "the job of traditional

newsmaking" by offering faster reporting speeds, better access to sources, and more

efficiency in research" (p. 891).

Studies have shown that journalists use different social media platforms for gathering information for their news stories, publishing news, checking what other news outlets are publishing, checking breaking news, interviewing a source, posting comments, verifying information, communicating with their audiences, and connecting with new people (Alharethi, 2020; Weaver, Willnat, & Wilhoit, 2019; Brems et al., 2017; Hermida, 2012). Also, social media provides journalists a unique opportunity to access user-generated content that may have impactful news value (Zhang & Li, 2020). Additionally, researchers found that journalists follow sources more easily through social media, especially Twitter and Facebook (Powers & Vera-Zambrano, 2018). Moreover, a study found that journalism has become increasingly dependent on social media during challenging times, such as crises or breaking news events, when journalists cannot access the latest information (Rauchfleisch et al., 2017).

Social media has gained much fame as a source of news for journalists around the world in the past decade (Lariscy, 2009; Brandtzaeg et al., 2016; Alharethi, 2020). Paulussen and Harder (2014) pointed out that monitoring social media platforms has become part of Belgian journalists' daily newsgathering routine. Furthermore, multiple studies indicated that Norwegian journalists use social media to search for news and access updated information during breaking events because social media offers easy accessibility of information, cheapness, and convenience (Brandtzaeg et al., 2016). In a study of convergence and divergence in the use of social media by French and US journalists, researchers found that journalists from both countries employ social media to

complete routine tasks such as gathering information, monitoring sources, and developing story ideas (Powers & Vera-Zambrano, 2018).

In non-western countries, researchers found that Rwandan journalists use social media for news practices such as searching for a story, communicating with sources, and distributing news (McIntyre & Sobel, 2019). In Saudi Arabia, a study found that journalists employ social media platforms for gathering and disseminating news and information (Alharethi, 2020).

Social Media and verification routines. *Verification* is "a process that is a critical part of the newsgathering and information dissemination process" (Brandtzaeg et al., 2016, p. 325). Due to the rise of social media, journalists and news organizations have already abandoned attempts to be the first to publish break news in favor of verification and curating (Hermida, 2012). The importance of verification is further discussed by Kovach and Rosenstiel (2021), who stated,

> While not following any standardized code, everyone who produces what is viewed as news, or even the broader range of nonfiction, operates by relying on a method of testing and providing information— his or her own individual discipline of verification. Practices such as seeking multiple witnesses to an event, disclosing as much as possible about sources, and asking many sides for comment are, in effect, tools for the discipline of verification, which is the essential process of arriving as nearly as possible at the truth of the matter at hand. These methods may be intensely personal and idiosyncratic. Writer Rick Meyer at the Los Angeles Times would splice his facts and interviews into note card–like snippets

and organize them on his office floor. Or the methods may be institutionalized, like the fact-checking department of the New Yorker. But by whatever name, in whatever medium, these habits and methods underlie the third principle of journalism: The essence of journalism is a discipline of verification. In the end, the discipline of verification is what separates journalism from entertainment, propaganda, fiction, or art. (p.79)

According to Lecheler and Kruikemeier (2016), verifying online sources is challenging. Furthermore, Hermida (2012) stated that "the rise of social media as a source for breaking news, and the speed at which information is disseminated on the network, poses a challenge to journalism's discipline of verification" (p. 320). For instance, due to a large amount of information on user-generated social media, journalists face challenges regarding the reliability and verifiability of content, including multimedia messages (Zhang & Li, 2020). Moreover, journalists who trust online search tools may end up with biased results because these tools use algorithms to decide which information is displayed and which information is not (Van Leuven et al., 2018). Therefore, journalistic verification strategies were needed to align with what social media offers as a source of information and news.

Information verification on social media can be challenging due to the lack of standardized strategies worldwide. According to Rauchfleisch et al. (2017), "There is no commonly approved method to verify information from social media in journalism, which makes it hard for journalists to effectively bypass the risks of spreading unverified information" (p.11). However, Wardle (2014) suggests that when journalists verify social

media content, four elements are essential: provenance (the originality of the content), source (the creator of content), date (content creation time), and location (place of origin content).

Additionally, a study revealed that the social media work and verification practices of journalists could be classified into five main categories: trusted sources (relying on national and international news agencies and news providers), access to eyewitnesses, and authenticating sources (using Facebook and Twitter to contact sources involved in the event), traditional journalistic methods (using face-to-face contact or phone contact), multimodal fact-checking and verification tools (verifying photos and videos by using online tools), and workaround methods (using phrases such as "according to unverified sources") (Brandtzaeg et al., 2016).

Verification routines in the era of fake news. According to Brandtzaeg et al. (2016), "the risk of distributing inaccurate and false information may force journalism into a direction of greater awareness and standardized verification routines" (p.338). However, a study found that user-generated content on social media is complex, and journalists are not knowledgeable about discovering, verifying, and filtering it (Wardle et al., 2014). Van Leuven et al. (2018) stated that "verifying online sources demands practical knowledge and (digital) skill sets, such as techniques and tools to check the geo-location or trying to track down the original source of a video, that many journalists do not (yet) have." Indeed, with the speed and ease of spreading fake news on social media (Tandoc et al., 2018), journalists need to develop their content verification skills to cope with the complexities of spreading fake news. In their study, Himma- Kadakas and

Ojamets (2022) concluded that journalists need to become familiar with the practical features of digital tools to use them effectively.

Many journalists use various skills and competencies to verify the accuracy of information about different types of information disorders. According to Himma-Kadakas and Ojamets (2022), journalists verify information using traditional journalistic skills such as verifying sources, critically thinking, and having knowledge of topics outside journalism. The researchers argued that having these skills is generally sufficient to detect most information disorders, such as fake news, disinformation, and misinformation.

Other scholars found that journalists rely on traditional toolkits when verifying online news stories. The researchers indicated that journalists adopted standard practices, including checking the authors' identity and backgrounds and checking the background of a post on the website where the story was published (Jahng et al., 2021). Brandtzaeg et al. (2016) pointed out that most verification practices that are used by journalists regarding online content are traditional journalistic methods such as "looking up contacts and calling them directly" (p. 330). Multiple journalists have adopted several practices quickly, but some have been reluctant. In order to avoid spreading fake news and misinformation, journalists tend to use verification strategies such as cross-checking with sources more often, avoiding anonymity as much as possible, and identifying the source of information (Vu & Saldaña, 2021).

Regarding technological verification, many journalists have reported using reverse image searches to verify visual content and other internet-based tools to verify

information online. Journalists have also described websites such as Snopes.com that fact-check stories as helpful in verifying information (Jahng et al., 2021). Furthermore, several online tools can be employed by journalists to conduct research and verify social media content, such as SocialMention, Storyful, Politifact, Fastfact, Topsy, Sulia, TinEye, FotoForensics, and Trackur (Brandtzaeg et al., 2016).

Role Perceptions and Journalism

In role theory, a *role* is defined as "the expected behavior of people who occupy a particular social status and position in society" (Mellado, 2019, p. 04). In other words, a role is a function that a person performs in accordance with the normative demands of the position he occupies. A person's social role can be conceptualized as an expected attuited and expected behavior related to a specific situation in a group, organization, or society (Mellado, Hellmueller, & Donsbach, 2016).

In journalism, a role has been described as "a composite of occupational tasks and purposes that is widely recognizable and has a stable and enduring form" (Christians et al., 2010, p. 119). Within the construct of professional roles in journalism, there are four concepts: role conception, role perception, role enactment, and role performance. Mellado and Hellmueller (2016) defined *role conception* as "journalists' own formulation of the journalistic roles that are most important to them," while role perception is "journalists' or media's role expectations in society." They defined *role enactment* as "individual behavior materialized in news decisions and journalistic reporting." In contrast, role performance was the "collective outcome of concrete newsroom decisions

and the style of journalistic reporting." These concepts differ among themselves in definitions and how they are measured empirically (Mellado & Hellmueller, 2016, p. 7).

Journalists, as individuals, play an essential role in professional roles. Mellado, Hellmueller, and Donsbach (2016) argued that "the journalist can conceive his or her roles, perceive roles, perceive how he or she does his or her job, and the audience can also perceive and evaluate the performance of the journalists" (p. 05).

Journalistic role perception. The current study focuses only on the role perception of Saudi Arabian journalists regarding fake news on social media. However, the importance of investigating journalists' role perceptions is that how they understand their role will considerably influence how they interact with news sources and make decisions about news selection and presentation (Donsbach, 2008). Moreover, Donsbach (2008) pointed out that role perceptions are "an important concept to apply in describing how journalists in different cultures and media systems understand their work and its social function" (p.1).

Scholars have defined journalistic *role perception* as "what obligations and responsibilities journalists ascribe to their own job and how they see their relationship with the public, as well as with politics and businesses" (Prager & Hameleers, 2021, p. 397). Other scholars stated that role perceptions are "the normative and actual functions of journalism in society, a set of expectations, values, norms and standards, which define how news people and organizations should and do work" (Hellmueller & Mellado, 2015, p. 4). Furthermore, Mellado, Hellmueller, and Donsbach (2016) elaborated more about role perceptions and their relationship with journalists as they mention that

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Role perception more likely refers to perceived role expectations in society. The idea here is that journalists do not conceive a role, but perceive a specific task as socially required. Role perceptions do not necessarily have a location in the conceiver, but might be a followed script that has been internalized and is located in the larger social structure, but did not form a mental representation of that role for a particular journalist. Any journalist may perceive role expectations at any time, but journalists do not always have a self-conceived role, but follow role expectations. (pp. 05-06)

Types of journalistic role perception. In order to describe journalistic role perceptions, mass communication scholars have classified role perceptions into several typologies that have been utilized widely in journalism studies. Cohen (1963) provided a classical approach to conceptualizing journalistic role perceptions. The researcher divided journalistic roles into two primary roles: *neutral* and *participant*. Johnstone, Slawski, and Bowman (1976) carried out a study that distinguished between two roles: the neutral and the participant. Journalists adopting the neutral function see that their primary job is to public verified news to the audience. In contrast, in the participant role, journalists play an extra active role in social reforms and public affairs because it is hard for the public to identify their interests, journalists play an extra active role in social reforms and public affairs.

Many scholars expanded the typologies of journalistic role perceptions in the literature. For example, Morris Janowitz (1975) provided two role perceptions that are widely recognized: the gatekeeper and the advocate. However, two dimensions

distinguish these perceptions of the role. The first dimension relates to the audience, and the second relates to news choice. In the advocate role, journalists may assume that many audiences cannot identify or pursue their interests in society. As a result, these journalists believe their job is to act on the audience's behalf, so they choose news for the social groups they support based on news instrumentality. On the other hand, journalists who adhere to the gatekeeper role see the audience as mature and can pursue their needs, so they select news based on professional criteria.

Weaver and Wilhoit (1986, 1996) identified four role perceptions from a follow-up survey among news reporters in the United States between 1982 and 1983. The role perceptions include *interpretive*, *disseminator*, *adversarial*, and *populist-mobilizer* (Weaver & Wilhoit,1986, 1996). First, the interpretive role is where journalists interpret and analyze events and issues to make them understandable to the public. Second, the disseminator's role is to deliver information to the public based on the facts rapidly. Third, the adversarial role is very similar to the watchdog function of the press, which emphasizes skepticism and criticism of everything related to the government and other news sources. Finally, the role of the populist mobilizer is to give ordinary citizens a chance to express their opinions about the government's affairs (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986, 1996). Journalists in the populist mobilizer focus on four subcomponents: (1) develop intellectual and cultural interests, (2) encourage people to form opinions, (3) motivate people to get involved, (4) and point to possible solutions" (Balod & Hameleers, 2021, p. 2371).

Weaver and Wilhoit (1996) pointed out that journalists' perceptions of their roles tend to be a combination of multiple roles simultaneously. For instance, Ward (2009) asserted that journalists perceive themselves as a mixture of interpreters, informers, and advocates. However, Weaver and Wilhoit (1996) stated that the journalistic role perceptions considered dominant among journalists are interpretive, adversarial, and disseminator.

Understanding journalists' perceptions of their role is vital since their perceptions and behaviors are influenced by how they perceive their professional role (Vu, Trieu, & Nguyen, 2020). For instance, in a study of role perceptions of journalists in five Latin American countries, Weiss (2015) found that Argentinian journalists who identify with the role of interpreters tend to check facts and use press releases online. The researcher also found that Mexican and Colombian journalists who identify with the role of the populist mobilizer engage more in everyday tasks such as searching for sources and searching for press releases on the Internet.

However, it is essential to know that journalists' role perceptions are inconstant. The role perceptions change in society from time to time. Weaver, Willnat, and Wilhoit (2019) found that American journalists' perceptions of their roles have altered during the past twenty years. Moreover, journalists' perceptions of their role vary according to region, political ideology, religion, culture, and ethnicity (Relly, Zanger, & Fahmy, 2015). Furthermore, journalists' perceptions of their roles may vary depending on the type of political system in which they operate (Strömbäck, 2005). The study by Kwanda and Lin (2020) found that Indonesian journalists perceive their role as working with the

government rather than acting as aggressive watchdogs like their counterparts in Western countries.

Scholars pointed out societal, organizational, and individual influences impact journalists' role perceptions (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). For example, Relly, Zanger, and Fahmy (2015) examined professional role perceptions among Kurdish journalists in Iraq. The researchers found that the journalists selected three out of the top four role perceptions of the top journalists in the United States. The three role perceptions (disseminators, interpreters, and populist-mobilizers roles) were equally significant. In addition, the researchers discovered that "the 'Islamist' ideology had a stronger influence than 'democrat' on 'Watchdog' role perceptions" (p. 1085).

Journalistic role perception in different contexts. Scholars have studied role perceptions in different contexts to understand how journalists work professionally (Weaver, Willnat, & Wilhoit, 2019). In the context of social media, Vu et al. (2020) found a significant relationship between the role of interpreters and populist mobilizers and their adoption of social media in their work. Other scholars have studied how role perceptions affect Danish journalists' perceived importance of objectivity and their implementation of the norm. The researchers found that the role perceptions of Danish journalists have substantial explanatory power regarding the implementation of the objectivity norm (Skovsgaard, Albæk, Bro, & de Vreese, 2012).

Regarding the health crisis, Klemm, Das, and Hartmann (2019) conducted in-depth interviews with 22 journalists who have experienced health crisis reporting to explore how they understand their role perceptions. The findings revealed that

"journalists experience role conflicts between remaining independent and feeling responsible for supporting public interest, when covering public health crises" (p. 1236). They also found that the most role perception among journalists as they cover health crises is the role of populist mobilizers (Klemm, Das & Hartmann, 2019).

        Journalistic role perception in the fake news context. In the context of fake news, several studies have examined role perceptions in different countries. The studies have provided different results regarding role perceptions among journalists in Western and non-Western countries.

        In Western countries, Schapals' study (2018) focused on the role perceptions of Australian and British journalists in the context of fake news. The results indicated that journalists showed concern about the issue of fake news and its negative impact on the role of the media in democratic societies. As a result, journalists had concerns about their roles, such as the "watchdog" role in society. They suggested adopting more rigorous fact-checking techniques to fulfill these roles and spending more time verifying. Moreover, in the United States, Vu and Saldaña (2021) explored the fake news effects and its discourse on journalism. The findings revealed that journalists who adopt the interpretive role were less likely to embrace accountability and transparency practices.

        In non-Western countries, scholars examined how journalists in the Philippines perceive their role under the influence of misinformation and disinformation. The results revealed that the role of the watchdog and the disseminator had been reinforced as journalists perceived that the credibility of journalism was under threat. In addition,

journalists magnified the disseminator role by adopting more verification and rigorous

fact-checking to combat fake news (Balod & Hameleers, 2021).

Media Literacy and Journalism

Despite being a relatively new scholarly discipline, media literacy has recently

become integral to contemporary discourse (Potter, 2010; Hobbs & Jensen, 2009). The

concept of media literacy has recently received significant attention in the academy.

Since the advent of media technologies that have enabled the flow of information to the

public broadly and rapidly, media literacy studies have increased in the past two decades

(Potter, 2010). The importance of media literacy today is further highlighted by Potter

(2010), who emphasizes that it broadens people's perspectives into new areas and

increases their ability to exercise control over the messages they are exposed.

The definition of media literacy and its perspectives. Scholars and researchers

have provided several perspectives in the media literacy field that have influenced and

contributed to its development. As a result of this influence, *media literacy* has been

defined in a variety of disciplines. For example, the National Leadership Conference on

Media Literacy defined *media literacy* as ''The ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and

communicate messages in a variety of forms'' (Aufderheide, 1993, n.d.). In addition,

Silverblatt, Eliceiri, and Eliceiri (1997) described media literacy as ''a critical-thinking

skill that enables audiences to decipher the information they receive through the channels

of mass communications and empowers them to develop independent judgments about

media content'' (p. 48). On the other hand, the US National Association for Media

Literacy Education (NAMLE) provided a broad definition of media literacy as "the

ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act upon all forms of communication"
(Core Principles, 2021, n.d.). The definition refers to the core principle of media literacy:
the "active research and critical thinking about the messages we receive and create"
(Hobbs & Jensen, 2009, p. 07).

Scholars have offered a variety of perspectives on media literacy, including
protectionist media literacy, empowerment media literacy, and civic media
literacy. *Protectionist media literacy* focuses on mitigating the harmful effects of media
exposure and relies heavily on media effects theories to frame the concept of media
literacy (Potter, 2019). In addition, Potter (2019) identified seven skills people should
possess to become media literate. The seven skills are analysis, evaluation, grouping,
induction, deduction, synthesis, and abstracting.

As a second perspective, *Empowerment media literacy* focuses on how
individuals can consume and create media messages by critically analyzing the messages
and media providers. Moreover, this perspective identifies five essential skills of digital
and media literacy. These skills include access to information, analysis and evaluation,
creation, reflection, and action (Hobbs, 2010).

Finally, the third perspective, *Civic media literacy*, emphasizes the importance of
civic intentionality in media literacy. Consequently, individuals should learn how to
engage with others to actively contribute to the common good. Therefore, prioritizing
civic intentionality for media literacy becomes even more critical to preparing people to
solve their social problems and create positive social dialogue (Mihailidis, 2018).

Media literacy and fake news. Due to the expansion of news production and consumption via social media, concerns have been raised regarding the public's ability to identify high-quality information and avoid becoming victims of fake news content. Additionally, social media facilitates the circulation of information without restrictions, resulting in the proliferation of fake news that manipulates the public's perception of reality (Lazer et al., 2018). With the rise of fake news on social media, scholars have addressed the urgent need to enhance the public's media literacy in order to empower them and develop their abilities to deal with fake news on social media (Clayton et al., 2020; Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017).

Media literacy can play an essential role in educating people about the importance of identifying fake news. In some studies, scholars have asserted that individuals with greater media literacy can identify and refute fake news on social media (Jang & Kim, 2018; Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017). However, one of the many subtypes of media literacy is news literacy, considered one of the most critical types in dealing with news content. To combat fake news and educate audiences, Vraga et al. (2020) argue that news literacy has become more critical in recent years. According to them, news literacy is the ability to understand the personal and social processes associated with generating, distributing, and consuming news, along with control over these processes.

However, some researchers have argued that only possessing knowledge and skills of news literacy may not lead to being news literate. Instead, news literacy requires people to apply their knowledge and skills when engaging with news content (Vraga et al., 2020; Vraga & Tully, 2021). News literacy scholars suggest several behaviors occur

when people critically and mindfully engage with news. These behaviors, known as News Literacy Behaviors, include consuming news, distinguishing news, evaluating news, and identifying and verifying information (Vraga et al., 2020).

Journalists and media literacy. No matter what type of media literacy is used to combat fake news, governmental and nongovernmental entities strive to promote media literacy in society due to its benefits for the public. However, compared to other stakeholders, journalists' organizations have been the least active in promoting media literacy in the last ten years (Kanižaj, 2019). According to Free Press Unlimited, journalists and other media professionals can be crucial in media literacy programs. Journalists' contributions may facilitate a better understanding of the importance of reliable information and the role of the media in society (*Media Literacy – FPU Knowledge & Quality*, n.d.). Therefore, recent calls have been made for media organizations and journalists to actively promote media literacy (Balod & Hameleers, 2021).

Why journalists? Journalists are considered the most qualified individuals to deal with news and are ready to educate the public about the news (Finneman & Thomas, 2018). Furthermore, due to growing mistrust and misunderstanding about journalism, journalists are becoming increasingly aware of the imperative to defend themselves. As a result, professional journalists become advocates for their profession, resulting in more projects, partnerships, and participatory initiatives with the public to increase their media knowledge about the news (Klibanoff, 2012). Thus, journalists need to work with educators to promote media literacy and achieve media literacy goals (Masterman, 2003).

In addition, journalists need to work with audience members to combat fake news to mitigate the effort of dealing with fake news (Jahng, Eckert, & Metzger-Riftkin, 2021). In Schapals' study (2018) about the role perceptions of British and Australian journalists in the context of fake news, journalists have shown a strong interest in collaborating with different independent initiatives to help counter the spread of fake news.

Promoting media literacy could benefit the journalistic community and journalists in several aspects. Kanižaj (2019) argues that media organizations and journalism communities need to provide media literacy programs more today than ever due to their challenges. Kanižaj mentions at least two reasons need for journalists to adopt these programs: investing in future readers and empowering the audiences to realize the quality and professional journalism against fake news and misinformation.

Media literacy in Saudi Arabia. Although the topic of media literacy has attracted a lot of scholars and researchers in recent years, the application of media literacy around the world is disappointing. Moreover, the application of media literacy on the ground differs in different countries. Middle Eastern countries have been experiencing a lack of studies on media literacy compared to Western countries. The topic of media literacy is considered somewhat novel among researchers, educators, and journalists in the Middle East region. Middle Eastern countries are still in their earliest steps toward media literacy education.

There are some non-governmental initiatives in some countries. For instance, UNESCO's efforts in several Arab countries contribute to training journalists and young social media activists in partnership with non-governmental institutes. They also provide

training for educators and work with local educational institutions to diffuse media literacy knowledge. However, the education system in Saudi Arabia has been more traditional for many years, and the instructors were less compatible with the digital knowledge society despite the enormous wealth. However, innovative and technological learning has become more critical in recent years. Saudi Arabia is trying to be at the same level as other countries in the region. Recently, remoting learning has become popular, and educators use it in other learning methods (Abu-Fadil, Torrent, & Grizzle, 2016).

For several reasons, the need for media literacy programs is becoming increasingly crucial in Saudi Arabia. First, the government has a responsibility toward Saudi citizens to protect and preserve local culture. Additionally, it is essential to confront Western stereotypes about Saudi Arabia and promote intercultural understanding (Abu-Fadil, Torrent, & Grizzle, 2016).

However, applying media literacy in Saudi Arabia seems complicated. In Saudi Arabia, media literacy initiatives are allowed within narrow limits and under the government's supervision. Among the reasons for this is the government's concern that these programs could be misused to disseminate extremist ideas or for political purposes. Therefore, Saudi Arabian government institutions responsible for implementing media literacy, such as the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Media. Under the umbrella of the Ministry of Media, Saudi journalists could play an essential role in promoting media literacy. In light of the previous literature, part of this study examines Saudi journalists' perceptions of media literacy and their role in promoting it among the general public.

Gatekeeping Theory

Gatekeeping theory is one of the essential and foundational theories that have been widely used among scholars and researchers in journalism and mass communication. For decades, scholars have studied gatekeeping theory to provide a better understanding of media and journalists transforming the information of numerous events into manageable messages. The gatekeeping theory has also contributed to the development of other theories, such as social control theory and agenda-setting theory (Roberts, 2005). The importance of gatekeeping theory is derived from its ability to determine people's social reality and how they define their lives and the world around them. In addition, it influences the audience's cognition by shaping their perceptions of the world (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

Gatekeeping theory is defined as "the process of culling and crafting countless bits of information into the limited number of messages that reach people each day, analysis more difficult" (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 1). Gatekeeping theory is a complicated and significant process due to the daily emergence of various and related messages. Therefore, the theory seeks to investigate the influences that impact journalists' decisions as "gatekeepers" during news production and when content passes through "gates" to the public (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

Gatekeeping theory explains the process by which journalists control the news and decide which news items to select and which to reject (Shoemaker & Riccio, 2016). The decision-making process is the basis of gatekeeping theory. The theory presumes that many decisions are made between the occurrence of an event and its publication to the

public as news. During this stage, the news passes through the decision points referred to as "gates," and the people who make the decisions are referred to as "gatekeepers" (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

According to the theory, gatekeepers play an essential role in controlling news content in any news organization. A *gatekeeper* is someone who works in the field of journalism, such as a reporter, editor, producer, content manager, or someone else who works in a variety of positions within media organizations (O'Sullivan et al., 1994). The most important task of the gatekeepers is to guard the various gates by filtering and editing many messages before they reach the audience (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

The development of Gatekeeping theory. Gatekeeping models have developed and become increasingly complex over the past decades as scholars have begun to consider external pressures, internal characteristics, and the system in which gatekeepers work (Roberts,2005).

The first model of gatekeeping theory was introduced in 1947 by Kurt Lewin, a German Psychologist. Lewin provided an explanation of widespread social changes. According to Lewin, psychologists can determine the forces that shape an individual's behavior. In order to examine how household members make decisions about food, the scholar proposed a "gatekeeping" model that explained how food decision-making processes were made through channels and a series of gates. As a result of Lewin's research, he concluded that individuals were not equally responsible for determining what food was consumed. Thus, focusing on individuals with greater control over food selection was essential in order to achieve social change. However, Lewin suggested that scholars

from different fields could apply this model to their field since it is not limited to food choices, and scholars could utilize the model for news items as well (Lewin, 1947; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

It was David White (1950) who applied Lewin's theory of channels and gatekeepers to the journalism field. White examined how gatekeepers operate their gates and what factors determine their decisions. White selected a wire editor called "Mr. Gates," who worked for a non-metropolitan newspaper in selecting national and international stories and had the final decision of choosing a news story to be published or rejected. White discovered that the news stories passed through several gates and gatekeepers until they reached the audience. Furthermore, the results indicated that selection decisions were highly subjective, and the most fundamental reason for rejected news stories was based on Mr. Gates' personal preferences (White, 1950; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

Although White's study focused on the influence of individuals on news production, Dan Berkowitz (1990) conducted a study aimed at exploring the selection of news stories for news shows on a local television station. Berkowitz found out that the decision to select news content results from a group process. The results contradicted the widely held belief that the decision-maker is the traditional wire editor selecting news stories based on personal preferences. The results also indicated that news values and other considerations were paramount in news selection decisions (Berkowitz, 1990).

Recently, a group of scholars contributed to the gatekeeping theory by providing a new model. Schwalbe, Silcock, and Candello (2015) proposed a new gatekeeping model

for visual news streaming in the digital age. They provided a new concept for the gatekeepers in newsrooms called "gatecheckers." The researchers defined gatecheckers as news workers responsible for selecting, verifying, and curating visuals. Their functions in digital newsrooms include watchdog, curator, distributor, news transmitter, content supplier, and accuracy validator. In other words, "The gatecheckers perform a cleansing process that is critical to truth telling in the news ecosystem" (p.478). The gatecheckers play an essential role in the digital age due to advancing technology that has provided the audience with the same capabilities as gatekeepers to create and distribute visual images (Schwalbe, Silcock, & Candello, 2015).

The hierarchy of influences model. The current study applied the hierarchy of influences model in an attempt to gain a better understanding of the role of Saudi journalists in addressing fake news published on social media. It also helped to understand Saudi journalists' challenges when debunking fake news on social media.

According to Shoemaker and Vos (2009), "Gatekeeping Theory applies to many aspects of the lives of communicators and their messages" (p. 31). Therefore, the researchers developed the Hierarchy of Influences (HOI) model to understand the complex factors shaping media content, including news content. This model can help researchers "study communication and build theory" (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 31).

The model consists of five hierarchy levels of analysis, individual level, routines level, organizational level, social institutional level, and social system level. This model looks at the process of selecting news as a continuum, starting from the micro world (individuals) to the macro world (countries and continents) (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009;

Shoemaker & Reese,1996; Reese & Shoemaker, 2016). According to Shoemaker and Vos (2009), "There are no hard and fast rules about breaking the continuum into levels; scholars use as many levels as they think will help build theory, and they define those levels for their own research" (p.31). Reese (2019) argued that this model has helped scholars study diverse questions about news sources. In addition, Reese pointed out that this type of framework is being implemented and applied to journalism and media content in general.

The importance of this model is to help "disentangle the relationships among individual-level professionals and their routines, the organizations that house them, the institutions into which they cohere, and the social systems within which they operate and help maintain" (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016, p.390). Despite each level's importance and influence, no level is more important than another (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014).

The individual level. The individual level of analysis focuses on understanding journalists in journalism and how they appropriately reflect society and the professional values they uphold. Reese and Shoemaker (2016) presume that "individual creative, professional practitioners matter and knowing who they are helps understand the larger journalistic project—who is being drawn to the profession, how adequately they reflect society, and what professional values they support" (p 398).

The individual level of analysis considers several factors related to journalists' characteristics, professional roles they take on, news values they adhere to, and demographics such as race, gender, and social class (Shoemaker & Reese,1996; Reese & Shoemaker, 2016). Furthermore, Shoemaker and Vos (2009) argue that self-confidence,

age, education, religion, income, biases, journalistic beliefs, attitudes, and expectations of gatekeepers are also influenced gatekeepers' decision to select or reject news items. Moreover, the type of job gatekeepers holds within the media organization can impact the process of crafting the information, influencing their comfort in disseminating it. Individuals at this level do not always make their decisions unintentionally but may sometimes make them consciously and strategically (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

The routines level. The routine level of analysis examines the journalistic practices of gatekeepers. Routines are pivotal in selecting or rejecting news items while selecting the news. The routine level focuses on the patterns of behavior and ways of working that shape practices, including legislation and rules that are not stipulated and are not always articulated explicitly (Shoemaker & Reese,1996).

A *routine* can be defined by Shoemaker and Reese (1996) as a series of patterned, routinized, and repetitive activities that media workers use in the performance of their jobs. The routines can be found in, for example, newsgathering, processing such as news beats, deadlines, and inverted pyramid. Moreover, all news organizations develop routines to help them control the flow of journalistic work. Finally, the gatekeepers' decisions result from these routine processes adopted by the news organization (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). For instance, Bennett (2004) argues that the process of selecting news turns into routine work for gatekeepers that follow their organizations' policies and priorities.

The organizational level. The organizational level of analysis examines the role of news media organizations in influencing gatekeepers' choices during the process of

selecting the news. The importance of news organizations lies in the fact that they set the rules that govern the work within them and have the right to hire or fire gatekeepers (Shoemaker &Vos, 2009).

However, it is essential to understand that at this level, one organization's internal factors differ. These factors in news organizations include management styles, goals, news policies, size, newsroom cultures, and staffing arrangements. These factors influence the gatekeeping process (Reese, 2019; Shoemaker &Vos, 2009).

The social, institutional level. The social, institutional level of analysis focuses on external factors that influence media organizations and the gatekeeping process. At this level, social institutions play an essential role in affecting the gatekeeping process by influencing "both the shaping of messages as they approach and pass or do not pass through news gates" (Shoemaker &Vos, 2009, p. 76).

Journalists as gatekeepers understand that "none of these factors—the individual, the routine, the organization, or the social institution—can escape the fact that it is tied to and draws its sustenance from the social system" (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 116). As a result, journalists and newsrooms are influenced by affiliated relationships with key players, including the state, public relations, the market, and advertising.

The social system level. The social system level of analysis explores the influence of social systems, social structures, ideology, and culture on the gatekeeping process as a factor at the macro level. Several forces, such as political, religious, cultural, and local, play a crucial role in influencing press decisions. This level assumes that media organizations "function within a larger social system, and these systems increasingly span

national boundaries" (Reese, 2019, p. 406). In other words, this level explains how journalistic organizations and their workers try to satisfy different forces, such as the masses, religious, and political.

Hierarchy of influences model applications. The hierarchy of influences model has been used by several scholars to study journalism in various contexts in the past. In the context of the role perception of journalists, Xu and Jin (2017) employed Shoemaker and Reese's Hierarchical Model to examine the factors that drive the formation of professional role perceptions among online journalists in China. The researchers found that there were essential influences of three factors: individual level, routine level, and organizational level. At the individual level, older and female online journalists emphasized hybrid roles significantly more than younger online journalists. Compared with previous generations, the younger generation is more closely identified with the function of the entertainment provider role and profit maker. At the routine level, journalists who received orientation training tend to emphasize the significance of the hybrid role and the populist mobilizer role. "At the organizational level, online journalists working in online news organizations with a larger staff size and website reach have a lower level of identification with the populist mobilizer role" (Xu & Jin, 2017, p. 208).

In Middle East countries, Relly, Zanger, and Fahmy (2015) conducted a study examining professional role perceptions among Iraqi Kurdish journalists employing the hierarchy of influences model. The study found out that forces at the individual-level were the most influencing toward watchdog gatekeeping attitudes and followed by forces

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at the ideological-level. Moreover, forces at the news media routine level were the most toward influencing attitudes toward access to the records of government.

Kim's study (2010) is another example of a study that applied the hierarchy of influences model. The researcher examined the physical threats Iraqi journalists encountered after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. Iraqi journalists' perceptions of physical danger were influenced by various forces at the individual, organizational, and social institutional levels. In particular, the study found that individual-level forces dominate perceptions of physical danger. The findings of the study indicated that, compared to other Iraqi journalists, male Iraqi journalists with long experiences and negative opinions about the future of Iraqi media are more likely to perceive a higher level of physical danger. In contrast, female journalists who perform similar duties tend to perceive a lower level of physical danger.

In the context of fake news, few studies employed the hierarchy of influences model. For instance, Kwanda and Lin (2020) investigated fake news during natural disasters using the Hierarchy of Influences Model. In addition, they examined information patterns and journalistic practices during the 2018 Palu earthquake and tsunami. As a result of using the Hierarchy of Influences Model, the findings revealed the importance of journalistic professionalism at the individual level when dealing with fake news stories. At the routine level, in comparison, independent media tended to provide balanced news stories with various points of view. At the same time, journalists regarded the government as the authority to verify controversial, high-risk fake news. Furthermore, the journalists indicated that the handling of fake news practices in newsrooms was greatly

influenced by organizational policies regarding the types of media (Kwanda & Lin, 2020).

Chapter Summary and Research Questions

A literature review revealed that Saudi journalists and journalists worldwide use social media in their daily news routines (Alharethi, 2020; Willnat & Weaver, 2018; Lasorsa, Lewis, & Holton, 2012). Due to journalists' increasing use of social media in their daily journalistic activities, fabricated information and fake news have become a growing challenge for journalists (Saldaña & Vu, 2022; Balod & Hameleers, 2021). However, currently, there are no data on how Saudi journalists address fake news published on social media.

As the first objective of this study, I will explore the knowledge of Saudi journalists regarding fake news and its definition. Fake news detection poses several challenges, including the lack of agreement between scholars and practitioners about what fake news is (Gelfert, 2018). In the context of fake news, journalists have different interpretations and definitions of the term, which affects their ability to detect fake news (Mutugi, Nyamboga, & Matu, 2020). The first question aims to gain insight into the perception of fake news on social media among Saudi journalists.

RQ1: How do they define fake news as it is used on social media?

According to the previous literature, journalists use several practices and skills to verify fake news and false information on social media (Vu & Saldaña, 2021; Jahng et al., 2021). Scholars asserted that journalists need to be more aware of false information and develop standardized verification procedures (Brandtzaeg et al., 2016).

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Himma-Kadakas and Ojamets (2022) concluded that journalists should learn how to use digital tools effectively by becoming acquainted with their practical features to verify fake news on social media. Unfortunately, no study has been conducted to determine how journalists in Saudi Arabia verify fake news on social media. Therefore, the second question focuses on the verification practices employed by Saudi journalists.

RQ2: How do they verify fake news published on social media?

Reviewing the literature showed that several studies have indicated that journalists worldwide face many challenges related to debunking fake news (Saldaña & Vu, 2022; Balod & Hameleers, 2021; Mutugi, Nyamboga, & Matu, 2020). In addition, multiple studies have found that Saudi Arabian journalists face various challenges during their daily journalistic work (Almaina, 2019; Al Maghlooth, 2013; Awad, 2010). However, to our knowledge, no study identified Saudi journalists' challenges when confronting fake news on social media. Therefore, this study's third question aims to identify the challenges they face during their daily journalistic routine.

RQ3: What challenges do they encounter or expect to encounter in debunking fake news?

Further questions in this study have been addressed relating role perceptions of Saudi journalists in society in response to fake news on social media. Previous studies have shown that journalists in Western and non-Western countries had different role perceptions regarding fake news (Vu & Saldaña, 2021; Balod & Hameleers, 2021). However, there was a gap in journalists' role perceptions in the Saudi context, where journalists work under different systems.

RQ4: What do they perceive their roles to be in response to fake news on social media, and how do they translate them into action?

The concept of media literacy, in its various forms, has emerged as a crucial matter in today's world (Potter, 2010; Hobbs & Jensen, 2009). Potter (2010) emphasizes the importance of media literacy, which makes people more able to control their exposure to messages and broaden their perspectives. Media literacy's role in confronting fake news and disinformation in social media has received considerable attention in several studies. However, it has been suggested in numerous previous studies that journalists and press institutions should promote media literacy to their audience to combat fake news circulating on social media (Kanižaj, 2019). As a result, several journalists in different countries were willing to participate in this matter (Balod & Hameleers, 2021). Therefore, as part of this study, the objective is to explore Saudi journalists' potential role in promoting media literacy to their audiences.

RQ5: What roles might or do Saudi journalists have in promoting media literacy to their audiences?

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I discussed the literature review related to the study and

the research questions. This chapter details the methodology I used in this study to

address the research aim, objectives, and questions. In the beginning, I restated the

purpose of the study and the research questions that I wanted to explore. Then, I discuss

the methodology, starting with the research design. I also discuss the research paradigm,

my positionality, the method used, data collection, sampling, and data analysis. Finally, I

discuss the research's trustworthiness.

This study seeks to explore how Saudi journalists address fake news published on

social media. The study objectives are to determine how they define and verify fake news

circulated on social media and the challenges they might encounter. The study also aims

to explore their role perceptions in society in response to fake news and their potential

roles in promoting media literacy to the audiences to combat fake news on social media.

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research approach in order to explore how Saudi

journalists address fake news published on social media. Creswell (2013) defines the

qualitative research approach as,

an inquiry process of understanding based on a distinct methodological approach

to inquiry that explores a social or human problem. The researcher builds a

complex, holistic picture; analyzes words; reports detailed views of participants;

and conducts the study in a natural setting. (p. 300)

The qualitative research approach is also characterized by interpretive, subjective, political, and theoretical aspects. By using language, the qualitative research approach provides insight into concepts based on the experiences of individuals. Qualitative research intends better to understand human relationships (Brennen, 2017).

In the qualitative research approach, researchers "are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam, 2009, p.05). Qualitative researchers can communicate directly with participants and encourage them to tell their stories without judgment, leading to a deeper understanding of any issue (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Furthermore, a qualitative research method seeks to answer questions about experience, meaning, and perspective, most often from the participant's viewpoint (Hammarberg, Kirkman, & de Lacey, 2016). The qualitative methods are "flexible and allow the researcher to pursue new areas of interest" (Wimmer & Dominick, 2013, p. 48).

Qualitative researchers use qualitative research methods for a variety of reasons. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research is appropriate to use when researchers need a) "to explore a problem or issue, b) to study a group or population, identify variables that cannot be easily measured, or hear silenced voices, c) a complex, detailed understanding of the issue, d) to understand the contexts or settings in which participants in a study address a problem or issue" (p.08). Furthermore, researchers often employ qualitative research when unsure of the most significant variables to examine. The

qualitative method is also used when the topic has never been examined with a particular sample or group of individuals, and existing theories do not apply to the particular sample or group (Morse, 1991).

Therefore, this study used qualitative research as an appropriate approach to provide in-depth answers to the research questions and to fulfill the aim of the study, which is to explore how Saudi journalists address fake news published on social media. Since there has been a lack of studies conducted on this subject, this study relied on the participants' experiences, meanings, and perspectives to answer the research questions. In addition, there is a need to hear from Saudi journalists regarding fake news on social media and to gain an in-depth understanding of the context in which they address fake news circulated on social media.

The Researcher's Worldview

Paradigms have been referred to as worldviews by Creswell (2013). A *paradigm* is "a way of looking at the world. It is composed of certain philosophical assumptions that guide and direct thinking and action" (Mertens, 2019, p. 07). Guba and Lincoln (1994) define a *research paradigm* as a "basic set of beliefs that guides action" and consists of three types of concepts: ontology, epistemology, and methodology (p. 107). Denzin and Lincoln (2011) explain each concept: "Epistemology asks: How do we know the world? What is the relationship between the inquirer and the known? Ontology raises basic questions about the nature of reality. Methodology focuses on how we gain knowledge about the world" (p. 185).

According to Creswell (2013), there are four different worldviews: postpositivism, constructivism, participatory, and pragmatism. In this study, I adopted the constructivist paradigm that assumes that "knowledge is socially constructed by people active in the research process, and that researchers should attempt to understand the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it" (Mertens, 2019, p. 16).

The constructivist paradigm is also referred to as social constructivism and interpretivism. Creswell and Poth (2018) explain the constructivist paradigm as:

> Individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. They develop subjective meanings of their experiences—meanings directed toward certain objects or things. These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrow the meanings into a few categories or ideas. The goal of research, then, is to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation. Often these subjective meanings are negotiated socially and historically. In other words, they are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interaction with others (hence social construction) and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives. Rather than starting with a theory (as in postpositivism), inquirers generate or inductively develop a theory or pattern of meaning (p. 24).

In this study, I sought to understand a social phenomenon, i.e., how Saudi journalists address fake news published on social media, how they define and verify fake news on social media, and what the roles perceptions, the challenges they encounter in

response to fake news, their protentional roles in promoting medial literacy to the audience. Therefore, for several reasons, constructivism could be an appropriate paradigm for this study. First, I came to this study without predeveloped theories. Second, I assumed that reality is multiple, and people construct their realities through their social constructions. Third, I assumed that humans create knowledge through their interactions with the world; instead, knowledge exists in an external world. This paradigm influenced the research questions, the method I used, and the interpretations of the results (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants

  Sampling type. The proper selection of a sampling method is essential in qualitative research; this will allow an appropriate exploration of the study focus. In addition, it is essential to select an appropriate sample to ensure that the study results are not affected by inappropriate procedures (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013).

  The four types of sampling procedures used in qualitative research are convenience, purposive, snowball, and theoretical. In this study, I employed purposive (purposeful) sampling, which is a commonly used sampling strategy, also known as "judgment sampling" (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013). Purposive sampling was selected to allow the researcher to intentionally select participants with relatively long experience in handling news on social media (Saini & Shlonsky, 2012). According to Merriam (2009), "Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (p. 77).

Sampling criteria. As a criterion for purposeful sampling, the selected

participants of this study were Saudi journalists who work or have worked for printing or

online newspapers, whether full or part-time. Furthermore, to ensure a maximum

variation sampling, the selected journalists were from different regions of Saudi Arabia

with different years of experience in order to gain various perspectives and professional

experiences. The journalists were also selected based on different positions, including

reporters, editors, and online journalists. In addition, I sought out male and female

journalists to present different perspectives and enrich the results.

After obtaining the Institutional Review Board (IRB) permission, I started

recruiting potential participants. The recruitment of participants relied on a list of Saudi

journalists registered with the Saudi Journalists Association. This list provided

information on Saudi journalists, including their names, affiliation, and contact numbers.

The list was provided to the Department of Media and Journalism at a university in Saudi

Arabia, where the researcher works as a lecturer, allowing the researcher to access this

list. The list given to the researcher consists of 29 journalists, 23 males and six females.

However, there were fewer female journalists on the list than male journalists. This is due

to the small number of Saudi female journalists compared to the number of male

journalists working in Saudi Arabia.

I directly communicated with the potential participants via WhatsApp, a mobile

application, inviting them to participate in the study. As a result, an invitation was sent to

participants that included the interview procedures, such as the expected time of the

interview, voluntary participation, audio recording of the interview, confidentiality, and privacy of the information they shared, and the ability to withdraw at any time.

However, not all journalists on the list agreed to participate in this study. Some journalists initially agreed and withdrew later without apologizing for not participating, while others did not respond by either rejecting or accepting the invitation.

However, to verify the suitability of participants who agreed to participate in the study, I initially asked the potential participants some questions regarding the use of social media in their journalistic work, the nature of their journalistic work, and their years of experience. Afterward, the appropriate day and time for participation were determined based on the participants' preferences.

Sampling size. This study employed a sample of fourteen journalists from various news outlets in Saudi Arabia. According to Creswell (2013), in-depth, semi-structured interviews need a minimum sample size of between 5 and 25 participants. In qualitative research, a small number of participants provide in-depth information about the central phenomenon (Creswell & Clark, 2017). However, Patton (2015) argues that "there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry. Sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what's at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with the available time and resources" (p.311).

Several studies that addressed fake news and journalists used the qualitative in-depth interview method, and the sample of participants ranged from seven to 16 journalists. For instance, in Schapals' study (2018) on the role perceptions of Australian and British journalists in the era of alternative facts, the researcher used a sample of 11

journalists. Balod and Hameleers (2021) studied the role perceptions of Filipino journalists in an era of misinformation and disinformation; they used a sample of 16 journalists. However, another study conducted by Kwanda and Lin (2020) in Indonesia, which dealt with fake news practices in newsrooms during disasters, used a sample of seven journalists. The researchers stated they had difficulty recruiting participants due to the topic's sensitivity. It is worth noting that in this current study, I found the same challenges in recruiting journalists to participate. Many journalists refused to respond to participation and withdrew without an apology or stating a reason.

In this study, I followed Seidman's criteria of judging when a researcher has enough participants. The first is sufficiency which means when a researcher has sufficient numbers of participants to reflect the population. The second is a saturation of information, which means when a researcher receives the same information from participants (Seidman, 2006). However, the sample size was affected by several factors, including the availability of those who agreed to participate in the study, the sensitivity of the subject under study, and the time available to conduct the study, as I am a scholarship student committed to a limited time.

The characteristics of participants. To ensure the confidentiality of the participants' information, the participants' names and places of work were anonymous due to the subject sensitivity. However, of the 14 participants, thirteen journalists were men, and one was a woman. Seven of the 14 journalists were affiliated with news outlets in the western region of Saudi Arabia, five in the central region, one in the eastern region, and one in the southern region. This distribution of journalists reflects the number of

major newspapers in these regions, where the most significant proportion of the number

of newspapers in Saudi Arabia is in the western and central regions, a newspaper in the

southern region, and a newspaper in the eastern region. Twelve of the participants

worked for newspapers, and two for online newspapers. The participants' positions

varied, with eight editors, three reporters, two online editors, and one online journalist.

The experiences of the participants ranged from 35 years to 7 years.

Table 2

General information of the participants

Name*	Gender	Outlet*	Region	Role	Experiences
Participant 1	M	Print Newspaper	Western	Editor	14 years
Participant 2	M	Print Newspaper	Southern	Editor	9 years
Participant 3	M	Print Newspaper	Central	Online journalist	7 years
Participant 4	M	Print Newspaper	Western	Reporter	19 years
Participant 5	M	Online Newspaper	Western	Online Editor	12 years
Participant 6	M	Print newspaper	Western	Reporter	7 years
Participant 7	M	Print newspaper	Central	Editor	35 years
Participant 8	M	Print Newspaper	Western	Editor	19 years
Participant 9	M	Print Newspaper	Eastern	Editor	15 years
Participant 10	F	Print Newspaper	Western	Online Editor	10 years
Participant 11	M	Print Newspaper	Western	Editor	5 years
Participant 12	M	Print Newspaper	Central	Reporter	14 years
Participant 13	M	Online Newspaper	Central	Editor	14 years
Participant 14	M	Print Newspaper	Central	Editor	8 years

Note*: * The name of journalists and outlets have been kept confidential for IRB standards.*

Data collection

In this study, I utilized a qualitative interview method to obtain an in-depth understanding of the perceptions and experiences of Saudi journalists in response to fake news on social media. As Kvale (1996) defined, a qualitative research interview is a method to understand the world from a people's point of view and disclose the meaning of people's experiences. The topic of how Saudi journalists address fake news published on social media is under-researched; thus, employing a qualitative interview as a valuable method helped the researcher collect an enormous amount of valuable, interesting, relevant, and important information (Brennen, 2017).

More specifically, I employed an in-depth, semi-structured interview method for data collection to ensure that all the topic areas were covered (Seidman, 2006). Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) defined the interview method "as an interview with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena" (p. 6). A semi-structured interview allowed me to ask the participants a set of prepared questions as a guide to ensure that I covered all the critical areas in the study. This type of interview also allowed me to change the order of the questions and ask follow-up questions to gain an in-depth understanding of the topic or clarify participants' answers (Brennen, 2017).

Procedures

This study conducted the interviews virtually using the innovative video conferencing platform Zoom. According to Archibald, Ambagtsheer, Casey, and Lawless (2019), using Zoom to collect qualitative data is a valuable tool due to its ease of personal

communication between users, relative ease of use, low costs, security options, and data management features. Besides the previously described benefits, it is essential to note the significant distance separating the researcher and the participants, as the researcher was located in the United States and the participants in Saudi Arabia. However, zoom provided the researcher with many advantages that facilitated the interview process. For example, many journalists lived in different cities in Saudi Arabia, which made it easier for the researcher to communicate with them without high costs. Moreover, conducting interviews in a comfortable setting for the researcher and participants gave them a sense of comfort and familiarity during the interview.

After obtaining the participants' permission, each interview was audio recorded and stored electronically in the researcher's computer, only accessed by the researcher. The audio recording helped me focus entirely on the interview and use it later to confirm conversational points. I explained to each participant that I would use the audio recording only for transcription and analysis.

The interviews were conducted in Arabic due to the participants and the researcher's mother tongue. Therefore, the open-ended questions used in these interviews were translated from English to Arabic and addressed to the participants. The set of predetermined questions was used in the interviews besides follow-up and probing questions. The questions explored several topics regarding how Saudi Arabian journalists address fake news published on social media. Based on the research questions, several topics covered during the interviews varied. The interview guide included journalists' use of social media in their journalistic work, procedures for verifying fake news in social

media, the challenges they encountered, their role perceptions in society in response to fake news, and journalists' role in promoting media literacy to the audience.

I conducted the semi-structured, in-depth interviews over a period of three months, from July 2022 to September 2022. The researcher conducted the interviews for three months because the Saudi journalists were busy covering the Hajj season during the month of June/July 2022. However, the interviews ranged from one hour and 22 minutes to 45 minutes. This duration allowed me to cover all my questions and grant the participant plenty of time to answer the questions.

However, transcribing the interviews is time-consuming; therefore, I started the transcription process promptly as long as the conversation was fresh (Brennen, 2017). I used the Sonix software, a paid, online transcription service. It is an automated transcription software that converts audio interview recordings to written form. However, its accuracy reaches about 85 percent, depending on the clarity of voice and pronunciation. Therefore, it was vital that I manually proofread each text to ensure it was free of errors.

Ethical Considerations

I followed the Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines in this study. In addition, I was aware of any applicable international rules or regulations related to this research. Therefore, I reviewed and followed the International Compilation of Human Research Standards, including legislation, regulations, and guidelines in Saudi Arabia. To follow ethical research principles, Gray (2014) suggests four categories: ensuring

informed consent, preserving the participants' privacy, avoiding risk, and avoiding deception.

At the beginning of the interviews, I obtained informed consent from the participants by signing a written form explaining the study's objective. I explained to the participants the purpose of the study and how I planned to use the information of participants. Thus, the participants were assured that their information would be treated confidentially and saved securely. All participants were informed that they had the right to refuse to answer any question and to withdraw from the study at any time. I also omitted information that might compromise the confidentiality of participants in the quotes used in this study. I informed the participants that the interviews were audio recorded to avoid deception. I also informed the participants that the data of the study would be used primarily in a dissertation and could also be used in peer-reviewed journals, books, and conference presentations. I also informed them that the results would be offered if they were interested.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis. In this study, I analyzed all the interviews thematically, utilizing the framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). *Thematic analysis* is defined as "a method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning ('themes') within qualitative data" (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297). Thematic analysis is widely used for qualitative techniques such as interviews and focus groups (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that thematic analysis is an essential

method of qualitative analysis. They suggest that researchers should learn it because it provides essential skills for conducting many other qualitative analysis forms.

Braun and Clarke (2006) point out that there are two approaches to thematic analysis: the inductive approach, which focuses on analysis without engaging in literature, especially in the early stages, and the second, the deductive approach, which requires dealing with literature from the first stages of analysis. Due to the paucity of literature on how Saudi journalists understand and address fake news published on social media, the inductive approach was used in the analysis process of this study. This analysis helped me identify and interpret the data's key features guided by the research questions.

The Phases of thematic analysis. The thematic analysis offers a six-step process that can be used to identify, analyze, and report qualitative data. These phases include familiarizing yourself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Clarke and Braun (2017) state that these phases are iterative and recursive rather than a strictly linear process. The authors assert that the researchers may move back and forth between the phases during the analysis. They also stress the importance of being flexible in implementing the six phases (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Phase 1: familiarizing yourself with the data. During this phase, I immersed myself and engaged with the data through several stages. First, the first immersion and familiarity with the data were through conducting interviews by myself and taking notes during the interviews, which provided me with prior knowledge of the data. Secondly, the

transcription and proofreading for the data's accuracy contributed to the data's immersion and familiarity significantly. Finally, I immersed myself further by reading and re-reading the entire data actively with note-taking of first impressions and initial ideas of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Phase 2: generating initial codes. This phase began when I actively engaged with the data by taking notes for first impressions and initial ideas. In this phase, I started by generating the initial codes, which are defined as "first impression phrases derived from an open-ended process" (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saldaña, 2009, p.4). A *code* is defined as "most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (Saldaña, 2009, p. 3). In this analysis, I used descriptive coding, that "summarises in a word or short phrase—most often as a noun—the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data" (Saldaña, 2009, p. 102).

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), the performance of coding can be done either manually or through a software program. During the analysis process, I employed CAQDAS, known as MAXQDA 11, "a computer software program that helps the researcher to systematically evaluate and interpret qualitative texts" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 212). The software helped to gain insights from the transcribed data. The reason for using this software was that MAXQDA is the only software I could use with Arabic language data. Consequently, the data analysis was performed in Arabic, followed by translating the pertinent quotations to English to prevent changes in meaning unintentionally (Merriam, 2009).

I coded each interview separately and immediately after the transcription process. During this phase, I generated as many codes as possible. During the first cycle of coding, I generated more than 400 initial codes. I coded all the data extracts, even those unrelated to my research questions, because I wanted to be open to all data. Open coding was used because I did not have pre-set codes. The codes were developed and modified as I worked through the coding process.

Phase 3: searching for themes. I started searching for themes based on the research questions in this phase. I began collating codes using interpretive analysis, sorting the extracted data into themes, and finding the relationship between codes, subthemes, and themes. I used visual representations to help me sort the different codes into themes in order to understand the relations between them. At the end of this phase, I came up with a collection of candidate themes, sub-themes, and all extracts of data that I coded in relation to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Phase 4: reviewing themes. At this phase, I reviewed the identified themes and decided whether I needed to combine, separate, refine, or discard the themes. I refined the candidate themes by canceling some topics for lack of sufficient evidence, merging similar themes, or dividing some themes that needed to be separated. I followed two levels of reviewing and refining themes, according to Braun and Clarke (2006). The first level is "reviewing at the level of the coded data extracts" (p.91). I read each theme's collated extracts to see if they form a coherent pattern. Then, I moved to the second level, similar to the previous level, but in relation to the entire data set. At this level, I re-read the entire data set to check the validity of individual themes and how it was related to the

data set and coded any additional data within themes that I might miss earlier. However, all codes that were not used in this study were stored in a file called (Future studies) (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Phase 5: defining and naming themes. At this phase, I defined and named the themes and the sub-themes. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), "A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (p.82). I also provided definitions that explain each theme. Finally, I returned to collated data extracts of each theme, and I organized them "into a coherent and internally consistent account, with accompanying narrative" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 92).

Phase 6: producing the report. At this phase, I started producing the report when I had a set of fully worked-out themes. The intent of this phase is "to tell the complicated story of your data in a way which convinces the reader of the merit and validity of your analysis" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.93). I also provided sufficient evidence of the themes within the data. This will manifest in writing my findings chapter and discussion chapter.

Trustworthiness

For the accuracy of the findings, I used Creswell and Miller's framework (2000), which proposes multiple validation strategies. These strategies are divided into three major types: the *researcher's lens, the participant's lens, and the reader's lens*. The researcher's lens includes "corroborating evidence through triangulation of multiple data sources, discovering negative case analysis or disconfirming evidence, and clarifying researcher bias or engaging in reflexivity." The participant's lens consists of "member

checking or seeking participant feedback, prolonged engagement and persistent observation in the field, and collaborating with participants." Finally, the reader's lens involves "enabling external audits, generating a rich, thick description, and having a peer review or debriefing" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, pp. 260-263).

Creswell and Miller (2000) define a lens as "the inquirer uses a viewpoint for establishing validity in a study" (p. 125). Rather than using scores, instruments, or research designs, qualitative researchers employ a lens that incorporates insights from those who conduct, participate in, or read and review research (Creswell & Miller, 2000). However, Creswell and Poth (2018) recommended at least two validation strategies.

This study employed one strategy from each of the three primary lenses. First, through this *researcher's lens*, I achieved credibility by clarifying researcher bias or engaging in reflexivity. In qualitative research, reflexivity called the researcher's position, is defined as "the researcher's ability to be able to self-consciously refer to him or herself in relation to the production of knowledge about research topics" (Roulston, 2010, p. 116). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), "Researchers "position themselves" in a qualitative research study. This means that researchers convey (i.e., in a method section, in an introduction, or in other places in a study) their background (e.g., work experiences, cultural experiences, history), how it informs their interpretation of the information in a study, and what they have to gain from the study" (p.44).

In 2006, I worked as a collaborating journalist for a prominent Saudi newspaper for three years. My work has given me opportunities to gain a deep insight into journalistic work in Saudi Arabia and what Saudi journalists face during their daily

routines. It also allowed me to form relationships with working journalists from different departments. Finally, it also allowed me to live the journalistic work experience with the emergence of social media. At that time, social media in the country was not yet regulated, and the magnitude of its impact was not yet realized. Moreover, the prevalence of fake news in the past was not as apparent as today. Thus, I approached this topic with few expectations about the possible findings.

As a lecturer in the journalism and media department at a university in Saudi Arabia since 2009, I have taught many journalism and media topics, which allowed me to gain theoretical knowledge of the field of journalism. Moreover, the experience of teaching journalism has allowed me the opportunity to interact with journalism students. Many of these journalism students have become journalists in major newspapers and online newspapers in Saudi Arabia.

I have been an active user of social media platforms and have witnessed the transformations that have occurred in recent years. Choosing the topic of fake news and trying to understand how Saudi journalists address it resulted from my professional and academic experiences and my observations on social media in Saudi Arabia. These experiences and observations gave me insight into journalists' work and needs; however, they have also made me aware of my assumptions and position in this study.

Second, through the participant's lens, I achieved credibility of the findings by using member checking, which Lincoln and Guba (1985) considered "the most critical technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314). I asked two participants, who were willing to get involved in the member-checking process, "if the themes or categories

make sense, whether they are developed with sufficient evidence, and whether the overall account is realistic and accurate" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127).

Finally, through the reader's lens, I employed a peer review or debriefing, which is "the review of the data and research process by someone who is familiar with the research or the phenomenon being explored" (p. 129). According to Creswell and Miller (2000), "By seeking the assistance of peer debriefers, researchers add credibility to a study" (p. 129). For this strategy, I communicated with a friend who is a professor in journalism at a Saudi university. He worked in the journalistic profession for several years. In addition, I contacted him during the process of the entire study and asked for feedback.

Chapter Summary

In summary, this chapter comprehensively described the methodology of the study. This chapter started by restating the research objective and question. Afterward, a qualitative research approach was presented as the study's research design and the justifications for using it. Next, the chapter describes the researcher's worldview and the participants, including the sample's type, criteria, size, and characteristics. The chapter then discusses the method of data collection, which was a semi-structured interview, its procedures, and the ethical considerations. Finally, this chapter concludes with a discussion of the thematic analysis used to analyze the data and trustworthiness of the study. However, the next chapter will present the analysis of the qualitative interview data using the methodology chosen.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Introduction

The study aimed to explore how Saudi Arabian journalists address fake news

published on social media. To achieve this goal, the study sought to determine how Saudi

journalists define and verify fake news on social media and what challenges they

encounter. The study also sought to explore the role perceptions of Saudi journalists in

society in response to fake news and their role in promoting media literacy to audiences

as a solution to combat fake news on social media.

In the previous chapter, I discussed the methodology used in this study. This

study employed a qualitative approach to answer the research questions and fulfill the

research objectives. I used in-depth interviews to collect data from 14 Saudi journalists

participating in this study. Furthermore, I employed thematic analysis as a means of

analyzing interview data.

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings based on a thematic analysis

of semi-structured interviews conducted with Saudi journalists. In this chapter, various

themes and sub-themes will be discussed relating to the thematic analysis of the

interviews. The chapter structure follows the order of the research questions addressed in

this study. Presenting the findings in this manner allows the reader to comprehensively

understand how Saudi journalists address fake news on social media. Given the unique

nature of the study and the absence of previous studies on the subject, the findings were

presented in this order to provide the reader with more information on the topic.

RQ 1: Saudi Journalists' Definitions of Fake News

This study's first research question examined how Saudi journalists define fake news published on social media. The findings from the thematic analysis process of interviews showed no agreement among the participants in this study about a specific definition of fake news on social media. Instead, each participant presented a different definition of fake news on social media based on their perception, understanding, and professional experiences in journalism. Although most participants provided different explanations of fake news on social media, they agreed that "fake news" refers to inaccurate and false information spreading on social media.

The data analysis of the interview responses indicated that three major themes emerged regarding journalists' understanding of and defining fake news on social media (see Figure 1). The first theme focused on the definition of fake news based on the content intentions. There were two sub-themes within this theme: *political intentions* and *non-political intentions*. The second theme was the definition of fake news based on the source. This theme also had two sub-themes: *unofficial sources* and *hostile sources*. Lastly, the third theme was the definition based on when the fake news was spread.
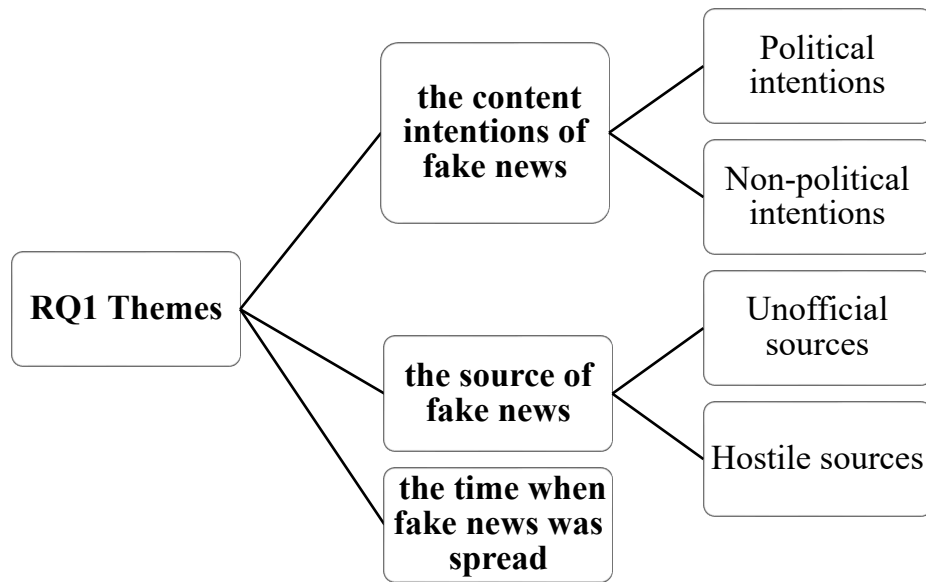
Figure1. The Themes and Subthemes of the Participants' Definition of Fake News.

The definition based on the content intentions of fake news. As the study's participants discussed their understanding and definition of fake news on social media, one of the most common themes that emerged was the theme of the definition based on the content intentions. This theme indicated that most participants understood and defined fake news on social media by the intent and purpose of creating and spreading fake news on social media. More specifically, participants believed that posting fake news on social media has intentions that its originator is attempting to fulfill.

The data analysis showed that the participants had difficulty providing a comprehensive and accurate definition of fake news on social media. However, all participants agreed on one aspect while defining fake news on social media: they stated that fake news includes inaccurate information that spreads on social media. Moreover, the interviews' analysis showed that most participants defined fake news by focusing on

the intent behind creating and disseminating fake news among the audience on social media. They believed that identifying the intentions of fake news content could help to provide a definition of fake news. One participant stated, "The problem with fake news is that you can define it with a million thousand definitions. However, I would like to provide something simple. In fake news, I can say that the information is incorrect to accomplish a specific intent" (Participant 14).

The participants stated that fake news on social media has multiple intentions regarding its creation and dissemination. They believed that the intentions of fake news differed depending on the intended outcome. Furthermore, most participants stressed that fake news content could not simply be created and spread by accident through social media platforms. According to one participant,

> There are intentions for it [fake news], such as social intentions, economic intentions, political intentions, and religious intentions. There is more than one intention; it is impossible for fake news to create, diffuse, and spread like this by chance. There is nothing by chance. In the press, there is no coincidence. (Participant 12)

The participants highlighted many intentions regarding fake news on social media. The data analysis indicated that two sub-themes for the intent of the content of fake news have emerged: political and non-political.

Political intentions. The sub-theme of political intentions was the most common intention the participants reported concerning their definition and understanding of fake news on social media. There were two perspectives presented by participants regarding

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the political intentions of fake news. In the first perspective, the participants defined fake news as content with harmful and malicious intentions toward the government, society, and citizens of Saudi Arabia.

The data analysis showed that the participants highlighted several examples of fake news content with political intentions. Some participants pointed out that fake news content aims to strike at society's religious and national constants. The participants also noted that fake news intents to incite the community and instigate public opinion against the government. They also added that fake news intends to overthrow governments and undermine the relationship between the people and their political leadership. For example, as Participant 8 explained, "Fake news is disseminated for negative goals, for goals that try to strike at the constants, whether national constants or religious constants, or even to incite society and stir public opinion." Similarly, Participant 12 stated that "Any news that incites public opinion, and enrages public opinion, is often fake."

According to one participant, journalists recognize fake news on social media by its method because of its harmful goals, such as inciting the public and promoting political news. Participant 9 said,

> Over time, those who work in the media know the method of fake news, which is the promotion of political news, agitation of public opinion, or incitement of the inside with such topics or specific hashtags whose intentions are well known.

Another political intention of fake news content reported by some participants was the intent to change the government's regime and undermine the relationship between the people and the political leadership by inciting the people against the

government and causing them to participate in demonstrations. According to one participant,

> The fake news aims to agitate public opinion, to separate the bond between the leadership and the people, to shake the trust between the leadership and the people, to stir up sedition, to bring citizens out into the streets under the guise of demonstrations and rights in order to overthrow the government. Let's speak more clearly: this is the main intention of fake news that has a political intention.
>
> (Participant 1)

> The second perspective of the political intentions of fake news content on social

media was from some government institutions to society. Some participants spoke about how fake news content could be spread by some official entities in order to measure people's reactions to future decisions and projects. One participant explained,

> My definition of fake news is news that has hidden goals, and its goals may be political. Its goals may be, for example, to stir up sedition. Sometimes, its goals may be to measure the reactions in society toward a particular issue or topic.
>
> (Participant 6)

Similarly, another participant stated, "Some fake news is that we are asked to write it; we write it because the ministry or the official institution wants to measure the feedback, or the reaction of the readers, the public, or the citizens." (Participant 3)

> ***Non-political intentions.*** This sub-theme refers to non-political fake news content created and published for reasons involving finance, entertainment, and fame. The

participants defined fake news as content created and disseminated on social media based on intentions to attract the audience in order to accomplish non-political objectives.

The study participants believed that fake news content is generated and disseminated through some social media accounts and some websites with the aim of increasing followers and readers on their accounts and websites. Participant 2 stated, "They [fake websites] play on emotion by aiming to increase readers and the number of visits to the site." Participant 9 spoke about social media accounts: "Fake news is sometimes meant by people who release it to promote their accounts." In this vein, Participant 2 explained, "Some people or accounts always rely on fake news and false and illogical stories. If we always notice this news, fake stories attract readers and have a popular attraction." Some participants believed that some audiences prefer fake news posts on social media, thus inducing these accounts to post such content. Participant 3 stated that "Some people love fake news. Anything that touches people's needs; you see people go along with it."

Other participants asserted that fake news has been created and spread on social media by social media accounts in order to gain fame. Participant 10 stated, "Whoever writes fake news wants to be famous; if he or she is on social media, they want to get followers." Similar to Participant 10, another participant agreed that fame was one of the many goals for creating fake news content: "I think, specifically in social media, the first goal is to attract attention, fame, and interaction" (Participant 13).

Other participants compared fake news on social media to yellow journalism[1], which uses sensationalism and excessive exaggeration to attract audiences. Participant 9 described accounts spreading false news on social media as yellow journalism by stating, "They post this news like the yellow journalism that was in the past or existed in some countries promoting a newspaper with disinformation and fake news. This can be the most prominent goal of promoting this news." Participant 12 mentioned yellow journalism when he described fake news content: "This is what they call the yellow journalism that is spread all over the world."

The definition based on the source of fake news. The participants in this study showed great interest in the source of the fake news they encountered on social media when they defined and understood fake news. Based on the data analysis of the interviews, the theme of the source of fake news was the second pattern that appeared concerning how the participants understood and defined fake news on social media. This theme comprises two sub-themes: unofficial and hostile sources.

Unofficial sources. The participants focused their definition and understanding of fake news on the source of the fake news on social media. According to the participants, fake news is news that is issued and spread from non-governmental and unofficial sources. Unofficial sources refer to social media accounts that do not belong to Saudi

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[1] Yellow journalism refers to reporting that uses sensationalized and lurid content in order to increase readership and circulation. In the mid-1890s, the term was used to describe the rivalry among New York newspapers that employed features such as colored comics, numerous illustrations, and banner headlines (Danesi, 2014).

government institutions or government officials, either within or outside Saudi Arabia. One participant said,

> Fake news in social media is news that is not from an official source or a trusted account. Moreover, this fake news is from figures or fake and undocumented accounts, accounts that do not exist. Meaning you are talking about Saudi Arabia. The news in Saudi Arabia from these accounts is originally outside Saudi Arabia. (Participant 1)

Similarly, Participant 5 provided a direct and brief definition of the source: "Any news that is not proven [authenticated] by the government institution or the official entity is considered fake news."

Moreover, if news about a specific official institution was circulating on social media, some participants understood it as fake news as long as the institution did not issue a denial or confirmation. For example, Participant 1 stated, "If there is a trending hashtag about an issue, there is undoubtedly an official institution affiliated with this issue; as long as the institution has not confirmed, denied, stated, or clarified, the news remains fake."

In addition, other participants stated that when news is obtained from unofficial sources, there is a high probability that it is fake. Participant 14 explained:

> If the news comes from official sources, it is considered one hundred percent true if it was from an official authority. In the sense that the information, such as the Ministry of Commerce, tweeted in its account, official institutions are recognized, whether the private sector or the public sector... But if the information comes out

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from accounts that do not belong to official institutions, the amount of credibility weakens, and the percentage of fake news always reaches between seventy to eighty to ninety percent to be fake, or it is inaccurate, or a significant part of it is false.

Hostile sources. Hostile sources refer to social media accounts operated by individuals and organizations that are hostile to Saudi Arabia, oppose its policies, or have disagreements with Saudi Arabia. According to some participants, fake news on social media is defined by the hostility and suspicion of the source posting the news. According to Participant 4,

> Often, we find that fake news is issued by parties with agendas. For example, we are here in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, with the Umrah season and the Hajj season; we are receiving fake news related to the religious side, and its rates are rising. This means that this is a systematic plan. It has specific goals in that it does not want to affect only a person but it wants to affect the whole group.

The participants considered information from social media accounts related to specific parties as fake news. Participant 13 stated,

> Sometimes, from a glance, you realize that a news item is tainted by a state of doubt, which causes you to be suspicious of this news. Who is the source of information? Whom are the people interacting with it? Comments?... if an account has a specific orientation, it is clear that this news supports its agenda... it will enter into a circle of doubt about the credibility of the news.

The definition based on when fake news is spread. The participants asserted that when it comes to fake news on social media, they refer to it as disinformation that appears during times of crisis or challenging circumstances. Several participants indicated that fake news is prevalent during times of crisis. Participant 4, for example, emphasized that fake news "is always created in times of crisis. This is a sensitive time; you always find the dissemination of fake news in these times." Another participant also expressed the same understanding of fake news on social media. Participant 10 stated, "Usually, fake news does not spread at any time. You feel that usually there is a problem. When you know there is a problem, the fake news begins."

RQ 2: Verification of Fake News on Social Media

The second question addressed in this study aimed to determine the verification practices used by Saudi journalists to verify fake news on social media. The data analysis of interview responses showed that two themes dominated journalists' interviews concerning verifying fake news on social media: traditional verification practices and new verification practices.

The theme of traditional verification practices includes three sub-themes: the sources of information, journalistic writing style, and the gatekeeping process. The second theme, new verification practices, also includes three sub-themes: social media and official websites, search engines, and visual verifications (see Figure 2).
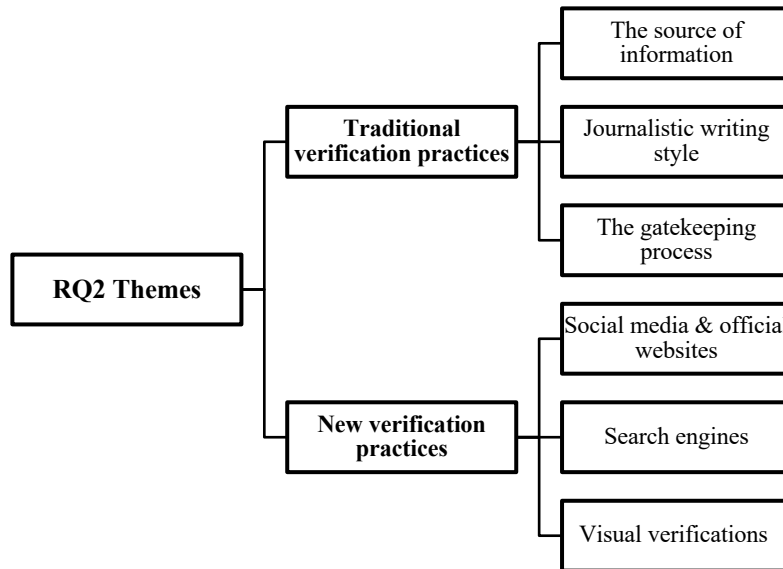
Figure 2. The Themes and Subthemes of Verifying Fake News on Social Media.

Traditional verification practices. As the participants discussed how they verify fake news on social media, the theme of traditional verification practices was the most common during the data analysis process. Traditional verification practices refer to the journalistic practices that journalists apply daily to verify information. These practices do not rely on internet-based or digital tools to verify news and information. In other words, participants adopt verification practices used in their daily news routines in their news outlets and apply them to checking fake news on social media.

The source of information. The participants' most common traditional verification practice to verify fake news on social media was verifying the sources of information. Participants reported that they practice verifying sources of information as part of their daily news routine. They emphasized that the credibility and reliability of the sources were essential and crucial in verifying information and fake news on social

media. Participant 6 emphasized that "there is a very important point that I focus on during my work, which is that the source must be reliable." Similarly, another participant stated that verifying the source of information is a crucial practice for journalists to verify fake news on social media:

> When a journalist gathers information, whether from Twitter or other social media platforms, he must first verify the information from its sources to ensure the authenticity of the information before transmitting it, in order to ensure that the information is not fake or false. (Participant 2)

The data analysis showed that the participants relied heavily on various traditional verification practices related to sources to verify the information and fake news on social media. The participants presented several practices for verifying the sources of information, including *contacting official sources*, *checking with the journalist's confidential sources*, *checking with people involved with the news*, and *visiting the scene*.

The participants spoke about the importance of contacting official sources to verify information spreading on social media. For example, Participant 8 stated, "As a journalist, it is my duty to communicate with the official institutions in order to verify the information that is circulated in social media, whether it is correct or it isn't real." Additionally, the participants contacted official institutions in order to verify information, particularly when fake news content is widely circulated on social media. One participant stated, "Things [fake news] that are widely circulated and widespread, we respond to them by taking a denial from the relevant entity and disseminating it" (Participant 9).

The participants mentioned contacting official institutions' spokespersons to verify fake news and information circulated on social media. Participant 8 explained the procedures for verifying information on social media by saying, "The first step is to search for the official spokesperson of the concerned authority and communicate with him." Furthermore, another participant explained how he and his colleagues rely on official spokespersons in their daily news routines to verify information on social media. Participant 5 said,

> We contact the official spokesperson, who confirms or denies the authenticity of this news. So, it will be like this: if it is confirmed, I will report the confirmation, and if it is a denial, I will report that they deny this news's existence. This is how it works in Saudi Arabia; we work this way.

Some participants used their personal connections with the official spokespersons to verify the information and fake news on social media. Participant 10 said,

> If it is news about an official organization, for example, before I do anything, our relations with government institutions are good, so I will call someone I know [the official spokesperson] and tell him about the news I read, ... is this news true? If he says yes to me. I will discuss the topic with him and send questions that need to be answered. If they say yes, I guarantee this information is correct here.

Another method related to verifying the source of information used by the participants was checking with the journalist's confidential sources. Whenever the official authorities failed to respond to the news spread on social media, journalists relied on their confidential sources inside the official institutions to verify the information.

Participant 1 explained how he counted on his confidential source to verify information on a trending hashtag on social media. He stated,

> When I see trending news, neither has a government institution confirmed it, or denied it... It is impossible that I will wait for the government institution to announce or the government institution to confirm; I am talking about myself as a member of a newspaper: you will not have a scoop. So, I rely on my sources in the end: they are the real test of this event, they confirm the news to you.

Additionally, some participants mentioned that they had checked with individuals associated with the news circulated on social media. Participant 2 stated that, "It is impossible to write a specific article or write a specific news [story] without contacting the person involved in the event because he has the right to respond." In the same vein, Participant 13 spoke about the importance of checking with individuals involved in the event:

> The first thing is to reach out to the parties involved in the event. If we assume a case, for example, and a case that formed public opinion, who are the parties to the case, we try to reach them and take sufficient information from them.

> The participants reported that they verified information circulating on social media by contacting and checking with individuals who posted on social media. As Participant 14 said,

> I look for who is the owner of the original clip. Who tweeted the clip? Who is the person who took pictures and uploaded them? What is the first account uploaded

on Twitter? I communicate with the person who uploaded it. Do you have any information?

Another method used by participants to verify the source of information was to visit the event scene. The participants spoke about checking the information on the ground themselves. Participant 9 explained that when he found a post on Twitter about a shortage of some medicines in a health center, "I went to a health center myself, asked for medicine, and then sent an inquiry to the Ministry of Health, and took the opinions of pharmacy specialists. It was the beginning of the information spread on Twitter."

If the location is remote, the participants contact their colleagues there and ask them to visit the scene in order to verify it. As Participant 11 explained,

> If the place is in my area, I go to the place and check it. If it was far, I would contact the editor-in-chief. Then, I contact a colleague in that area. I would ask him about this matter and order him to visit it to verify its authenticity.

Journalistic writing style[2]. Journalistic writing differs in style from other writing. Several participants mentioned that they could detect fake news published on social media through its writing style. The participants relied on their long experiences in which they could distinguish professional real news from fabricated news. However, according to the participants, this practice, albeit inaccurate, signals to them that the news is fake and fabricated. One participant mentioned that official Saudi Arabian institutions have a specific writing style that enables journalists to distinguish real news from fabricated

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[2] The journalistic writing style refers to the unwritten editorial style of a newspaper which a journalist acquires through practice and experience.

news. The participants discussed how they could detect fake news based on writing style. Participant 9 said,

> Based on my experience, I can distinguish the news through its writing style. Is this news real or not? I know the official institutions and how they write and publish the news. These are indications that I know whether this news is true or false.

Some participants mentioned that they focused on the structure of fake news. Participant 3 pointed out that he could distinguish fake news by reading the introduction and conclusion:

> There is news that you know is inaccurate from the first time you read it... The more you experience in journalism, you know through publishing the news, the way of writing in the news, the introduction and the conclusion, you know that this is neither a journalist nor a newspaper that wrote it.

The participants also identified fake news on social media through misspellings. Participant 10 noted that too many spelling errors indicate that the news is incorrect and fabricated:

> Note the content you often find in misspellings, and you know it was fabricated in the first place. I mean, sorry, no newspaper lacks a proofreader or a spell-checker. I may find the wrong word, but half of the topic is misspelled, as if a school student is writing it. No, this is impossible.

In the same vein, Participant 11 spoke about how he could debunk fake news through the writing style of the fake news content: "The writing is weak. The one who wrote it is not an expert."

The participants stated that newspapers have their own writing style in which they use phrases, terms, and titles through which journalists can identify fake news. Participant 14 stated that "Each newspaper uses certain phrases and terms. For princes, for example, we do not write His Royal Highness. We write Prince as wording. We do not write Honorable Minister. The word His Excellency is removed."

The gatekeeping process. The participants referred to the importance of the gatekeeping process and the gates that information passes through in order to verify fake news on social media. The participants relied on their editorial departments to verify the information they sent them. They considered their colleagues and departments reliable filters for detecting fake news on social media.

Participant 1 explicitly spoke about how they verify fake news through gatekeepers and the gatekeeping process: "The news passes through gatekeepers, the gatekeeping theory. It does not post on social media or publish in the newspaper until it passes through several gates to be approved."

Some participants mentioned there is a department in their newspaper office where they send information to be verified. Participant 9 stated, "We have, for example, in our newspapers, even if the news is not false, ... there is a department in the newspaper that verifies all the news, even if the news is repeated. We have a department to verify."

However, other participants indicated that there is no department specialized in detecting fake news, but that each department at the newspaper is responsible for checking and verifying the news. For example, Participant 7 said, "Each department is responsible for its credibility. Moreover, the department is keen, it is impossible for me to publish news that I am not convinced of, as an official, for example." Similarly, Participant 2 spoke about the responsibility of these departments: "Each department is responsible for the news that is issued by it. Its responsibility is to verify and implement."

New verification practices. As a result of the data analysis, new verification practices emerged as the second most common theme. The theme of new verification practices relates to participants using internet-based tools, such as social media platforms, online websites, and verification and fact-checking services, to verify fake news circulated on social media. However, a few participants mentioned that they adopted new verification practices in their daily journalistic routines to verify fake news on social media. These practices included using *social media and official websites*, *search engines*, and *visual verification*.

Social media & official websites. Along with traditional verification practices, the participants verified information and news daily through social media platforms and government institutions' websites. Although new verification practices were used by both online and print journalists, their priorities differed. For instance, online journalists adopted new verification practices into their daily routine first and then later used traditional verification practices. One participant, an online journalist, described his daily practices for verifying information online as follows:

The first thing is to search the official websites. The second thing is to search for it on Twitter accounts, social media accounts, or the official spokesperson account, then ask some people who are in the ministry or in the facility or authority or where they are. (Participant 3)

On the other hand, print journalists mentioned that using new practices to verify information and fake news on social media was a second step in their verification process, after they had used traditional verification methods. They adopted two sequential practices when verifying information on social media: first, they communicated with the appropriate official entity to verify the news, and second, they searched the website and accounts of the institution related to the news. Participant 6 described journalists' verification practices:

They can contact the official entity if they doubt the content. They can call, e-mail, or use any other means to search for the official entity and verify whether this news is accurate or not. Then search on the same platform or website of the entity [to determine] whether this information exists or not.

The participants mentioned that they value and praise social media platforms for easier verification of information and fake news. They stated that they could rapidly and conveniently verify information through official social media accounts. Participant 4 said,

Now it has become effortless because of or thanks to social media platforms. You can return to the official or relevant entity associated with this news. Did they post an official statement? Did they indicate what happened? And so on.

The participants mentioned that they relied on official accounts on social media to verify fake news. Participant 1 mentioned checking official social media accounts, such as the Saudi Press Agency, to verify the information: "Any event in the hashtag that draws my attention, I verify the information. Does an official account issue this information? An official body like the Saudi Press Agency."

Search engines. The search engine Google was referred to by the participants several times as a new tool for verifying fake news spread on social media. They adopted this practice to locate the news source and check if other news organizations had published the information they sought. Participant 9 described how he used Google for verification:

> For me, any news that attracts me in social media or information, whether positive or negative, I take some of the vocabulary, words, or sentences, put them in Google, for example, and do a search. If I find it on many sites, I look for the most authentic and reliable site and enter it to see if it is actually published.

> Google was also used by other participants and social media platforms, such as Twitter, for their verification practices. Participant 9 explained his use of new internet-based tools for verification:

> The first step I take, frankly, is to search in Google and see the origin: who published this article, news, or information. Then, on Twitter, I also search for the personalities who promote this news. Are they known personalities or related to the topic?

The participants used several methods when using Google as a tool for verifying information and fake news. Some of the participants began by typing headlines into the search engine Google to check the source of information. For example, as Participant 11 explained,

If I find a news or a post, and the headline is there, certain disturbing news, I go and type it into a Twitter search, I type it into a Google search, and the one who first wrote it would appear, and I'll be able to see if it's there or not.

Other participants used keywords from the news body and typed them into Google to verify them. The reason one uses the body of the news instead of the title is because the title of fake news might change. As Participant 8 clarified,

We do not take the title because it is possible in fake news that they change the title, but we take from the body of the content, for example, a word that has been repeated more [than once] in this news [story].

Visual verification. The participants complained about the chaos of images and videos that appear on social media because of their ease of manipulation and the difficulty of verifying their authenticity. For instance, Participant 6 stated, "Unfortunately, now I think it's a mess. And many applications have played a negative role in the chaos of pictures and videos so that you no longer realize the information, I mean the real image from the false image."

However, a few participants mentioned using Google and fact-checking services websites to verify images and videos on social media. They discussed using these new tools for reverse image searches to verify the authenticity of visual content. Google was

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one of the most accessible sites for the participants when they wanted to check the authenticity of photos. Participant 12 stated that "there is more than one website. The easiest and simplest is Google to search for images."

Another search engine used by the participants to verify images is TinEye.com, a free reverse image search engine. They used the site to ensure that images had not been manipulated by photo editing software such as Photoshop. Additionally, they collected information about the image and its source and verified the background of the image's creation. Participant 10 explained how she used this reverse image search engine:

> I get the image and put it in programs like TinEye.com and I make sure that the image has no photoshop. Then, I look for the picture's information, date, time, and things like this. Then, the person who uploaded it: I do a background check on it.

Not all participants spoke about using these new practices to verify fake news on social media. As Participant 12 stated, "I also have to tell you that not all journalists know these tools." However, some participants valued these new practices and learned about them through self-learning and daily practice. Participant 5 explained how important it is for journalists to have "digital skills" to verify information, especially nowadays. He stressed that it is the journalist's responsibility to learn these skills, not the newspapers' responsibility:

> Currently, in the era in which we are these days, it depends on the skills of a journalist using digital media. I mean, the newspaper will not teach you the skills of searching for the credibility of the news. You, as a journalist, have specific

digital skills to search for every image, for a story, for a source. So, it depends on

the journalist's skills, not on the newspaper.

RQ 3: The Challenges Journalists Encounter in Combating Fake News on Social

Media

The third question explored Saudi journalists' challenges in debunking fake news

published on social media. The data analysis showed two main themes that emerged from

the data concerning the challenges: *internal* and *external*. The first theme was internal

challenges, including the individual, the routines, and the organizational challenges. The

second theme was external challenges, which included social institutions challenges and

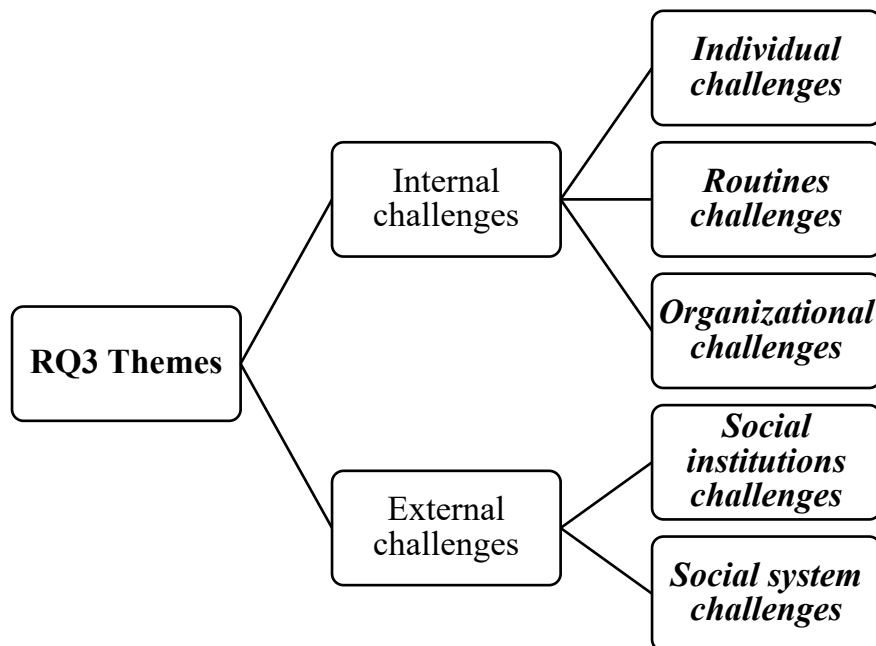social system challenges (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. The Themes and Subthemes of the Challenges that Saudi Journalists Encounter.

Internal challenges. This theme refers to the challenges that participants encountered in the journalism environment. In other words, the challenges that affect the work of journalists when debunking fake news on social media both personally and professionally. The data analysis indicated that three sub-themes emerged: individual challenges, routines challenges, and organizational challenges.

Individual challenges. The participants stated that Saudi journalists encountered challenges at the individual level. They discussed challenges within journalists themselves that affect their ability to combat fake news on social media. The participants indicated that the journalist's lack of skills to combat fake news on social media was one of the most common individual challenges they encountered. They mentioned the various skills a journalist must employ when combating fake news on social media.

As reported by the participants, journalists in Saudi Arabia require technical skills to combat fake news on social media. The participants pointed out that there is a need for a journalist to obtain the necessary technical skills to verify the information to combat fake news on social media. Participant 12 said,

> We need a journalist even if he or she knows how to operate these things [verification programs and websites]. You need a good person, someone with these skills to be able to deal with information, searching, intelligent, quick-witted, practical, and professional.

Furthermore, the participants spoke about the importance of technical courses for journalists to combat fake news on social media, primarily visual content that posts on social media. Participant 13 stated, "Journalists and media professionals in general need

courses with specialists in the field of technology... and courses on how to determine if this video is fabricated or not, [if] the information contained in this video is correct or incorrect."

Some participants attributed the lack of technical skills in verifying fake news to the fact that they were not taught these skills in Saudi universities. Participant 10 stated that,

Not all of them [journalists] know how to use websites where they can verify things, like TinEye.com and other verifications services. There are people who do not even know these services because we do not have this in our universities. What I know in Saudi universities is that there is no such thing as how to verify the news, or how to be sure that this news is accurate.

Another challenge associated with the individual level was new journalists' lack of academic qualifications concerning fake information. Some participants pointed out that many journalists, who graduated from media departments in Saudi universities, lacked academic education in terms of fake news. Participant 14 stated he had never heard of fake news when he was in college:

In my time, the role of universities was worse than bad. If we talk about the theoretical side, we have studied a course called the news. How we define the news is that every new event interests people. OK. When you go into the course details, I don't remember going through false information or fake news.

Additionally, some participants mentioned that English is a challenge for many journalists when they verify fake news on social media because most verification services

that specialize in detecting fake news and dealing with fabricated images and videos are in English. Participant 10 said, "Usually, in my experience dealing with them [journalists], sometimes the language is an obstacle if he or she does not have another language other than Arabic. Of course, because the sites where you can verify and search the sites are in English." Similarly, another participant noted the importance of having a second language for journalists and of being familiar with international cultures. Participant 8 stated, "We are talking about a percentage of journalists who need to have a societal culture, as well as an international culture, whether language, interest in international newspapers, or interest in following social media."

Some participants mentioned the importance of journalists' communication skills to verify information and fake news. The participants mentioned two aspects of communication skills: one related to the journalist's communication with official authorities and the other regarding communicating with people. Participant 11 mentioned that one of the journalist's challenges was communicating with government institutions: "He or she will have obstacles if he or she does not have the right channels of communication with the relevant authorities, and if he or she does not have communication with the relevant authorities." The other aspect of the communication skills challenges was related to communication with people, mentioned by Participant 12: "We have a problem; as a Saudi journalist, if your relationship is not good with people, you may not obtain any information."

Routine challenges. This theme refers to the challenges the participants encountered when dealing with information and fake news during their daily routines.

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Two main sub-themes emerged from the data analysis: the lack of interest in correcting fake news and devoting time and effort to combat fake news.

The lack of interest in correcting fake news. Some participants expressed their unwillingness to correct false news on social media. The participants attributed this to several factors, including editorial policies, limited resources, and uninterested journalists.

The participants stated that their newspapers are not as interested in correcting the news as they are in highlighting stories that journalists can expand upon and write about in depth. Participant 1 explained:

> When the news is false, like our newspaper policy, it tells you that fake news and denial news are not published. We want news that contains information in order to expand and develop it and obtain the opinion of specialists.

Another participant attributed the newspaper's lack of interest in fake news to the lack of importance of fake news to them and the absence of any verification of fake news in Saudi Arabia:

> For example, we are in a meeting of the editorial board of directors. We assume that now we have received fake news; we know that it is fake news. We dispense with it and look for a more important story. Simply, no one will pay attention to the motivation to see the truth in this news. Who made it? Who is behind it? The reasons? This is not [to be] found in Saudi Arabia. (Participant 5)

In the absence of newspaper interest in correcting fake news, journalists have been less motivated to correct it. Some participants mentioned lack of motivation as one

of the challenges they encountered when combating fake news on social media. Participant 5 said, "We in Saudi Arabia do not have a journalist who is striving to discover whether this news is fake. There is no motivation or sense that I am revealing a certain truth."

Several participants spoke about the lack of interest in correcting fake news in various ways. Participant 14 mentioned that correcting fake news does not appeal to him anymore: "No, I don't care about it [correcting fake news] personally." Moreover, Participant 5 stated that they were only interested in correcting fake news if they had been ordered by their newspapers to do so: "I wouldn't care about fake news unless I was assigned to investigate it. It does not make a lot of difference to me." Furthermore, Participant 1 pointed out that denying fake news is not a journalist's duty: "If it is fake, then I think it is not your duty to deny it. As a journalist, you are not an official body that refutes it."

Devoting time and effort to combat fake news. Participants in the study mentioned that they had to devote time and effort to verify fake news on social media. One participant stated that verifying fake news takes effort, as it requires journalists to search for information and communicate with official institutions, which may take a long time to respond to journalists. Participant 1 said this about fake news: "sometimes it requires effort to search for this information." He added, "It takes effort from you sometimes, and the most effort is when the fake news is talking about a specific institution, and this institution takes long hours and does not deny this information." Moreover, other participants pointed out a journalist must dedicate time and effort to verifying fake news.

Participant 2 said, "It takes time and effort to find information," while Participant 9 added, "It definitely takes time and effort." Participant 11 mentioned devoting time and effort to visiting the event location to verify fake news: "It takes me time and requires me to go to it."

Organizational challenges. This sub-theme focused on the organizational challenges that the participants encountered while combating fake news on social media. Organizational challenges are those challenges derived from the news organization for which the journalist works. It includes journalistic leaders and newspaper policies, the organization's structure, co-workers, and financial issues such as salaries and penalties.

Management challenges. Some participants stated that the challenges they encountered when combating fake news on social media included a lack of adoption of online and social media technologies by several printed newspapers. As a result, the participants reported having difficulty debunking fake news easily and rapidly. One participant said,

> Fifty percent of our newspapers in Saudi Arabia have turned to online newspapers. Of course, official newspapers are still sticking to print newspapers. Now I have a fake news story, and I need to combat it as soon as possible through social media. As a beneficiary or as an audience, I don't sit waiting for you until tomorrow. (Participant 2)

The newspaper's policy of preventing journalists from using their social media accounts to expose fake news was another management challenge. Some participants complained that their departments in newspaper management restrict their use of social

media and do not allow them to write corrective reports for fake news. One participant

mentioned that some journalists are required not to write, even if he has the correct

information that exposes the fake news, for fear of the administration. Participant 14

admitted that "Some news organizations control the journalist: do not do [this], do not

write [that]. Even when he knows the news is incorrect, he does not want to write about it

because he may have a problem with his management."

Some participants indicated that among the challenges they encountered was the

lack of specialized departments in their newspapers to verify fake news. Participant 5

said,

> No, we have not reached this stage in Saudi Arabia. I am talking personally... I
>
> worked with a newspaper to develop it, and then I moved to another newspaper.
>
> There is no such thing as a section to check false news.

Newspaper editors used their personal judgments to verify fake news on social

media. Participant 13 mentioned this when speaking about whether they have a

department specialized in checking fake news: "Honestly, no. Rather, initiatives from the

editors and their professional standards."

Another challenge related to management was the employment policy for new

journalists. Several participants noted that new journalists had no academic degree in

journalism and no experience in journalism. As Participant 4 explained,

> We are our problem, or the press environment has some people who have joined
>
> the profession. These are not considered a measure. He is not the one who
>
> studied, nor is he the one who knows how to practice the profession, nor is he the

one who knows this. I mean, some newspapers may have hired them as reporters to provide them with information. Still, he does not have a journalistic sense; he cannot investigate the news, reveal the facts, and perform a journalistic investigation.

Some participants stated that journalists who join this field without adequate skills do not know how to deal with fake and inaccurate news since they consider journalism more of a hobby than a profession. As mentioned by Participant 9,

Frankly, as for inaccurate and fake news, many journalists have become aware of this, but most of those [who are] left are not mature and do not have the skill because they joined journalism and consider it a hobby rather than a profession.

Financial challenges. Several participants complained that financial issues affected their work in verifying fake information and news on social media. As Participant 10 said, "Times when newspapers were at their peak, when the financial crisis first started. It's over. Everyone verifies by himself."

One participant spoke about the low financial income compared what they used to earn, which does not attract journalists to work in newspapers. As Participant 7 said, "Now, the first thing [to know] about journalism in terms of financial benefits, with which you attract the journalist, for example, [is that the profession] does not have a financial return as [it did] before. Press organizations are not paying now as [they did] before." Moreover, another participant spoke about the low salaries they earned from working as journalists compared to the salaries of editors-in-chief. To make a decent living, one journalist must work for many newspapers; as a result, his or her quality of

work decreases. Participant 12 stated, "The salaries are not excellent, frankly, the salaries of the press. Compared to the [rest of the] world, editors-in-chief may be OK. They have the hardest work. Their average income is from five thousand to a lot, about fifteen thousand."[3] He explained that because most jobs in newspapers are part-time, the quality of work is weak:

A journalist has to work for many organizations to provide a good income. He works for this, works for that, and works for that, and in the end, all of them end up with lousy content… Now most newspapers operate part-time because it is cheaper for them. They can hire ten or fifteen [journalists], but the quality is weak.

Another participant mentioned that the financial crisis affected newspapers, which resulted in relying on volunteer journalists. Participant 13 said,

To be clear and frank with you today, in many newspapers suffering from a financial crisis, the journalist may not receive any financial amount from the newspaper. Some journalists work as volunteers, so the process is not regulated within press organizations.

External challenges. This theme refers to the challenges the participants faced beyond the traditional boundaries of journalism organizations. The data analysis of the

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[3] The currency mentioned by the participant is Saudi Riyal, equivalent to 0.27 US dollars. The value of five thousand Saudi riyals is equal to 1331.31 US dollars. Therefore, fifteen thousand riyals equals $3993.94 in U.S. dollars.

interviews showed two sub-themes related to external challenges: social institutions and social systems challenges.

Social institutions challenges. The first sub-theme concerns challenges encountered by participants in the context of government, audience, and influencers.

Governmental challenges. Some participants encountered difficulties verifying information and fake news on social media when dealing with the public relations departments of government institutions in Saudi Arabia. The participants mentioned that some public relations departments in government institutions lacked transparency and withheld information from journalists, contributing to the spread of fake news. Most ministries and official organizations in Saudi Arabia have recently changed the name of their "public relations" departments to "corporate communication" departments. As one participant explained, "A journalist suffers from corporate communications departments in official institutions. There is a fear that information is being withheld. This issue has increased the frequency of dealing with fake news, as whoever spreads fake news takes advantage of this issue" (Participant 14).

Additionally, some participants expressed concern about the time it takes corporate communication departments in official institutions to respond to their inquiries regarding verifying the information or fake news published on social media. The participants believed that this delayed response led them to expend additional time and effort, and that it rapidly spread fake news. One participant stated, "Fake news sometimes takes effort from you, and the biggest effort is when the news is talking about a specific

institution, and this institution takes a long time, and they do not deny this information"
(Participant 1).

Another challenge related to government institutions was that some participants
reported experiencing difficulties when dealing with government spokespersons. First,
the participants noted that government spokespersons often delay responding to their
inquiries until a press conference, which takes time to schedule. The participants believed
that this delay in responding to their inquiries regarding verifying the information
contributes to the spread of fake news and the failure to combat it promptly. One
participant said,

> Indeed, every ministry has a speaker, and the spokespersons do give statements
> from time to time, but the response is always postponed to press conferences. I
> think it lowers the value of the spokesperson significantly. I mean, sometimes the
> news is happening right now, … for example, if I am [working for] a TV channel
> or a newspaper, I want an urgent response. I mean, now, with the information you
> have. When you reveal it in the press conference the next day or the day after,
> many questions lose their luster or lose relevance. (Participant 13)

Second, the participants mentioned that another challenge related to
spokespersons in official institutions was favoritism in dealing with journalists. Some
participants mentioned that they encountered difficulties contacting spokespersons
because they were not well-known journalists and did not have a good relationship with
the spokespersons. As Participant 12 stated, "Sometimes the official institutions do not

respond to you easily unless, for example, you are a well-known journalist and such-and-such."

Among the challenges faced by the participants related to the theme of government challenges was the fact that some governmental institutions were leaking inaccurate information to journalists to determine the public response to an issue or decision that may soon be implemented. As mentioned in the previous findings relating to the first question, the participants defined fake news as incorrect content spread to measure the audience's feedback. A few participants indicated that they could be accused of spreading fake news because of the news that government institutions leak to them to measure the public's feedback. One participant said that "the fake news is passed so that they [official institutions] can see the public's reaction, and then the news is issued" (Participant 7).

Several participants spoke out about how official sources rush to provide information to some journalists and then later deny that information. As one participant explained,

> The problem is with the person or official who comes to you and gets excited and tells you that "they are building a tower that will cost such and such," while the government has not decided yet. Afterward, he tells you, "OK, the project exists, and it will be postponed because new things have happened here," and then you fall into the trap. (Participant 12)

Similarly, one participant described his experience publishing news about an official institution based on information provided to him by a source within the government

institution and later denied by the official institution. After a while, however, they published the same news story. Participant 14 said,

> I published a piece of information about a government institution... After a few days, they showed and denied that by saying it was not true. A month later, they confirmed the news... Understood? They denied my information and then confirmed it a month later. When I contacted the person responsible [and asked] why he had done this, he said, "We have to."

However, the participants spoke about how they were greatly affected by official institutions denying news after it had been leaked to them. Participant 12 said, "It could end his or her journalistic career." Moreover, the participants believed that frequent denials could affect journalists' credibility and place them in a difficult position vis-à-vis their audiences. Participant 14 stated, "When you publish a denial once or twice, you lose your credibility with people. Denial greatly harms the journalist unless action is taken to clarify what happened."

Audience challenges. The participants mentioned that they faced challenges from the public while debunking fake news on social media. According to the participants, audiences today have a very different relationship with journalists than they did in the past. Thanks to the advent of social media, the audience can reach journalists instantly and effortlessly. As a result, the participants were thus able to criticize and attack them daily. One participant described the current change in public behavior toward journalists:

> In the past, the audience could not express themselves [very] much. The audience was rarely present in the comments [section] on the newspaper's website.

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However, when we published the news, they expressed their opinions in the comments section. Currently, they come to you every day. They come to your Twitter account, attack you and criticize you; you know, they text you on your mobile via WhatsApp. (Participant 5)

The participants stated that if they expose the facts and combat fake news on social media, they are attacked by society. Participant 4 explained:

I am, as a journalist, within society. So, when the whole society is sympathetic to a particular issue, for example, I am here even if I reveal the facts, and if the truth goes against the tide or against the direction of society, society itself will attack me.

Furthermore, some participants stated that as a result of public pressure, they might not only avoid publishing news to combat the spread of fake news but also publish fake news to please the public. Participant 13 said,

A journalist might not publish news for fear of public pressure, or he might publish for fear of public pressure. A journalist may publish information that he may not be sure of, but it supports public opinion, and therefore he publishes it. In the past, journalists were the ones who led the public, and today the general public is the one who leads the journalists.

Influencers challenges. The participants spoke about the decline in their standing in government institutions in exchange for the increase in the status of social media influencers. The participants complained that governmental institutions invited and

communicated with social media influencers, while journalists were neglected and ignored. Participant 5 explained this situation as follows:

> They [government institutions] no longer recognize us now. If an influencer attends an event, they sit in the first row. What a farce! Because he or she laughs on social media and has five thousand followers, he or she becomes more important than you as a journalist.

Another participant complained about marginalizing journalists who practiced, learned, and worked hard for influencers. Participant 6 stated, "Unfortunately, journalists have been undermined, and a new template called influencers has appeared. The journalist formed himself professionally, got tired, learned, and worked hard until he reached a degree of expertise that he did not reach quickly."

Additionally, the participants mentioned that influencers affected them by increasing the gap between journalists and the public. Participant 12 stated, "There is a large gap between the journalist and the public now because the gap has included the influencers."

Participant 6 described the current situation, where anyone with an enormous number of followers can become a journalist:

> Now everyone has become a journalist, unfortunately. I mean, it was chaos. For example, I have one hundred, one thousand, two hundred thousand followers. Of course, this thing is a mess. Even in the ethics of journalism, it is not correct. I feel sorry for it [the profession] now.

Social systems challenges. The second sub-theme related to the theme of the external challenges was social systems, which focused on the influence of culture, traditions, and ideologies on the participants. Some participants spoke about the impact of society's customs and traditions when combating fake news on social media. Participant 4 spoke about his experience facing fake news spread on social media about the kidnapping of two girls. When he verified the news, he discovered that the two girls had run away from home, so he decided not to correct this news item because of the social customs and traditions, which might affect the two girls' families. He explained as follows:

> The topic was the disappearance of two girls. Their parents reported that the girls had been kidnapped, and so on. When she arrived and was able to gather all the leads and reveal facts that the police themselves could not reach... the case turned from kidnapping to a case [where] they [the girls] went of their own free will. It's an ethical issue. I am here as a journalist, and it is my duty to get a scoop or adhere to the traditions and culture of the community. I did not publish this news [story], not a single word.

> Additionally, some participants decided to remain silent and ignore fake news spreading on social media if they thought it would affect individuals, families, or tribes in society. As Participant 8 explained,

> This news could be offensive to a family, offensive to society, or it could harm a family or a community, so do not repeat the same information even if the goal is to correct this information... There is news that deserves attention and deserves to

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be highlighted. And there is news one needs to ignore. We have in the press what

is known as "the unspoken."

The participants mentioned that they avoided publishing information that could affect families and their social reputation. Participant 11 stated, "Anything related to a family, do not open the door to anything that provokes or harms it. You are supposed to prevent it. You do not harm them directly or indirectly." However, another participant used different methods to publish information that might affect families and tribes in society so as to avoid harming them. Participant 9 said, "Tell the truth. If [there is a risk of] people being harmed, families or tribes, there might be a specific code [one could use] without mentioning the names, or replacing them with letters or symbols or something like that."

RQ 4: Role Perceptions of Saudi Journalists in Response to Social Media

The fourth question in this study comprised two parts: how Saudi journalists perceive their role in society in response to fake news on social media and how they translate these roles into action. The data analysis of the interview responses indicated that the participants perceived their roles in society regarding fake news on social media as being divided into three types: disseminator, populist mobilizer, and interpreter. The data analysis also showed how the participants translated their roles into actions by employing their social media accounts and their newspaper (see Figure 4).
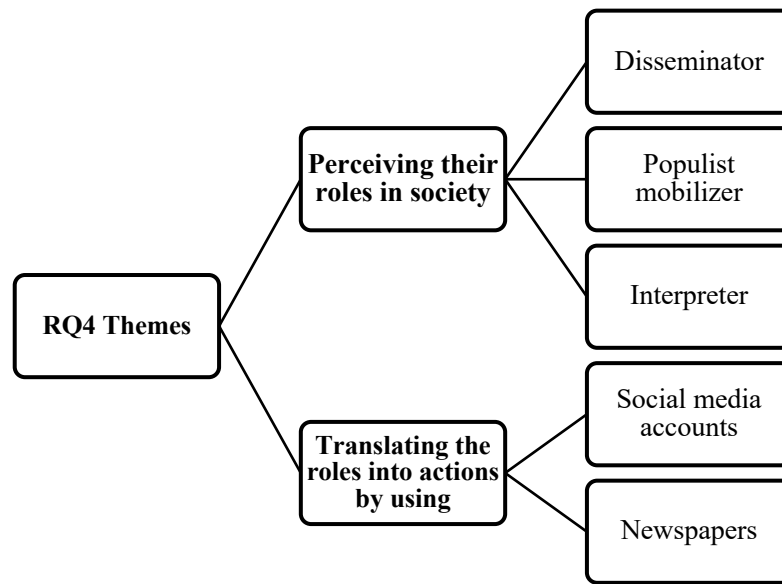
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                              ┌──────────────┐
                              │ Disseminator │
                              └──────────────┘
          ┌──────────────┐   ┌──────────────┐
          │Perceiving their│  │   Populist   │
          │roles in society│──│  mobilizer   │
          └──────────────┘   └──────────────┘
                              ┌──────────────┐
                              │ Interpreter  │
                              └──────────────┘
  ┌──────────┐
  │RQ4 Themes│
  └──────────┘              ┌──────────────┐
                            │ Social media │
                            │   accounts   │
          ┌──────────────┐  └──────────────┘
          │Translating the│
          │roles into actions│
          │   by using    │ ┌──────────────┐
          └──────────────┘  │  Newspapers  │
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Figure 4. The Themes and Subthemes of the Role Perception of Saudi Journalists.

Perceiving their roles in society. As a result of the analysis of the interview responses, the participants in the study perceived three types of social roles: disseminator, populist mobilizer, and interpreter.

The disseminator role. The most common journalistic role that emerged from the data analysis process was the role of disseminator. The disseminator's journalistic role refers to those participants who perceived their job in society as publishing news based on facts, and with a distance from uncertain facts, to provide information to many audiences in order to combat fake news on social media. The participants who perceived this role focused only on presenting facts and disseminating information to their audiences to combat fake news on social media. They believed that because they were a

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reliable source of information for the public, their dissemination of facts helped combat fake news in social media.

One of the participants emphasized that journalists are a reliable source for the public. Thus, journalists play a major role in the fight against fake news on social media. According to Participant 1, "The journalist has a very big role in combating fake news. For example, it may be published that this fake news [story] is not true based on my information. He is a source of trust in the end." Similarly, Participant 2 highlighted the role of journalists in society by linking combating fake news on social media with ensuring that the facts are presented :"The role of the journalist in society to combat fake news lies in one task: confronting fake news by presenting the facts."

As one participant pointed out, it is the responsibility of journalists to provide truthful information to the public because it is the public's right to be informed. Participant 13 stated, "The greatest right of the public is that the journalist must provide him with truthful information. This is the largest right the audience has over you as a journalist." Furthermore, Participant 6 stated that when it comes to correcting fake news on social media to provide truthful news, it is important that the journalist provide evidence to back up his or her correction:

> The role that [one] can play as a journalist is to show truthful news. You as a journalist, it is for sure that you have followers and people who follow you and people who trust what you have. Your word is heard by some people. It is [to be] expected that you say, "Oh people, this thing is inaccurate." If it is actually inaccurate, show people with evidence why it is inaccurate.

Some participants mentioned that, at present, due to changes in the media environment, they have become transmitters of the news, not its makers. Therefore, journalists must act as filters when reporting the news, as it is their responsibility to do so. Participant 5 provided an example of how a journalist acts as a filter to ensure that only truthful information and news reaches the public:

The important thing is to convey the news. We are just reporting the news. Every journalist is supposed to be a filter for the news. That's our mission, but we're making the news. There's no industry like there used to be, because the media atmosphere has changed, and media kitchens have changed our mission. We convey the news, it is true, because we do not make it anymore. The important thing is that we are a filter to convey the truth only. This is our role. It's just that simple, in my opinion.

The populist mobilizer role. This role concerns not only publishing news and what is behind the news, but also providing awareness, encouraging the public, and working with them to combat false news on social media. The data analysis of interview responses indicated that the participants in this role paid particular attention to awareness. They perceived their responsibility as raising awareness among the public through their journalistic work. In addition, the participants believed that journalists should focus on forming and developing the public's views, beliefs, and interests.

Several participants mentioned the importance of increasing awareness among the audiences in order to combat fake news on social media. Participant 14 spoke about the role of a journalist in society as "an important role in raising awareness." Participant 2

focused on spreading awareness in order to include the audience in combatting fake

news: "By including the news with messages to correct previous disinformation. It is also

important not to be satisfied with merely denying the misleading information. No. No. It

must involve the public in combating that information by spreading awareness." In the

same vein, Participant 8 asserted that the awareness aspect is more important than other

roles, especially when fake news spreads on social media:

> The awareness aspect, I think, is what constitutes an obsession with the media at
>
> this stage. I think focusing on the awareness aspect is more [important] than
>
> [focusing on] the other aspects. As for the other roles that journalists must believe
>
> in, they are important roles, and they are a grand message and noble message. We
>
> are all keen on it, but there is one stage we must increasingly stop at: the
>
> awareness aspect.

Although Participant 12 did not mention the awareness aspect explicitly, he

focused on how important it was for journalism and journalists to focus on public opinion

by gaining and forming their views:

> Today, many journalists believe that they no longer have a role. On the contrary,
>
> their role is to help form public opinion, gain public opinion, and correct public
>
> opinion's concepts. It is all on the journalist. Beliefs and ideas are all the
>
> responsibility of the press and journalists.

The interpretative role. The less common role in this study that emerged from the

data analysis was the interpretative role. Some participants perceived their role in society

in response to fake news on social media as interpreters. They believed that their role was

to convey the news to combat fake news on social media and provide their interpretation. They focused on interpreting and explaining what lies behind fake news.

One participant explained this role by emphasizing the importance of the behind-the-news in order to compete with individuals who play a part in reporting news. As Participant 4 said,

> I told you that many people participated with us in the role of reporting news. The journalist's role is not only to report the news. This is considered one of the tasks of the journalist. There is a journalistic investigation, in which he explores what is behind the event and reveals the facts that come after the news. All of which can only be done by a real journalist.

Participant 8 noted that audiences require more than simply correcting the fake news on social media, that they need more than mere information:

> As a journalist, it is obvious that in order to correct information, I do not think that the statement that "the information is false" is sufficient for me. It is not accurate for me to be satisfied with this information. Rather, it must be clarified because the reader is not so naive that he will be satisfied with one phrase. Rather, he will search for what is behind the truth or what is behind the information in a more accurate sense.

Participant 7 mentioned that the behind-the-event is more important these days, given new media approaches:

> Now, if you give me news and don't report it at the same moment, it does not mean that if you do not publish it is over... The behind-the-news is the most

important part: what is the official opinion, the opinion that can get a reaction from people. The new media now focus on following the event.

Translating the roles into actions. The participants spoke about several approaches to translating their roles into action in order to combat fake news on social media. Some of the participants focused on the use of social media in order to do so. The participants mentioned that they used their accounts on social media platforms in addition to their newspapers as one of the approaches. Participant 1 stated that "The journalist is now responsible. He should be interested in publishing the correct and confirmed news on his account on social media platforms or in the newspaper. And the journalist is an official source now considered by all followers." Similarly, Participant 14 mentioned Twitter as a tool that journalists can use to educate audiences about fake news: "The role of the journalist is to educate people. Through his account on Twitter, for example, through his tweets, he explains such-and-such."

Participant 3 explained why journalists should use their accounts on social media to combat fake news because newspapers cannot correct every fake news story on social media:

He [the journalist] translates his role through his own platform. There are journalists whom the public trusts and they can tell you, according to my sources, that this information is incorrect. Because newspapers cannot talk about every topic published through social media, and this is true, and this is wrong, and this is such. A journalist can publish on his platform or on his own account.

Moreover, Participant 6 spoke about social media's importance in helping journalists translate their roles in society to combat fake news:

> Now the issue is simple: social media are to help you report the news and present your honest point of view or the accurate information you have, especially since you are a role model as a journalist.

Some of the participants mentioned that journalists should follow and support official sources when they use their accounts on social media platforms to apply for their role. Participant 7 said, "When the official websites are published, you publish and support them on social media to clarify. This is your role as a journalist." Participant 1 explained in more detail how journalists could use social media and their accounts by following official sources and creating content that educates the public about the importance of these sources to combat fake news on social media:

> Journalists who can create content for public awareness: their work will be crucial. This is vital content and is not simple in educating the public about following government agencies on social media, such as the Saudi Press Agency as an official source for the state and as an official source of news.

RQ 5: Journalists' Roles in Promoting Media Literacy to Audiences

The fifth question in this study examined the roles that Saudi journalists might play in promoting media literacy to their audiences in order to combat fake news on social media. The data analysis of the interview responses showed that two themes emerged: the knowledge of media literacy and perceiving their role in promoting media literacy.

The knowledge of media literacy. This theme refers to the extent to which the participants were familiar with the expression "media literacy" in Saudi Arabia. In this study, the participants divided into two categories in terms of their knowledge of "media literacy." The first category included participants who had never heard of the term at all, while the second category included those who had heard the term but did not apply it and played no role in it.

The first category of participants included those who had never heard of media literacy. Some participants were surprised when they heard the expression for the first time. Participant 1 mentioned, with a surprised tone, "What is this? Something new for journalists?" Like Participant 1, Participant 6 stated that he was unfamiliar with this expression: "I haven't heard of this. Unfortunately, no." Likewise with Participant 7: "This expression, I have not heard about it."

Conversely, the second category of participants included those with some knowledge of media literacy. They mentioned that they had heard about the expression, but did not believe it was applied in Saudi Arabia. Participant 4 mentioned that he had heard about media literacy while studying in Australia, but he believed that it was not being applied in Saudi Arabia: "Yes… Unfortunately, it is not applied." Similarly, Participant 13 stated that the expression was not widely applied in Saudi Arabia: "Yes, but not very much."

Perceiving their role in promoting media literacy. This theme refers to how the participants perceived their role in promoting media literacy to their audiences as a solution to combat fake news on social media.

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The participants mentioned that promoting media literacy is the duty of official institutions, such as educational and social institutions. They believe that educational and academic institutions, such as schools and universities, are more influential than journalists, because they can teach the public how to deal with, understand, and analyze news from the first grade onwards. Participant 8 stated,

> I expect schools from a young age to teach the child that how he reads the news well, understands it well, analyzes it well, in schools and universities… I do not think that the print press or the official media is the only one that carries around correcting concepts and limits the fake news or the media and social media that manipulate people's feelings and principles.

Some of the participants believed that media literacy should be part of the school curriculum so that students can be taught to combat fake news on social media. Participant 1 said,

> This should be in our curricula at the high school level. I think that students should have media literacy to know how to deal with right and wrong information. The public does not have it; the schools do not have anything that exists now.

Although the participants mentioned that educational institutions should play an essential role in media literacy, they acknowledged that journalists could play a crucial role in promoting media literacy to combat fake news on social media. Participant 14 explained this while stressing the importance of the journalist being a specialist in the field of training: "The role of journalism professionals is very important, especially when

the person is a specialized journalist. I mean, he is a specialist in the field of training, is well-versed in the media. This would be a very great benefit." Additionally, some participants stated that a journalist should be knowledgeable about many aspects in order to promote media literacy to the public. According to Participant 8,

> The journalist also needs to be conversant in many aspects. We are talking about a term that means to be a specialist. We have journalists who are not specialists [yet] who specialize in a specific aspect, but to play an effective role, there must be comprehensiveness in the aspect of media literacy.

Furthermore, other participants stated that journalists must be empowered and provided with the appropriate tools to play an essential role in media literacy. Participant 13 answered whether journalists would play a future role in promoting media literacy to the public: "Whenever you empower journalists and when you give them all the tools they need, I think yes."

The participants stated that the role of the journalist in promoting media literacy should be participatory between journalists and other governmental institutions, including educational, community, and media institutions. Participant 4 stated,

> This [media literacy] is a participatory term, shared by all institutions, societal institutions, educational institutions, and media institutions. Society has institutions which they trust instinctively. Educational institutions are trusted by the society instinctively. Society trusts community institutions by instinct.

Participant 6 spoke succinctly about the importance of collaboration between other institutions and journalists: "Other institutions should cooperate with the press."

The participants exchanged views on the importance of cooperating with other government institutions by allowing journalists to provide training courses for students in schools on how to deal with news in general and fake news in particular. According to Participant 9,

> There could be cooperation in courses some journalists sometimes give at secondary schools, journalism courses, awareness courses on how to deal with news. If he finds a piece of news that he doubts, [he could discuss] what steps he should take in order to be sure of this news.

Chapter Summary

This study explored how Saudi journalists address fake news on social media. The study addressed five research questions: 1) how Saudi journalists define fake news on social media, 2) how they verify fake news on social media, 3) how they perceive their roles in society in response to fake news, 4) what challenges they encounter with regard to debunking fake news, and 5) what roles they might play in promoting media literacy in audiences in order to combat fake news on social media.

To answer these questions, the qualitative research approach was employed. More specifically, a semi-structured interview method was used to collect the data from 14 Saudi journalists from various news outlets. The data were analyzed using the thematic analysis approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2008).

The analysis of the first research question showed that the participants agreed that fake news is inaccurate news, but they differed in providing a unified definition of fake news on social media. Through the data analysis, three main themes emerged related to

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journalists' definition and understanding of fake news. The participants defined fake news on social media based on the sources of fake news, the content of fake news, and when fake news is disseminated. The analysis of the second question showed that the participants used traditional and new verification practices to verify fake news on social media. However, the analysis also highlighted several challenges that participants encountered while verifying fake news on social media. There were two significant challenges identified in the findings: the first theme, internal challenges, included the individual, the routine practices, and organizational challenges; the second theme, external challenges, included social institutions and social systems.

Moreover, the analysis of the fourth question indicated that the participants perceived three roles in society: as disseminators, populist mobilizers, and interpreters. The participants demonstrated that using their social media accounts and newspapers helped them to translate their roles into actions. Furthermore, the fifth question's findings showed that most of the participants had no knowledge of media literacy and no role in promoting media literacy to their audiences. However, the participants expressed a keen interest in playing a role in promoting media literacy in the future by working with educational and social institutions.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This study is the first of its kind that originates from Saudi Arabia and explores

how journalists address fake news published on social media. The study aimed to

determine how Saudi Arabian journalists define and verify fake news circulated on social

media and what challenges they encounter. Additionally, the study sought to explore how

Saudi journalists perceive their role in society in response to fake news and how they

might promote media literacy among audience members in order to combat fake news on

social media.

In the previous chapter, the data analysis of interview responses showed that the

study's participants understood and defined fake news published on social media based

on three elements: the source, the intentions, and the timing. The study's findings also

shed light on the verification practices used by the participants in verifying fake news

spread on social media. The findings indicated that the participants employed traditional

and new verification practices to verify fake news on social media. Furthermore, they

indicated that participants encountered internal and external challenges when verifying

fake news on social media at all levels of the hierarchy of influence.

In addition, the findings found that there were three prominent roles perceived by

the participants in society in response to fake news spread on social media: disseminator,

populist mobilizer, and interpreter. In order to translate their roles into actions, the

findings showed that the participants employed their social media accounts. Although the

findings found that most participants had no knowledge of media literacy and no role in

promoting media literacy to their audiences, Saudi journalists showed a willingness to work with government institutions to promote media literacy to their audiences to combat fake news.

In this chapter, I will discuss the findings from the data analysis of the study's participants. The chapter is structured according to the order of the research questions. The purpose of adopting this structure is to make the discussion of results convenient for the reader to understand, as these results will be presented in the same order in which those in the previous chapter were presented. My purpose is to explain and interpret the key findings of each section in detail as well as relate them to previous studies. I will then discuss the implications of the study findings and how they can be used and benefited from theoretically and practically. Lastly, this chapter will discuss the study's limitations, recommendations, and future research.

Saudi Journalists' Definitions of Fake News

The first question in this study explored how Saudi Arabian journalists define fake news published on social media. It is essential to introduce this chapter by focusing on the first research question to understand how Saudi Arabian journalists define fake news on social media. This research question's findings will help us better understand the other research questions addressed in this study. In other words, through the Saudi journalists' definition of fake news, we can understand how they verify it, the challenges they encounter, and the roles they perceive in society related to combating it.

The absence of an agreed-upon definition of fake news. The current study concluded that there was no consensus among the participants on a specific definition of

fake news on social media. Therefore, the study participants provided different definitions of fake news on social media. It is important to note, however, that this finding is consistent with previous studies that have demonstrated that journalists in various countries define fake news differently. For instance, scholars have shown that journalists in Kenya provide a variety of definitions of fake news, which is consistent with the finding presented in this study (Mutugi, Nyamboga, & Matu, 2020).

The lack of a comprehensive and specific definition of fake news among Saudi Arabian journalists can be attributed to two main reasons. The first reason is the multiplicity of definitions and terms associated with fake news in the literature. As mentioned in the literature review, prior studies on fake news have shown that there are differences of opinion among scholars regarding the definition of fake news. As a result, many studies provide varying definitions of fake news in different contexts (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018). The second reason is that the expression "fake news" is relatively new among scholars and practitioners in journalism. Scholars and researchers began to pay more attention to the concept of fake news in recent years after Western media focused on the concept of fake news following Donald Trump's statements during his 2016 campaign for president of the United States (Hirst, 2017).

Differing opinions among scholars about the expression "fake news" and its novelty among journalism scholars and practitioners worldwide are reflected in how Saudi Arabian journalists define fake news. Therefore, participants in this study have difficulty providing a comprehensive definition of fake news on social media.

The three elements of the definition of fake news. As we have seen, the current study concluded that Saudi journalists provided different explanations of fake news on social media based on three key elements: content, source, and time. The study found that Saudi journalists defined fake news based on their journalistic experience and knowledge rather than on a specific definition in the literature. However, the focus of Saudi journalists on these three elements is likely influenced by the daily journalistic routines and experience they have gained while working as journalists. Journalists rely on several elements to verify social media content, including these elements (Wardle, 2014). More specifically, the finding showed that Saudi journalists are affected by their verification routines at the journalistic routine level regarding the definition of fake news on social media (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

The content intentions of fake news. The present study concluded that the content intentions of fake news were important to the participants when they defined it. The participants understood that fake news has intentions beyond its creation and dissemination on social media. This pattern of findings is consistent with the previous literature, which found that scholars and researchers defined fake news based on the intent of fake news content (Park, Montecchi, Plangger, & Pitt, 2020; Lazer et al., 2018). However, the current study concluded that two crucial intentions appeared in the participants' responses: political and non-political.

Political intentions. The current study concluded that the participants focused on political intentions in explaining fake news on social media. Previous studies indicated similar findings that defined fake news based on political intent (Maldonado, 2019;

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Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018). However, this finding shows a new perspective on how journalists perceive fake news in non-democratic countries. The current study concluded that Saudi journalists defined fake news on social media from two dimensions.

The first dimension is that Saudi journalists defined fake news published on social media as inaccurate content with harmful and malicious intentions toward the Saudi government and its citizens. These intentions include inciting public opinion against the government, calling for demonstrations, and encouraging people to rebel against the state. This finding supports the idea that fake news has a malicious agenda and is intended to influence public opinion or discredit specific individuals seeking to attain political objectives (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018; Klein & Wueller, 2017).

Considering the context of Saudi Arabia, journalists' focus on this dimension in their explanations reflects the influence of the government on the press and journalists. The government as a force at the social system level affects journalists' understanding of fake news on social media (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Saudi journalists are an integral part of the Saudi social system. This leads them to believe that external parties are targeting Saudi Arabia and its government. There is a general belief that the Saudi Arabian government is facing media campaigns via social media. These campaigns employ fake accounts and misleading hashtags on social media to stir public opinion and instigate Saudi citizens to participate in demonstrations to overthrow the government and change the regime.

The second dimension holds that fake news on social media consists of false information leaked by some sources in government institutions to gauge citizens'

reactions to future decisions or legislation. The study participants reported that they had to publish several false news stories that later turned out to be inaccurate, and the government institutions denied it. A possible explanation for this might be the lack of opinion polling in Saudi Arabia, as opposed to democratic nations. Therefore, some government institutions rely on social media to discover people's opinions about and reactions to the economic or social decisions they intend to implement and legislate in the future.

Non-political intentions. The current study concluded that participants defined fake news on social media as false content created and disseminated through social media with the purpose of achieving non-political intentions. The participants perceived these non-political intentions as being both financial and related to entertainment. Financially, Saudi journalists believe that fake news on social media is used by some social media accounts to generate financial profits and increase followers. This finding is consistent with the previous literature, which found that the goals that fake news attempts to achieve included financial or entertainment ones (Maldonado, 2019; Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018).

In the same context, the study's participants compared fake news on social media to yellow journalism, which is known for publishing inaccurate and unsupported information for commercial purposes (Molina, Sundar, Le, & Lee, 2021). The Saudi journalists compared fake news to yellow journalism in terms of publishing sensational and exaggerated stories to attract a large audience segment. This finding is consistent with that of Jahng, Eckert, and Metzger-Riftkin (2021), who found that U.S. journalists, in their definition of fake news, compared fake news to yellow journalism. Furthermore,

this finding supports the idea that Saudi journalists relied on their journalistic knowledge to define fake news on social media. At the individual level, this finding shows that Saudi journalists are influenced by their individual knowledge and experience when they define fake news on social media (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

The source of fake news. This study concluded that the participants defined fake news on social media based on the source of fake news and its importance. The credibility and reliability of the source play a vital role in identifying fake news on social media. At the routine level, this finding indicates that Saudi journalists are influenced by their daily routine news in their definition of fake news (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). However, the current study found that journalists relied on two types of sources to define fake news: the unofficial source and the hostile source.

This study discovered that the participants defined fake news on social media as false content created and disseminated by unofficial sources. Saudi journalists refer to unofficial sources as social media accounts that do not belong to Saudi government institutions or are unauthorized by the government, either within or outside Saudi Arabia. Saudi journalists linked the definition of fake news to the extent that the source's association with the official authorities in Saudi Arabia can be attributed to the press system in the country. According to Siebert et al. (1956), in authoritarian theory, the media system in a country can be grasped by understanding its political system. In Saudi Arabia, the government regulators all media forms. As a result, journalists have become dependent on official sources and the information they provide. Accordingly, this is reflected in how Saudi journalists define and understand fake news on social media.

In the present study, Saudi journalists defined fake news on social media in terms of the source's hostility toward the Saudi government. According to the participants, hostile sources are those individuals' and organizations' social media accounts with an anti-Saudi attitude and an opposition to Saudi Arabia's policies. However, a possible explanation might be that, unlike democratic systems, all forms of media in Saudi Arabia are considered part of the state's social structure. The government employs them to communicate with its citizens, promote propaganda, and combat malicious media campaigns. Therefore, Saudi Arabian journalists see themselves as the first lines of defense of Saudi Arabia and its system of government. This was reflected in their definition of fake news, given that its sources are hostile to Saudi Arabia. Another possible explanation for this is that there are large-scale media campaigns against Saudi Arabia in the media and social media, such as those conducted by Iran and their affiliated groups and militias in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen, as well as by Saudi dissidents living overseas, for example in the United Kingdom and Canada. These influences were reflected in the Saudi journalists' definition of fake news.

The timing of fake news. The current study found that the participants defined fake news based on when it occurs. The findings showed that the participants perceived fake news as a common occurrence during times of crisis or important events. They stated that fake news is widely circulated and promoted during economic, political, and security crises. However, a possible explanation is that Saudi Arabia, like other countries, has faced the spread of fake news on social media regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, studies have shown that fake news is created and disseminated during health

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crises such as COVID-19 (Rocha et al., 2021) and natural crises (Kwanda & Lin, 2020). Therefore, Saudi journalists showed interest in the timing of the spread of fake news by linking it to the timing of crisis, whether health, social, or natural, and also to the timing of important events.

The importance of a general definition of fake news for Saudi journalists. The current study found that Saudi journalists offered various definitions of fake news based on their journalistic experience and knowledge rather than a universal definition of fake news provided by their news organizations. However, the lack of agreement among scholars and practitioners about the definition of fake news poses a significant challenge to journalists when verifying it (Gelfert, 2018). In Saudi Arabia, the study found that it is difficult for journalists to define fake news on social media because there are multiple and varied definitions. Therefore, it may be helpful to have a universal definition of fake news that journalists refer to when addressing it on social media in order to reduce the political, organizational, and routine influence that may affect them.

The current study proposes a unified general definition of fake news on social media. This definition is derived from the various definitions given by the Saudi journalist participants in this study based on their knowledge and experiences of addressing fake news on social media. This study defines *fake news* as inaccurate multimedia content published and circulated by unofficial social media accounts during times of crisis or critical events to obtain political, financial, and entertainment objectives.

The proposed definition is based on the three elements that emerged during the analysis of the participant interviews. In Saudi Arabia, fake news begins to spread when crises and important events occur. An unofficial, hostile, or anonymous source creates false content, whether text, images, or videos, and is intended for political or non-political purposes. This source publishes it on social media, intending to deliver it to the widest possible audience (see Figure 5).
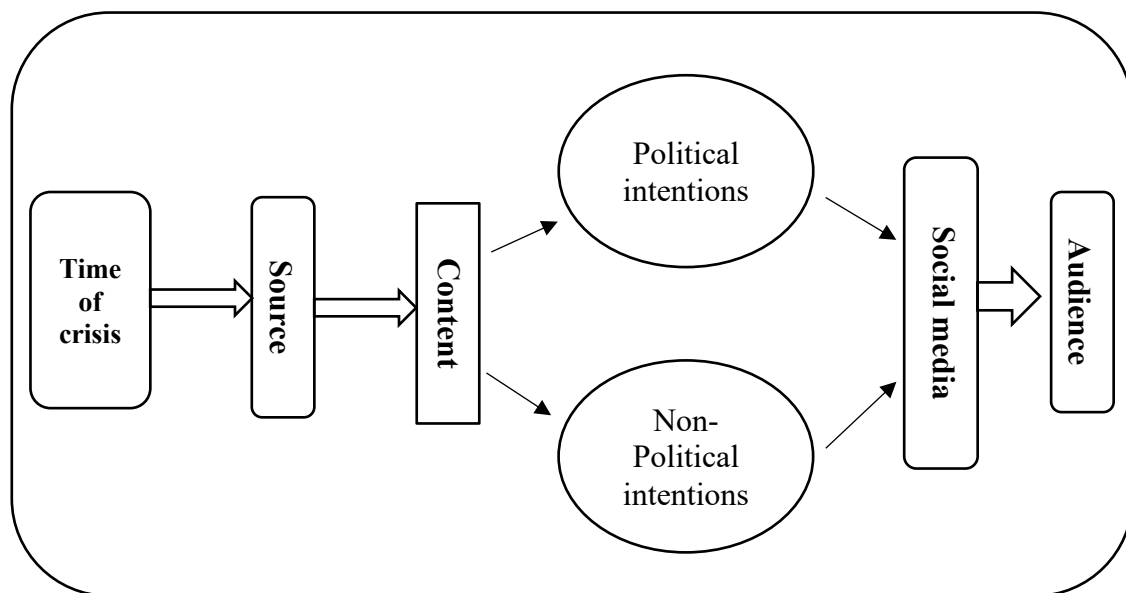

Figure 5. The Saudi Journalists' Definition of Fake News on Social Media

To conclude, the first research question explored how Saudi journalists define fake news on social media. According to the study, there was no standard definition of fake news on social media among Saudi journalists. Rather, they defined fake news on social media based on three factors: the content, the source, and the time. The study proposes a unified definition of fake news on social media that considers the perspective of Saudi journalists.

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In addition, the study concluded that journalists' definitions of fake news were influenced at three levels of the hierarchy of influences: the individual, the routine, and the social system. The discussion of the first research question provides some insight into how Saudi journalists address fake news published on social media. The second research question in this study provides further information about how Saudi journalists address fake news on social media by examining how they verify it on social media.

Verification Practices of Fake News on Social Media

In light of our knowledge of how Saudi journalists define fake news as part of their efforts to address it on social media, it is imperative that we investigate how they verify it. The second research question aimed to explore the verification practices used by Saudi Arabian journalists to verify fake news on social media. The current study concluded that the participants employed two verification practices to detect fake news on social media: *traditional* and *new practices*.

  Traditional verification practices. In this study, traditional verification practices refer to the practices used by journalists to verify fake news on social media offline. The journalists use the basic practices they learned and gained from offline work to verify their sources and information. The current study concluded that traditional verification practices were the most frequently used methods employed by the participants to verify fake news on social media. However, the study also found that while most participants used traditional verification practices, others used new verification practices. These findings are consistent with a study that found that most U.S. journalists use traditional

journalistic tools to verify fake news on social media, while few U.S. journalists used non-traditional tools (Jahng, Eckert, & Metzger-Riftkin, 2021).

The study's findings highlighted that the participants' most common traditional verification practices were source verification, writing style verification, and verification through the gatekeeping process. The study found that all the participants reported learning these practices through their experience working on news production in their newspapers. The findings show that the participants have transferred their practice of verifying information offline to verifying news stories online.

The source of information. The current study concluded that the participants relied on the source of information to verify fake news on social media as a traditional practice they acquired through their journalistic work. In other words, Saudi journalists employ the source of information to verify news stories when they encounter them on social media to determine whether or not it is fake. The participants relied on the source of information to verify fake news on social media by confirming with government sources such as official spokespersons, contacting the journalist's private sources in government institutions, checking with witnesses involved in the event, and visiting the location of the event.

The findings of this study are consistent with the researchers' finding that verifying the source of information was one of the practices journalists use to avoid spreading fake news and disinformation (Himma-Kadakas & Ojamets, 2022; Vu & Saldaña, 2021; Wardle, 2014). Furthermore, Brandtzaeg et al. (2016) indicated that most

of the verification practices used by journalists concerning online content were traditional journalistic practices, including verification of the source of information.

The reliance of Saudi journalists on the source to verify fake news on social media can be explained by linking it to their definition of fake news. Saudi journalists showed the significance of the source in their definitions of fake news. Relying on the source of information is a practice that journalists acquire from their first day of work until the end of their careers. Thus, this practice has become part of who they are and is reflected in their responses.

The present study found that the participants rely heavily on official sources as credible sources to verify fake news. The official sources include official institutions and official spokespersons. This finding aligns with a previous study that found Indonesian journalists relied on official sources as crucial sources to verify controversial, high-risk fake news (Kwanda & Lin, 2020). In light of this finding, there are some possible explanations for the reliance of Saudi journalists on official sources to verify fake news on social media.

The first possible explanation is that the government in Saudi Arabia, as a major force within the social system, plays a crucial role in regulating information and media, which is reflected in Saudi journalists' verification practices (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). In discussing the first question, Saudi journalists defined fake news as any content issued by an unofficial source. Once again, Saudi journalists showed great interest in official sources when fact-checking, indicating that they were affected by government control over media and information in Saudi Arabia (Almaina, 2019). Therefore, Saudi

journalists regularly refer to official sources, especially spokespersons. The journalists in this study stated that their first step was to contact the official source. For example, Participant 8 mentioned, "As a journalist, it is my duty to communicate with the official institution in order to verify the information that is circulated in social media, whether it is correct or it isn't real."

A second possible explanation for understanding journalists' reliance on official sources is that Saudi journalists tend to respect a particular hierarchy of sources in which they ascribe more credibility to official sources than to unofficial ones. According to the "hierarchy of credibility," a concept formulated by sociologist Howard Baker (1967), persons of higher rank and status are considered more reliable than those of lower rank and status (Paulussen & Harder, 2014). The journalists mentioned relying heavily on official spokespersons, government accounts, and the Saudi Press Agency to verify fake news spread on social media.

The third possible explanation for the reliance of Saudi journalists on official sources to verify fake news on social media is that they find this practice is a shortcut in light of the economic difficulties they face as journalists. The journalists referred to the financial challenges facing their news organizations, which led to a reduction in rewards and incentives, leading in turn to a decrease in the desire of journalists to exert more effort in verifying fake news, which is discussed in the next question. Consequently, they are content to deny or prove what has been provided to them by official sources.

Journalistic writing style. The current study concluded that participants verified fake news on social media by employing professional journalistic writing skills. They

relied on their experiences writing news stories over several years to distinguish between real and fake news. Saudi journalists applied several techniques to verify fake news on social media. These techniques included news structure, misspellings, and wording. It should be noted, however, that the participating journalists believed these techniques were not 100% accurate: they merely provide indications that the news was inaccurate.

These findings were unexpected given the lack of studies focused on journalists using their journalistic writing skills as a technique to verify the practice of fake news. It is generally acknowledged that journalists value professional journalistic writing and editorial writing in their news articles. Newspapers and print media journalists rely heavily on words in their daily work. Thus, the study participants relied on this practice to verify fake news on social media. This finding demonstrates how journalists are influenced by their daily journalistic work at the routine level, focusing on the editorial formulation and journalistic writing style of news stories (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

The gatekeeping process. The current study concluded that participants referred to the traditional gatekeeping process as a practice for verifying fake news on social media. The participants relied on the gates in the gatekeeping process to verify fake news. They referred to their colleagues and verification departments in newspapers to verify fake news on social media.

This result is expected because journalists generally rely on press institutions' editing and verification departments to correct their mistakes, especially when they are beginners. Journalists acquire this practice through the work of daily journalistic routines

that influence Saudi journalists to detect fake information on social media. This shows

that daily journalistic routines influence Saudi journalists (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

According to the gatekeeping theory, journalists choose which news stories to

select and which to reject based on the quality of the news (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

Therefore, this process allows Saudi journalists to determine whether the news is true or

false. During this process, journalists rely on a department or colleagues to verify the

news they have gathered from social media. However, some fake news is likely to get

through the gates. In other words, some journalists may rely on other journalists to check

fake news gathered from social media, who in turn rely on other journalists and so on,

thus facilitating the passage of fake news.

The phases of traditional verification of fake news on social media. The

current study suggests that Saudi journalists verify fake news on social media using

traditional practices. It is important to note that these traditional practices are divided into

three phases (see Figure 6). In the first phase, journalists verify fake news through its

writing style. They examine the structure of the news and the mistakes in spelling and

wording. The journalists also stated that this practice provides them with an indication of

whether the news is true or false. In the second phase, the journalist verifies the news

source by communicating with the government agency, private sources, or witnesses, or

by going to the event location. In the last phase, in the event that the previous two phases

prove ineffective, the journalists verify fake news by passing it on to their colleagues and

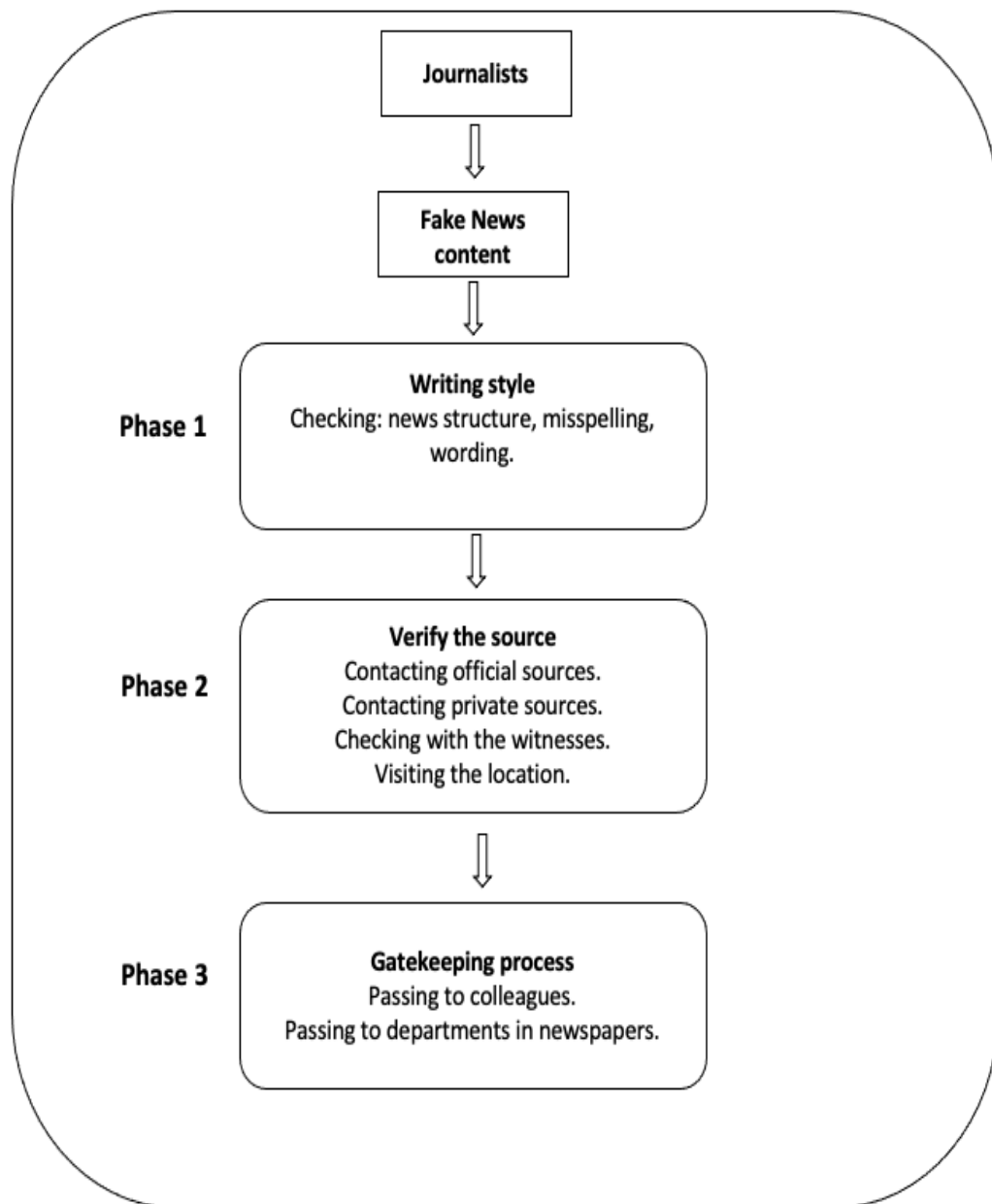the verification departments at their newspapers.

Figure 6. The Phases of Traditional Verification of Fake News on Social Media.

New verification practices. The current study concluded that a few participants used new verification practices to verify fake news circulated via social media. In this study, new verification practices refer to practices that rely on internet-based tools to verify fake news circulated via social media. Furthermore, the study found that the most critical new verification practices for the participants *were official websites and social media*, *search engines*, and *visual verification.*

Official websites and social media. The present study found that the first internet-based tools used by the participants were official institutions' websites and social media accounts, such as official institutions' sites and accounts, newspapers sites, and Saudi news agencies' sites and accounts, to verify fake news on social media. They employed official websites and social media accounts to check if the official institution posted any statement regarding the news circulated via social media. They searched and checked the official websites and social media accounts to verify whether the news was real or fake.

This finding partially aligns with previous studies that found that journalists in the United States check news stories on social media accounts to detect whether they are from reliable or questionable sources (Jahng et al., 2021). In contrast, Saudi journalists only check news stories through official social media accounts. A possible explanation for these results may be the difference in media systems in the two countries as well as the influence of the Saudi government on the media and journalists.

It is worth noting that the participants focused only on official sources when using these tools. This focus on official sources seems to be adopted from the traditional verification practices mentioned earlier. Therefore, this supports the idea of

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normalization, which occurs when journalists adopt new technologies only to incorporate them into their routines and norms (Singer, 2005).

As mentioned in the literature review, studies found that journalists worldwide use social media for their news routines (Powers & Vera-Zambrano, 2018; Rauchfleisch et al., 2017). In this practice, social media provides journalists with some advantages, such as ease of access and the ability to verify false news on social media. On the other hand, there are also some disadvantages of social media that only a journalist specialized in technology may be aware of. Official websites and social media accounts could be hacked by some entities and individuals who may distribute fake news for malicious purposes. For example, according to Reuters, the state-run Qatar News Agency and Qatar's Twitter feed were hacked, and false statements were allegedly published, contributing to a rift with other Gulf States (Browning, 2017).

Search engines. The study concluded that some participants used the Google search engine as a tool to verify fake news on social media by checking other news sites to verify the authenticity of the news. There are several ways in which they used this tool to search by headlines, keywords, or part of the text of the news spread on social media.

It is interesting to note that this practice is widespread among ordinary people rather than among professionals in the field of journalism. The journalist's reliance on search engines appears to be a primitive means of verifying fake news. Hence this practice was mentioned by only some of the participants. One of the possible explanations for its use is that it is an easy and effortless method for the journalist to use compared to other, more professional methods that require specific skills. There appears

to be a resurgence of this practice due to a lack of financial resources in news organizations and the inadequate training for journalists. This practice, however, may result in journalists publishing false information, as search engines employ biased algorithms (Van Leuven et al., 2018). In fact, Google recently launched tools known as The Fact Check Tools, including Fact Check Explorer and Fact Check Markup Tool. Thus fact-checkers, journalists, and researchers can use both tools to simplify their work (Fact Check Tools, n.d.).

Visual verification. The current study concluded that very few participants used websites and verified photos circulating on social media. Participants used Google Image Search to reverse image search and TinEye.com for visual verification. Saudi journalists use these tools to ensure that images have not been manipulated and also to gather information about them.

These findings are consistent with previous studies indicating that journalists used Google Image Search and TinEye.com, a fact-checking service for visual content, to verify images (Jahng et al., 2021; Brandtzaeg et al., 2016). This practice, as I mentioned, is limited to a small number of Saudi journalists. While these tools are not complicated to some extent, their non-prevalence can be attributed to a language barrier. This challenge will be addressed when discussing the question related to the challenges encountered by Saudi journalists in verifying fake news on social media.

The participants in the study believed that there is chaos in social media regarding photos and videos in terms of the reliability and verifiability of the content (Zhang & Li, 2020). Thus, journalists face problems when verifying visual content. In addition, they

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acknowledged that dealing with visual verification requires high skills that they do not have due to a lack of training and to relying on sections in newspapers to check and ensure that these sections exist.

The Challenges Journalists Encounter in Combating Fake News on Social Media

The third research question in this study sought to identify the challenges faced by Saudi journalists in debunking fake news on social media. The study concluded that the participants encountered internal and external challenges while combating fake news on social media. The internal challenges in this study focused on three levels: individual, routine, and organizational, while the external challenges concentrated on two levels: social institution and social system challenges.

Shoemaker and Vos (2009) developed the hierarchy of influence model to understand the factors shaping media content and influencing journalists. They pointed out that the hierarchy of influence model includes five levels that affect communicators and news content production at both macro and micro levels. The five levels include individual, routine, organizational, social institution, and social system. However, in this study, I employed this model to gain further in-depth insights into the challenges faced by Saudi journalists when verifying fake news content on social media.

Individual challenges. The current study concluded that the participants faced challenges at the individual level when confronting fake news on social media. The findings found that journalists in general and inexperienced journalists in particular complained about a lack of technical skills to verify fake news on social media. The findings also showed that a lack of English language skills is a challenge for journalists

when dealing with fact-checking programs and services in the digital world. Participants in this study attributed this lack of skills to journalists' lack of academic knowledge and training related to combating fake news on social media.

According to Shoemaker and Vos (2009), several factors influence journalists at the individual level of analysis, including journalists' characteristics, professional roles, news values, and demographic characteristics. They argue that journalists' decisions to accept or reject news items are also affected by factors such as self-confidence, age, education, religion, income, biases, journalistic beliefs, attitudes, and expectations. In the case of Saudi Arabia, the findings showed that journalists' academic and professional training qualifications play a crucial role in combating fake news on social media. More specifically, technical skills and knowledge of a second language are among the skills a Saudi journalist needs most to combat fake news on social media.

These findings support the idea that journalists face challenges related to the credibility and verifiability of user-generated social media content since they are unfamiliar with discovering, verifying, and filtering such content (Zhang & Li, 2020; Wardle et al., 2014). Scholars emphasized that journalists must become familiar with the practical features of digital tools to use them effectively (Himma-Kadakas & Ojamets, 2022). Furthermore, scholars stated that many journalists lack the adequate digital and technical skills to verify online sources, such as techniques and tools to verify geolocation or track down a video's original source (Van Leuven et al., 2018).

In the case of Saudi Arabia, the journalists blamed their lack of skills to verify fake news on the education system, particularly the universities' media and journalism

departments. In the United States, journalism faculty report being stressed by having to keep up with technological advancements (Voakes, Beam, & Ogan, 2002). Journalism departments in Saudi Arabia are in no better condition than those in developed Western countries. Therefore, participants in this study reported not having received sufficient education or training to verify fake news on social media. Internet technology and social media are rapidly evolving and changing, making it difficult for faculty members and departments of journalism and media in developed countries to keep up with them, let alone in developing countries. Therefore, several news organizations worldwide, such as *The Wall Street Journal*, have begun training journalists in detecting fake news on social media using advanced techniques (Marconi & Daldrup, 2018).

In addition to a lack of technical skills, English language skills have emerged as a challenge for Saudi journalists when verifying fake news on social media. Most websites and programs for fact-checking on the internet rely heavily on the English language and English content. Saudi journalists speak Arabic, the official first language in the country, and those who use these sites have studied abroad, such as Participant 10, who studied in the U.K., and Participant 5, who studied in Australia. Furthermore, the English language is very important for journalists to verify the authenticity of the news circulated in social media, especially those attributed to Western sources such as *The Washington Post* or *The New York Times*.

Routines challenges. Routines are "patterned, routinized, repeated practices and forms that media workers use to do their jobs" (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, p. 105). Routines are essential for selecting or rejecting news items during the news selection

process. However, the current study concluded that the Saudi journalists in this study encountered challenges related to their journalistic routine while combating fake news on social media. The study found two challenges related to their journalistic routine: *a lack of interest in correcting fake news* and *devoting time and effort*.

The first challenge the study found was that Saudi journalists expressed a lack of interest in correcting fake news on social media during their daily news routines. The journalists attributed this lack of interest in correcting fake news to two main factors. The first factor is related to their newspaper's unwritten editorial policy, which requires journalists to ignore fake news on social media and work on more in-depth news stories. The journalists mentioned that editors-in-chief on the editorial board of their newspaper asked them to cover news stories that could be expanded upon and to write more about them. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) argue that the routine level concerns patterns of behavior and working methods that shape practice, including legislation and regulations that are not stipulated or articulated directly. The current study showed that unwritten editorial policies influenced Saudi journalists at this routine level. In Kwanda and Lin's (2020) study of Indonesian journalists, similar findings were reported regarding the effect of editorial decisions on selecting or ignoring fake news on social media. The study stated that editorial decisions play an important role when selecting fake news to be fact-checked and also in assessing its spread and importance. Therefore, it is no surprise that Saudi journalists ignore fake news published on social media, not out of apathy, but rather to please their superiors at work and complete their assigned tasks.

Another factor contributing to journalists' lack of interest in fake news on social media is the lack of financial incentives for correcting or verifying fake news. News organizations do not provide financial incentives to journalists to correct fake news due to the editorial policy of ignoring fake news. In addition, news organizations in Saudi Arabia are also experiencing financial difficulties as a result of shrinking newsroom sizes, paying fewer salaries, and reducing the number of newspaper pages, which will be discussed in more detail at the organizational level. These difficulties limit a news organization's ability to compensate journalists for combating fake news. Saldaña and Vu (2021) argue that working conditions significantly impact what journalists do when combating fake news. They mentioned that Journalists are lacking the time to engage in checking fake news published on social media due to shrinking newsroom sizes and increasing journalists' workloads. In the case of Saudi Arabia, journalists get paid lower salaries, and most of them are part-time journalists with other jobs such as teaching in schools.

The second challenge related to the routine level is devoting more time and effort to verifying fake news on social media. The study found that Saudi journalists encountered a challenge in this respect, highlighting that the proliferation of fake news on social media influences journalists' daily routines, requiring them to spend more time and effort in addition to their regular journalistic duties. Saudi journalists highlighted that they could not verify all the fake news circulating on social media because of its quantity, which would require them to expend more time and effort in doing so. According to

Haque et al. (2020), journalists believe they cannot verify the vast quantity of information circulating daily via the internet.

Furthermore, scholars report that journalists have complained that verifying fake news on social media consumes too much of their time. In fact in many cases journalists simply do not have the time to verify their news stories (Brandtzaeg et al., 2016). Thus, in light of the sheer amount of information to verify on social media, the newspaper's editorial policy, and the lack of material incentives, the findings show that Saudi journalists are disinterested in verifying fake news published on social media.

Organizational challenges. Shoemaker and Vos (2009) argue that it is important to study the news selection process by examining the news organizations that employ journalists and that set the rules and regulations for managing the organization and its journalists. They found that numerous factors distinguish one news organization from another, including management styles, size, goals, staffing arrangements, news policies, and newsroom culture. However, the current study found that Saudi journalists experienced challenges at the organizational level, and that these challenges involved two main elements: *management* and *economic* factors.

The present study found that Saudi journalists faced management challenges in their newspapers related to combating fake news on social media. They complained that their newspapers faced difficulties adapting to the rapid technological development in the media field. This, therefore, was reflected in journalists' work verifying fake news on social media. The journalists expressed concern about the lack of a specialized fact-

checking department for fake news on social media in general and visual content in particular.

Shoemaker and Vos (2009) pointed out that journalists have noted the significance of the organizational context in which news production is integrated with technology. They highlighted the impact of technology on journalists and the newsroom reporting practices of news organizations that adopt the technology. However, there are indications for journalists participating in this study that the lack of adequate technology to verify fake news on social media in their newspapers makes it challenging to detect and verify fake news. The importance of fact-checking departments in newspapers lies in bridging the gap in journalists' lack of academic and practical qualifications to deal with the content of disinformation on social media.

The study highlighted the challenges associated with newspaper policies in *limiting journalists from using their social media accounts to correct fake news* and *hiring new journalists*. Shoemaker and Voss (2009) assert that the written and unwritten policies of news organizations influence journalists and their work in the news selection process. They also state that the traditional management style that relies on authoritarian control and an inflexible chain of command affects the work of journalists. In the case of Saudi Arabia, the editor-in-chief is primarily responsible before the government for the press, its employees, and what is published in their newspaper. Editors-in-chief sometimes impose stricter censorship than the Ministry of Information to avoid being held accountable or losing their jobs (Al Maghlooth, 2014). Therefore, some journalists receive verbal instructions from their superiors as to what they should and should not post

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on their own social media accounts. However, journalists believe that this policy affects their work in debunking fake news on social media because it slows down how fast they can confront false information with the correct information in the same place it came from: social media.

Another policy that Saudi journalists have identified as challenging when confronting fake news on social media is the employment policy in Saudi news organizations. According to Shoemaker and Vos (2009), one of the greatest strengths of a journalistic organization is the ability to hire and fire because it shapes its future and changes its past. In recent years, news organizations in Saudi Arabia have relied on austerity measures to deal with economic pressures. Among these measures is reducing the number of its employees and the size of spaces and pages in the newspaper. Many Saudi journalists work for these newspapers part-time and must also hold two or more other jobs to compensate for their low salaries at the newspapers.

The average monthly cost of living for a single person in Saudi Arabia is 796.8 dollars without rent. Considering the cost of living in Saudi Arabia, a reporter's starting salary is only about $920 per month. Many Saudi journalists jokingly call it "the beggar's job" (Pintak & Ginges, 2009). Thus, the participants believe that the work of a journalist who works part-time and holds more than one job might lack quality.

The journalists complained about the economic challenges they encountered as a result of the financial crisis at Saudi newspapers. Due to the economic crisis, Saudi Arabian newspapers adopted several financial policies by hiring part-time journalists, offering low salaries, and reducing financial incentives. Consequently, in order to make a

decent living, journalists began working for several newspapers at once, which affected their work and reduced their motivation to debunk fake news.

Several studies have shown that Saudi newspapers face financial crises associated with a significant decrease in advertising, as advertisers have turned to social media to reach a wider audience (Almaina, 2019). Newspapers also depend heavily on government aid, which has decreased in recent years due to the new policy of the Saudi government to cut spending and reduce dependence on the government (Rugh, 2004). Therefore, Saudi newspapers have resorted to shrinking newsrooms and hiring part-time journalists at lower salaries. They have also decreased the number of pages to 12, while in previous years newspapers comprised 48 pages.

These financial pressures have influenced Saudi journalists when confronted with fake news on social media. The journalists in this study indicated that fake news requires more time and effort to verify; however, the part-time journalist does not have enough time to do so. Also, the participants mentioned the lack of training provided by news organizations to detect and verify fake news on social media. This is likely a result of the austerity measures adopted by newspapers to handle their budget deficits.

Social institution challenges. The current study concluded that Saudi journalists highlighted three main factors at the level of social institutions that influenced their efforts to combat fake news on social media. The study found that the three components relate to *government*, *audiences*, and *social media influencers*.

The current study concluded that the government has an important influence on journalists in terms of debunking fake news on social media. The results showed that the

biggest challenge for journalists when confronting fake news at this level was the lack of corporate communication departments, public relations departments, and spokespersons in government institutions. Shoemaker and Vos (2009) argue that government and public relations influence journalists during the news selection process.

As mentioned in the discussion of the second question, one of the most important traditional practices for verifying fake news on social media noted by journalists was checking with official sources. Journalists resort to spokespersons and public relations departments in government institutions to verify the authenticity of the news circulating on social media. However, journalists complained that spokespersons and public relations departments in government institutions are delayed in responding to their inquiries about fake news on social media, resulting in fake news spreading widely. These delays took many forms, including not responding to their calls promptly, not answering their questions for days, or postponing answers until a press conference is held. Furthermore, some spokespersons or public relations departments keep some information from journalists relating to the news circulated via social media.

These findings support the argument of Rugh (2004) and Mellor (2011) that despite the various systems of governance in Arab countries, the media continues to be organized by the governments. Saudi journalists have complained that some government institutions regulate information and its flow, thus determining what is allowed to be published and what is not. Furthermore, this finding corroborates Almaina (2019), who stated that in the absence of a freedom of information law, some Saudi institutions select the information sources that journalists can access to information.

This finding can be explained by the fact that government institutions in non-democratic regimes are highly bureaucratic. Public relations departments in government institutions spend a great deal of time obtaining official permits from the top managers to respond to journalists and provide them with the necessary information. Spokespersons and public relations personnel do not want to be responsible for the information they will disclose and for which they may be held accountable. Another reason explaining these findings is government institutions' preference for social media influencers over traditional journalists. I will elaborate on this topic after discussing the audience factor.

Another challenge related to the level of social institutions is the audience. Journalists spoke about how audiences influence their work when confronting fake news on social media. According to Shoemaker and Vos (2009), audiences influence journalists and the news selection process. The findings showed that the public criticized journalists on social media accounts when they corrected fake news circulated on social media. They also highlighted that audiences influenced some journalists to post fake news. In other words, due to audience pressure, some journalists might post fake news content without verifying it. This finding supports Al maghlooth's study (2013), which found that several journalists are also willing to follow the direction set by their audiences.

This finding is consistent with those of Saldaña and Vu (2022), who found that journalists are attacked by the public when correcting fake news on social media because this practice goes against the beliefs of certain groups. In the case of Saudi Arabia, journalists have expressed concern about the criticism they face from the public, which

may include attacks and harassment. These findings reflect those of Balod and Hameleers (2019), who also found that Filipino journalists faced challenges regarding audience criticism.

An explanation for this finding is that the recent and rapid development of social media platforms has provided the public with many advantages. Social media audiences differ from the old audience for traditional journalism. The digital audience is active and highly involved with the news circulating in social media, communicates with journalists in various fields, and criticizes what they publish. Being anonymous and registering under any name enables the audience to attack journalists and reach them rapidly via comments or private messages. Therefore, many journalists are affected by the harassment they receive about what they publish. According to the participants, some journalists do not even open the messages they receive through social media platforms fearing harassment and bullying.

The study found that social media influencers in Saudi Arabia influence journalists' work when addressing fake news on social media. Saudi journalists spoke about the preference of government organizations for influencers on social media over their accounts. Journalists rely heavily on government agencies, in particular to verify fake news on social media. Therefore, government organizations' communication with social media influencers by providing them with information at the expense of ignoring journalists is a critical challenge for journalists. There is a heavy reliance on traditional practices to verify fake news on social media. One of the important traditional practices mentioned by the journalists in this study is verification through government sources.

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Therefore, journalists believe that ignoring them at the expense of influencers increases the gap between journalists and the existing government organizations, as shown in the challenges related to the government factor.

These are unexpected results due to the absence of studies indicating the influence of social media influencers on journalists and their work in collecting and verifying news. However, the journalists in this study pointed out the important role of influencers in widening the gap between themselves and government institutions. This can be attributed to government institutions hiring influencers as a result of the decline of Saudi newspapers among the public and their replacement by social media platforms. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is one of the countries in the Middle East that uses the most social media. Therefore, Saudi government institutions effectively employ social media influencers to reach the public.

Social system challenges. The current study concluded that cultural traditions and customs in Saudi Arabia influence the work of Saudi journalists when addressing fake news on social media. The findings indicated that the participants preferred not to correct fake news if it negatively affected the reputation of individuals, families, or tribes in Saudi society. The findings also showed that if participants find fake news on social media that needs to be corrected and could affect some families or tribes, they either avoid it or correct it by hiding the names of personalities and families by using initials.

Shoemaker and Vos's hierarchical influences model (2009) addressed the social system level, which includes social structures, ideology, and culture. The researchers argue that culture plays a vital role in news selection, given the influence of culture on

the types of items allowed to pass through a gate. Culture is defined by Schwartz (2004) as the "rich complex of meanings, beliefs, practices, symbols, norms and values prevalent among people in a society" (p. 192; as cited in Hanusch, 2015). Cultures can be divided into national, organizational, subcultures, and cultural communities. Often, culture is defined as a set of shared social practices at the national level in the context of social systems. A logical explanation for culture's influence on the news is that journalists embrace meaning systems derived from their cultural surroundings (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

A study conducted in New Zealand by Hanusch (2015) found that Indigenous journalism is influenced by Māori cultural values such as respecting others and adhering to cultural protocols. The journalists admitted that their culture influenced their work. Moreover, the process of separating their values from their work was extremely difficult. However, as a conservative Islamic society, Saudi Arabia places a high value on the family and tribe, and on the customs and traditions observed by its members. One of the journalistic norms in Saudi Arabia is that the names of individuals remain anonymous in reports of accidents and legal cases, with initials replacing names in order to maintain the reputation and privacy of the families involved. This is in contrast to the Western press, where the names of individuals involved in the news are explicitly stated.

It is noteworthy that Arab countries emphasize community values, whereas Western countries emphasize individualism. Therefore, the findings found that Saudi journalists tend to avoid correcting fake news circulated via social media that may cause harm to some families or tribes in society. Culture can provide Saudi journalists with

opportunities and constraints in terms of what is published and what is not published concerning fake news.

Role Perceptions of Saudi Journalists in Response to Fake News on Social Media

The fourth question addressed in this study focused on the role perceptions of Saudi Arabian journalists in society regarding fake news on social media. According to Donsbach (2008), the concept of role perceptions is important in describing how journalists from different cultures and media systems perceive their work and its role in society. The fourth question aimed to explore two dimensions: the first was about discovering the role perceptions of Saudi journalists in society in response to fake news on social media, while the second focused on how Saudi journalists might translate these roles into actions. However, one should keep in mind that journalists' perceptions and their translating their roles into actions depend on what they believe they should do.

The role perceptions of Saudi journalists in society. Scholars have mentioned several role perceptions of journalists within society, including interpretive, disseminator, adversarial, and populist-mobilizer (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986, 1996). The current study concluded that there were three role perceptions that Saudi journalists referred to when discussing their role in society in response to combating the spread of fake news on social media: disseminator, populist mobilizer, and interpretative. These role perceptions of Saudi journalists expand with each role they play. These roles begin with the simple role of disseminating news and conveying the truth. After that, the role of the disseminator is developed with the addition of interpretation and explanation. Then, the role expands to

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the populist mobilizer, who is not satisfied with conveying and interpreting the truth but contributes to educating the public (see Figure 7).
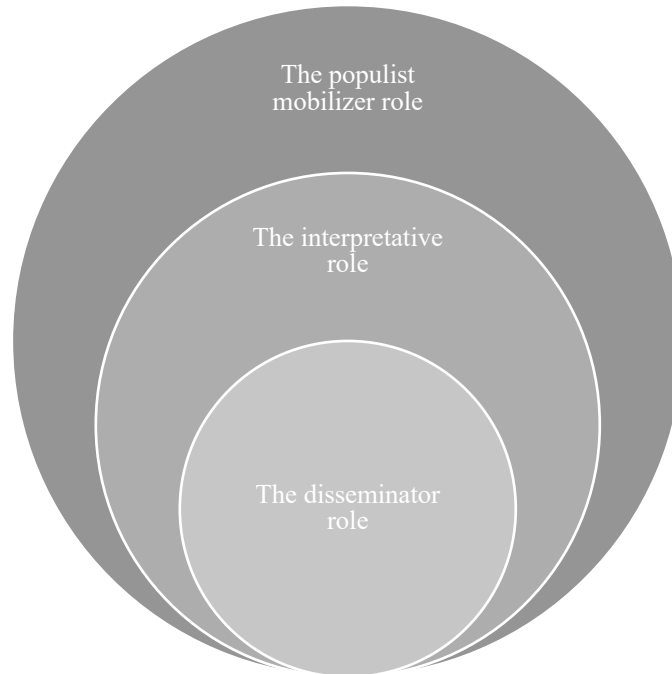

Figure 7. The Role Perceptions of Saudi Journalists in Response to Fake News on Social Media.

The disseminator role. The present study concluded that the most common role Saudi journalists perceived in society regarding combating fake news on social media was the disseminator role. The disseminator is responsible for delivering information to the public (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986, 1996). The findings showed that Saudi journalists believed the importance of this role is driven by the fact that they are a reliable source for the public. The journalists viewed their responsibility as being only to report news based on facts and presenting it to the public. In this role, the journalists relied on the evidence they had when they combat fake news on social media.

These findings are in line with a previous study conducted in the Philippines that found that the disseminator role was one of many role perceptions held by Filipino journalists. The researchers found that journalists believed in a more rigorous vetting process, correcting and debunking misinformation (Balod & Hameleers, 2021). However, the current study found that Saudi journalists emphasize the importance of rigorous verification as well as the presence of facts to combat fake news online. Unlike in Western countries, where previous studies indicated that journalists there perceive their role as a watchdog for governments in combating fake news and questioning its effects, Saudi journalists are working align with the government.

One possible explanation for the results of this study may be the difference between the press systems in Western countries in the Middle East. As mentioned in previous studies, the press systems in the Middle East, and in Saudi Arabia in particular, are authoritarian, whereby the government regulates the media and the flow of information. In these countries, a journalist is merely a disseminator of the information received from the government or official sources. It is thus no surprise that the disseminator role was the most common among Saudi journalists.

It is important to note that the findings indicated that Saudi journalists who perceived their role as disseminators tend to be influenced by their journalistic routines, as evidenced by their definition of fake news. The journalists demonstrated their commitment to objectivity, as they adhered to the evidence and facts in their news stories in order to counter the false news spread on social media. Accordingly, journalists believe their obligation to provide the facts helps the public decide how best to handle

fake news. They aimed to present only the facts and then allow the public to interpret them as they see fit.

The populist mobilizer role. The current study concluded that Saudi journalists perceived their role in society when confronting fake news on social media as populist mobilizers. The populist mobilizer focuses on journalists who perceive their role as creating awareness among the public, allowing ordinary citizens to express try to form their opinions (Balod & Hameleers, 2021; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986, 1996). Saudi journalists realized the importance of their role in creating awareness among audiences about the misleading and fake information spread on social media. Thus, they believed that correcting fake news and reporting the facts as they are is not sufficient, and that the public must be involved in combating fake news on social media. Therefore, Saudi journalists focused on one part of this role: raising public awareness about combating fake news circulated via social media.

This finding partially supports the results of Klemm, Das, and Hartmann (2019), who found that one of the role perceptions that journalists perceive most about themselves in times of crisis was as populist mobilizers. In the case of Saudi Arabia, fake news spreads widely during crises and important events, as journalists noted in this study. Therefore, the journalists view themselves as populist mobilizers whose responsibility is to create and spread awareness about fake news on social media during crises and not merely to report the news as it is.

The interpretative role. In the interpretive role, journalists explain and analyze events and issues to the public so they can make sense of them (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986,

1996). The current study concluded that some Saudi journalists perceived their role in society as interpreters when debunking fake news on social media. The journalists believed that correcting fake news by publishing denials is not enough. In light of technological and informational advances, journalists realize that the public is more aware and requires further interpretation and explanation.

These findings are consistent with other research that found that journalists realized the importance of providing context for factual information and the need for value-added information in combating fake news. In addition, they go beyond simply providing facts by providing narratives that describe the information (Balod & Hameleers, 2021). A possible explanation for this result is that Saudi journalists reported in this study that among the challenges they faced when combating fake news on social media is the editorial policy that requires them to expand upon news stories. It is clear that journalists' perception of their roles as interpreters may be influenced by the daily news routine.

Translating the role perceptions into actions. The current study concluded that Saudi journalists believed that they might be able to translate their role perceptions in combating fake news into action by using social media platforms. They argued that they should use their social media accounts to verify and correct fake news. This finding supports the results that indicate that professional journalists across the globe increasingly utilize social media (Lasorsa, Lewis, & Holton, 2012; Hermida, 2012). Saudi journalists, whether traditional or online, showed interest in the importance of social

media in their daily work, which in turn was reflected in their responses to how to implement their role perceptions.

Several studies have demonstrated that journalists use a variety of social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram (Santana & Hopp, 2016; Saldaña et al., 2017; Jurkowitz & Gottfried, 2022). The current study found that journalists focused on Twitter as a crucial platform in social media to combat fake news. The reason for focusing on this platform is that Twitter is one of the most utilized social media platforms in Saudi Arabia. According to a recent study by Alharethi (2020), Twitter is among Saudi journalists' most important and frequently used social media platforms. Therefore, journalists recognize its importance in communicating with their audience and implementing their roles as disseminators, populist mobilizers, and interpreters.

It should be noted that in this study, Saudi journalists suggested in their responses how they might use social media to fulfill their roles in combating fake news. Several suggestions were offered that journalists might use on their social media accounts. In the disseminator role, for example, journalists might tweet or retweet news from government accounts and official media to debunk the fake news spread via social media. Journalists follow different sources more easily through social media, especially Twitter, according to Powers and Vera-Zambrano (2018). Furthermore, through their own Twitter accounts, journalists can act as populist mobilizers by spreading awareness about the dangers of fake news to the public. In their interpretive role, journalists, via their accounts, might provide more information and interpret the fake news spread on social media.

It is important to note that there are two possible reasons why Saudi journalists think about using social media platforms to translate their roles into actions. Firstly, the large number of fake news stories spread on social media makes it difficult for newspapers to correct every one of them. Therefore, journalists believe that social media is the most appropriate tool for its speed of reaching audiences and correcting a great deal fake news. Secondly, the results of this study also found that the press organizations in Saudi Arabia were not interested in correcting every fake news story on social media. Thus, to compensate for the press organizations' disinterest in combating fake news, Saudi journalists consider social media an effective means to implement their roles in combating fake news. Willnat and Weaver (2018) reported that journalists consider social media a tool that can enhance the job of traditional newsmaking, enabling them to report faster, access sources more readily, and conduct their research more effectively.

Barriers to translating role perceptions into actions. In response to the third research question, Saudi journalists mentioned many of the challenges they faced when addressing fake news on social media. In this study, I found that two levels of influence affect journalists' ability to translate their role perceptions into actions. First, journalists' capability to translate their role perceptions into actions is affected at the organizational level (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). The unwritten policies of some Saudi newspapers that limit journalists' use of their social media accounts affect the implementation of their role perceptions. As a result, many journalists are forced to separate their personal social media accounts from their work as journalists to avoid publishing any material that might expose themselves or their newspaper to legal liability.

Second, journalists' role perceptions are negatively influenced at the level of social institutions (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Many journalists have complained about social media influencers and how they affect their work in debunking fake news. Journalists have trouble delivering their message to the public because the influencers on social media have numerous followers, while journalists have very few followers on social media. Consequently, journalists' role as disseminators of news and information has been challenged and, in some cases, undermined due to the popularity of influencers. In addition, social media influencers have eroded the role of journalists as populist mobilizers and advocates of awareness about fake news published on social media.

Journalists' Roles in Promoting Media Literacy to Audiences

As part of the current study, I sought to explore the knowledge and perceptions of Saudi journalists concerning media literacy and how they can promote it among Saudi Arabian residents. Several studies have shown that it is very important to promote media literacy to combat fake news on social media and that journalists and the journalism community must play a crucial role in the fight against fake news (Jahng, Eckert, & Metzger-Riftkin, 2021; Klibanoff, 2012).

Saudi journalists' knowledge of media literacy. The current study concluded that Saudi journalists were divided into two groups regarding the extent of their knowledge of media literacy. Most Saudi journalists are unaware of media literacy, while others know very little about it. Those with limited knowledge of media literacy do not believe that the concept is applied in Saudi Arabia. Instead, they first heard about media literacy while

studying in Western countries such as the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom.

The Saudi Arabian education system does not offer media literacy courses in its schools or universities. Neither are Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries in the Middle East aware of the importance of media literacy. Therefore, the findings support the persistent calls by international organizations such as UNESCO for Arab countries to adopt media literacy initiatives (Abu-Fadil, Torrent, & Grizzle, 2016).

The potential role of Saudi journalists in promoting media literacy. The current study concluded that Saudi journalists believed that media literacy is not one of their responsibilities as journalists; instead, it is the responsibility of other social institutions such as schools and universities. However, journalists believe they have a crucial role to play in the future. This finding is consistent with Kanižaj's (2019) results, which confirm that journalists have been the least active in promoting media education among the public in recent years.

As was pointed out in the study of Filipino journalists when addressing fake news (Balod & Hameleers, 2021), Saudi journalists underlined the importance of journalists being active so that in the future they would be able to fulfill this role. There are many considerations mentioned by Saudi journalists that must be available for journalists to become active in promoting media literacy to the public.

First, it is crucial that journalists be knowledgeable about many different fields in order to be able to effectively deal with fake news and the public. This finding supports the claim of Himma-Kadakas and Ojamets (2022), who found that journalists require

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several skills in order to deal with fake news, such as critical thinking and knowledge of topics beyond journalism. Journalists likely focused on these skills because today's fake news can be found in a variety of fields: political, cultural, scientific, and health, to name a few.

Second, journalists should be equipped with various tools and skills to verify and deal with fake news on social media. Several studies have argued that individuals' ability to engage with news content depends on their ability to apply their knowledge and skills (Vraga et al., 2020; Vraga & Tully, 2021). The findings of this study showed that many journalists lack a knowledge of modern technical skills to verify fake news on social media. Therefore, it was expected that results would indicate the importance of technical skills to journalists in their promoting media literacy for the public.

Lastly, one should note the importance of cooperation and partnership among other institutions with journalists by allowing them to provide courses for students in schools and universities. This supports the argument of Masterman (2003), who asserted that to achieve media literacy goals, journalists must work with educators to promote media literacy. It is noteworthy that this result is consistent with previous studies in which British and Australian journalists demonstrated a strong interest in collaborating with independent initiatives to help combat the spread of fake news.

Conclusion

In the final section of this chapter, I will summarize the study's key findings in relation to the research aims and questions and discuss their value and contribution as a whole. I will also discuss the study's limitations and suggest avenues for future research.

The current study aimed to explore how Saudi journalists address fake news on social media. With this goal in mind, this study addressed five research questions. The first question was about Saudi journalists defining fake news on social media. The study found that journalists defined fake news in several different ways comprising three important elements: source, content, and time. I propose a unified definition of fake news on social media based on the perceptions, knowledge, and experiences of Saudi journalists, as discussed in the first question. Theoretically, this result contributes to the body of literature on fake news by offering a new definition of journalists in a non-Western context, since most definitions in the literature are derived from the Western context. The purpose of this definition is to assist scholars and researchers interested in the literature on fake news to better understand this phenomenon from the point of view of journalists who are directly confronted with it every day. For news organizations in Saudi Arabia to adopt and provide journalists with this definition, it will serve as a basic standard for them to adhere to when they address fake news on social media.

The second question is about the verification of fake news on social media. The results showed that journalists rely primarily on traditional verification practices, followed by new verification practices. A practical benefit of these results is that they provide essential information to those responsible for the journalism departments of universities and press institutions in Saudi Arabia regarding the importance of educating and training journalists on new methods for verifying fake news based on the use of the internet and social media. According to the outcomes of the study, one of the reasons

Saudi journalists rely on traditional verification practices more than new ones is the lack of academic qualifications of new journalism students.

While addressing fake news published on social media, this study suggests that Saudi journalists faced internal and external challenges that negatively influenced their verification work. This was the answer to the third question posed by this study. Despite the many challenges Saudi journalists face when addressing fake news published on social media, there is an important and crucial challenge that must be addressed to reduce the obstacles they face and make their work more efficient. This study suggests that government institutions represented by spokespersons and their public relations departments can be a challenge to journalists. Taking a long time to respond to journalists and their inquiries, not responding to their inquiries, withholding information from them, and leaking false information to them to gauge public opinion are the most important challenges journalists face. Based on these results, stakeholders in government institutions should reconsider their relations with journalists by rebuilding trust in them and taking faster and more effective approaches to communicating with them.

The study also suggests that at the social institution of influence level, social media influencers play an important role when Saudi journalists address fake news. This result contributes to the hierarchy of influences model by adding influencers as an essential force impacting journalists addressing fake news. Notably, Shoemaker and Vos (2009) did not discuss social media influencers and their potential role in news production. The current study indicates that journalists believe that influencers influence them through government organizations favoring them at the expense of journalists and

also by contributing to disseminating false information to the public and followers on social media.

The fourth research question aimed to determine how journalists in Saudi Arabia perceive their roles in response to fake news on social media and how they can translate them into actions. According to Saudi journalists, there are three types of roles they perceive themselves to play: disseminators, populist mobilizers, and interpreters. Through their social media accounts, they were able to translate these roles into actions. Theoretically, these results contribute to the literature on role perceptions studies by expanding information about the journalist's role perceptions in the Saudi context. The information about the role of journalists in non-democratic countries is important for researchers and scholars seeking to understand how the perception of journalists in these countries differs from that of their colleagues in democratic countries.

Additionally, the study aimed to explore the contribution of journalists to media literacy. Despite their lack of media literacy knowledge, Saudi journalists expressed their willingness to work with other stakeholders to promote and disseminate media literacy among the public. The findings of this study suggest that Saudi Arabian journalists require additional media literacy training. As a long-term solution, policymakers should provide educational programs about media literacy in universities and schools. It would be advisable for media and journalism departments in Saudi Arabia to add media literacy courses to their curricula and to collaborate with newspaper organizations to train current journalists as a short-term solution.

Limitations

The present study has limitations, as do all studies. One limitation of this study is not being generalizable since it used only a qualitative methodology that employ on few participants (Gray, 2014). Moreover, qualitative methods cannot capture numerical data that can be easily quantified (Brennen, 2017). However, my objective in this study was not to draw generalizations from the findings but to gain a deeper understanding of how individuals interpret their experiences, construct their worlds, and interpret their meanings (Merriam, 2009). In particular, I aimed to explore how Saudi Arabian journalists define fake news published on social media, address it, and perceive the challenges and roles in this regard. In addition, the study is unique since it is the first of its kind to be conducted, especially in the Saudi context; thus, a qualitative research approach was necessary to explore this topic.

The in-depth qualitative interviews of this study were with 14 Saudi journalists. The sample size of this study may be relatively small, but this was not a significant factor in qualitative research since I reached the point of saturation where the findings were repeated. Moreover, like Kwanda and Lin's (2020) study, I found it difficult to recruit more research participants due to the study's sensitive nature. In fact, several journalists refused to participate in the study, while others never responded to invitations to participate.

Another limitation of this study is that the group of participants was limited to journalists with experience of five years or more, which led to the exclusion of journalists who had recently begun their careers. Some may argue that new journalists need more

journalistic expertise and experience can provide insight into the results. On the contrary, the presence of new journalist respondents in the study would have provided further insights and including them would be a suggestion for future studies.

The last limitation of the study is that it used only audio recordings in compliance with IRB guidelines and to protect the confidentiality of participant information. Although the interviews were conducted via Zoom, the journalists preferred not to show themselves visually, and as a result all interviews were conducted with audio only. Therefore, it proved impossible for me to record the participants' facial expressions and nonverbal communication. Nonetheless, the non-visual audio interview was recorded. However, focusing on audio in interviews provided participants with a more comfortable environment to speak and ensured their privacy. In addition, it was more practical since it allowed the conduct of interviews on a flexible schedule.

Despite the above limitations, this study has contributed to our understanding of how Saudi Arabian journalists address fake news published on social media. The study focused on understanding journalists in non-Western contexts addressing fake news. The results of this study may be useful in conducting further research in the future.

Future Studies

Based on this study's findings and the lack of available pertinent literature, especially in the Saudi context, several interesting topics could be investigated in further studies. The current results can be employed as variables in future studies, which could be conducted on a larger sample of Saudi Arabian journalists using a quantitative

approach. For example, researchers could use survey data to study the extent to which Saudi journalists agree with this study's results in addressing fake news on social media.

The study was limited to traditional and online Saudi Arabian journalists from print and online newspapers. Future studies could focus on how Saudi journalists in news communication social media accounts verify fake news. With millions of followers, these news accounts have recently gained the attention of the Saudi public. Therefore, it is essential to better understand how journalists in these accounts address fake news on social media, the challenges they encounter, and their role perceptions. Furthermore, a comparison may be useful between traditional journalists in traditional media, such as newspapers and magazines, and in social media, such as online news accounts.

In the current study, the participants complained about new journalists' lack of experience and qualifications. However, this study could be replicated with newly graduated journalists from Saudi universities' journalism and media departments to explore how they address fake news on social media. New journalists can provide a different perspective of journalism before they gain practical experience. Furthermore, this study could be replicated with Saudi journalists working in media organizations such as radio and television. For instance, this study could be replicated with reporters and editors of Saudi government television stations or private Saudi television stations.

To conclude, this study sheds light on the issue of fake news published on social media in the Middle East, specifically in Saudi Arabia. As part of the study, Saudi journalists provided insights into how they perceive fake news, the challenges, and difficulties they face, and ways to combat them and limit their impact. Thus, this study

contributes to expanding the horizons of research into fake news by presenting the perspective of journalists working in the Arab context during a critical time of political, economic, and health crises. The research contribution hopes to be a first step towards more research in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East, which still lack a real treatment for this problem based on empirical research.

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APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) APPROVAL

APPROVAL: EXPEDITED
REVIEW

Leslie Thornton
CRONKITE: Journalism and Mass Communication, Walter Cronkite
School of 602/496-8799
Leslie-Jean.Thornton@asu.edu

Dear Leslie Thornton:

On 4/29/2022 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	Fake News in Saudi Arabia: Journalists' Perceptions of Their Roles in Addressing Fake News on social media
Investigator:	Leslie Thornton
IRB ID:	STUDY00015728
Category of review:	
Funding:	None
Grant Title:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	• Majed Basfar- Project Interview Consent (Revised 4).pdf, Category: Consent Form; • Majed Basfar-Interview guide.pdf, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions); • Majed Basfar-IRB Social Behavioral 2022 (4).docx, Category: IRB Protocol; • Majed Basfar-RECRUITMENT SCRIPT (Telephone) revised.pdf, Category: Recruitment Materials;

The IRB approved the protocol from 4/29/2022 to 4/28/2023 inclusive. Three

weeks before 4/28/2023 you are to submit a completed Continuing Review application and required attachments to request continuing approval or closure.

If continuing review approval is not granted before the expiration date of 4/28/2023 approval of this protocol expires on that date. When consent is appropriate, you must use final, watermarked versions available under the "Documents" tab in ERA-IRB.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

REMINDER - - Effective January 12, 2022, in-person interactions with human subjects require adherence to all current policies for ASU faculty, staff, students and visitors. Up-to-date information regarding ASU's COVID-19 Management Strategy can be found here. IRB approval is related to the research activity involving human subjects, all other protocols related to COVID-19 management including face coverings, health checks, facility access, etc. are governed by current ASU policy.

Sincerely,

IRB Administrator

cc: Majed Bakr M Basfar

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview questions to explore a journalist's background
1- How did you become a journalist?
2- Tell me, please, how long have you been a journalist?
3- Could you please describe the nature of your work as a journalist?

Interview questions to explore a journalist's usage of social media
4- To what extent do you rely on social media as a news source for your journalistic stories?
5- What social media do you use in your journalistic work?
6- What do you think about the credibility of news on social media?

Key Questions:
7- Based on your experience, how do you differentiate between news and fake news?
8- In your experience as a journalist, what do you think of fake news published on social media?
9- What do you think about the spread of fake news on social media?
10- How do you verify fake news published on social media?
11- How do you verify photos and videos posted on social media to ensure their authenticity?
12- Have you ever experienced fake news detection?
13- How does your news organization verify news and information published on social media?
14- How do you feel when confronting or verifying fake news?
15- In your opinion, what does a Saudi journalist need to face fake news?
16- Are you trained as a journalist to verify fake news published on social media? If yes, how? If not, why?
17- As a journalist, what do you think is your role in combating fake news on social media?
18- Do you think the spread of fake news in social media affected your role? If yes, how? If not, why?
19- How would you describe your relationship with your audience?
20- In what ways do you communicate with your audience?
21- Do you think that journalists have a responsibility toward their audience to educate them about fake news? If so, how? If not, why?
22- Do you think that the Saudi audience is media conscious? If yes, how? If not, why?
23- In your opinion, how can journalists promote media literacy to their audience to combat fake news?
24- How do you see the future role of the journalist in confronting fake news?