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

**Abstract**

This paper examines how digital disinformation occurs through the creation and sustenance of figures or cultural tropes. It focuses primarily on the figure of the e-committees, a phenomenon that refers to online fake accounts mobilized by various political actors to tarnish their opponents and propagate their own ideologies online. Based on a frame analysis of Egyptian news articles published between 2011-2021, we trace the emergence of this figure in wake of the 25th of January revolution, its development over time, and its impact on digital politics and (dis)information. We illustrate how the framing of e-committees contributes to an atmosphere of chaos and confusion about the digital realm, and how such framing tactics can be understood as a practice of digital authoritarianism. As such, this paper contributes to a growing debate in Media Studies on disinformation and digital authoritarianism, by presenting a detailed empirical analysis of how e-committees are presented and given meaning in various stages of political transformation in the Middle East.

Keywords: Disinformation, social media, Middle East, fake news

# Introduction

In November 2017, a famous Egyptian radio-presenter, Shereef Khairy[[1]](#footnote-1), who once framed himself as a “revolutionary activist”, proudly declared on Facebook that he was participating in the first round of the World Youth Forum, a state-sponsored conference held in Egypt’s tourist destination, Sharm el-Sheikh. This annual event that started a few years after President Sisi’s ascent to power aimed at “marketing post-2013 Egypt as a democratic nation”, or at least, as a nation on the road to democracy (Mada Masr, 2017). The announced goals of the event were to bring together “promising youth from the region” to share ideas on peace, development and creativity through various workshops and lectures. In this event, Khairy facilitated workshops about “the use of electronic committees in the service of the nation.” Electronic committees (*al-lyjan al-eliktrouniyah*), or electronic militias (*al-milishyat al-elikrtouniyah*), are two terms used interchangeably to refer to the widely organized networks of fake accounts mobilized by various political actors to tarnish their opponents and propagate their own ideologies on social media. While the two terms haunted public debates from the early days of the 2011 revolution to our present day, they have rarely been given the scholarly attention they deserve.

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

By examining the work that e-committees do in digital disinformation campaigns, we contribute to the growing scholarship on fake news and public manipulation with a case study from a key post-colonial authoritarian context. Theoretically, we contribute to this field by proposing a conceptual approach to examine disinformation from a cultural studies perspective, that investigates how confusion and manipulation are systematically instilled into the everyday life of citizens. Our conceptual approach re-invigorates the feminist techno-science concepts of figures and figurations that was once developed by STS scholar Donna Haraway (1997) and later updated by cyber-ethnographer Adi Kuntsman (2009). Figurations is concerned primarily with how a specific cultural trope is *given form*, or *multiple forms* in public discourse through material and semiotic practices.

Methodologically, we examine how the figure of the electronic militia has been shaped by Egyptian media outlets, from newspapers that were historically aligned with the Egyptian state for decades like al-Ahram to relatively more independent newspapers like al-Shorouk. Our interest in tracing how the digital figure of the e-committee is shaped by newspapers speaks to two main concerns. First, these newspapers are to a great extent the voice of the Egyptian state, and thus represent its own views and narratives. Second, by focusing on how this digital figure that inhibits new media is constructed within print-media, we contributed to a cross-media approach media that problematizes the distinctions between old media and new media and refuses to examine disinformation as an exclusively digital phenomenon. Our goal is to investigate how media outlets have covered and represented e-committees over time as sources of (dis)information that transverse online and offline media environments, fostering an atmosphere of confusion, chaos, and suspicion amongst the publics of Egypt and the region. Finally, this study challenges the “Facebook revolutions” discourse that has for long characterized media scholarship on the region and uncritically celebrated the emancipatory potentials of these platforms (Aouragh & Alexander, 2011). It interrogates how social media became tools of demobilization leading to the annihilation of the revolutions. In what follows, we elaborate on using figuration as a conceptual framework. Then, we outline our methodological approach in detail.

# Figurations of Disinformation

The current debates on digital disinformation are mainly centered around three research agendas. The first highlights the role of the “political economy” of these technologies (Benkler, et al., 2018: 8). They question the affordances and infrastructures of our hybrid media systems that facilitate disinformation and look into the economies behind these “network propaganda” campaigns that aims at “misleading people to achieve political ends” (ibid: 24). This agenda gained more prominence after the Cambridge Analytical scandal and was fueled by the growing anxieties over the transnational interference in electoral processes. Building on this, the second agenda centers on the political implications of disinformation and the dangers it presents for established, and mainly Western, democracies (Iosifidis and Nicoli, 2021). In this agenda, scholars propose notions such as “digital authoritarianism” to understand how nation-states do not merely censor online dissent, but more often “compete[s] with it, making an example out of online dissenters in order to affirm the futility of activism to a disillusioned public” (Pearce & Kendzior, 2012, p. 284). The third agenda is concerned with researching and proposing methods and policies to combat disinformation (Saurwein and Spencer-Smith, 2020). While these three approaches are instrumental in understanding how digital disnformation works, they largely dismisses how its cultural meanings are constructed in different parts of the world, espccially in the Global South where democratic transitions are still in the making.

Few studies examine how technologies of disinformation are gradually setup in the everyday life, and fewer are those concerned with how cultural figures and tropes play a major role in the growing sense of mistrust and bewilderment. It is to the last gap of literature, that we aim to contribute by building on the concept of “figurations”. Our goal is to propose figures and figurations as a conceptual and methodological approach to examining digital disinformation from a cultural studies approach. So what do we mean exactly with figurations?

In her 1997 book on Feminism and Technoscience, Donna Haraway first proposed figurations both as a conceptual tool and methodological approach to understand Western technoscientific culture. To her, “Figures do not have to be representational and mimetic, but they do have to be tropic; that is, they cannot be literal and self-identical. […] Figurations are performative images that can be inhabited.” (Haraway, 1997:11). Haraway’s book is loaded with cyborg figures that combine human and non-human elements, and exist within the technological ecosystems of late capitalism. Her interest emanates from her believe that “the imaginary and the real figure each other” (ibid: 2). Her figures have a material and a semiotic dimension. They exist within and through a specific infrastructure, and at the same time, they fulfill a semiotic function. Instead of constructing figures to tell stories, Claudia Castañeda (2002) developed this notion to examine how the figure of the child came into being within 19th and 20th century medical and legal texts. Similarly, the cyber ethnographer Adi Kuntsman, went through the online/offline stories of Queer Russian immigrants to Palestine/Israel to highlight how figures are collectively built and imagined. In her book, “Figurations of violent belonging” Adi Kunstman (2009:26) mobilizes figurations to understand how specific cultural tropes migrate from one location to the other through the circulation of media texts. Kuntsman’s work demonstrates how figures lose and acquire new meanings by time. Similarly, in this paper we trace the figure of the electronic committee looking at how it became a central player in the digital politics of post-revolutionary Egypt and different parts of the Arab World.

Examining the e-committees through the theoretical lens of figurations, we argue, has two important advantages. First, it allows us to move beyond the definition of trolls and trolling as digital practice. Kunstman’s adaptation of the concept moves beyond what a figure *is* to what a figure *does,* by researching how figures are constructed through material and semiotic practices. Second, figurations point to the need to trace the historical roots of discursive representations of tropic characters. In doing so, we take from a cultural studies approach of disinformation where rumors, fables, and conspiracy theories are taken seriously as discursive practices. Framing and figurations are quite similar practices: both provide a structure or narrative that orders information and facilitates the transfer of this information to a particular audience. Yet, while framing assumes still an objective ‘real’ object with a diversity of representations, the concept of figurations adopts a more post-structuralist approach to embrace the messy and unpredictable trajectory of the e-committees between 2011-2021.

# Methodology: Tracing the Figure of the e-committee across news outlets

In this paper, we adopt a qualitative methodological approach to studying how the figure of e-committee was presented in mass media. We conduct a frame analysis of newspaper coverages that focused on e-committees and the conspiracy theories that surround them. A frame analysis focuses on the practice of framing particular events or figures as Robert Entman's (1993: 52) argues: “To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.” Journalists and newspaper owners construct frames through mobilizing familiar stereotypes, cultural codes, and narratives that hold a strong significance in a specific culture (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Amongst the various different approaches to conduct frame analysis, we followed Pan & Kosicki's, (1993) suggestion to examine syntactical, script, thematic and rhetorical structures within news discourses on e-committees. The syntactical structure focuses on how the headline of the news piece is structured and what leads, episodes, backgrounds, and closures does it present. The script structure interrogates how the story is told through a beginning, climax and end; highlighting how characters are presented dramatically and what collective emotional frames are evoked. The thematic structure analyzes the implicit hypothesis that every news piece suggests. Finally, the rhetorical structures scrutinize the linguistic and stylistic choices made by journalists in relation to their intended effects on audiences (ibid).

Our corpus includes a total of 110 newspaper pieces and articles published between 2011 and 2021. The time frame of this sample corresponds to our desire to understand how the imaginary of social media – and its figures – has changed throughout a decade; from a tool of emancipation and public mobilization to a conspicuous technology that aims at confusing and demobilizing the nation. We have searched in these six newspapers for the keywords: “electronic committees” (al-Lijān al-iliktrūnīyah), “electronic militias” (al-mylyshyāt al-iliktrūnīyah), “fourth generation wars” (hurūb al-Jīl al-rābiʻ), “social media” (wasāʼil al-tawāṣul al-ijtimāʻī), “digital danger” (al-Khaṭar al-iliktrūnī)[[2]](#footnote-2).

We gathered this corpus from six different newspapers whose ownership and political orientations vary. Al-Ahram (n=26), Egypt’s oldest newspaper that since the Free Officers Movement of 1952 had been under the complete control and ownership of the state becoming the official voice of the ruling parties, with exception of the one year tenure of the Muslim Brotherhood (Sakr, 2013). Al-Youm A-sabe’ (Seventh Day, n=28) is a privately-owned newspaper launched in 2008 by a handful of businessmen who held strong ties to Mubarak’s regime it was first owned by the construction businessman Mohamed al-Amin and later sold to the steel tycoon Ahmed Abou Hashima who is reportedly close to intelligence services (Guaaybess, 2021). Al-Watan (the Homeland, n=30) a privately-owned newspaper launched in 2011 along with CBC and Al-Nahar Television networks by roughly the same handful of businessmen who supported Mubarak (ibid). Both al-Youm al-Sabe’ and al-Watan have been acquired by Eagle Capital – a business front for the Egyptian Intelligence services in the massive media reacquisition deals that happened in 2017 in which corporations such as Iʻlām al-Miṣrīyīn (Egyptian Media) and al-Mutahida (the United) emerged to monopolize film production companies, satellite television channels, newspapers, news websites, and even small social media production companies (AFTE, 2018; Z. Badr, 2021; Ramadan, 2020). Our corpse also included news pieces from relatively autonomous outlets like al-Shorouk (Sunrise, n= 16) and al-Masry al-Youm (the Egyptian Today, n=4). The first was established in 2009 by Ibrahim al-Moallem, the heir of a renowned publishing house who invited many of the oppositional voices and intellectuals to write in his paper (Sakr, 2013). The second was first launched in 2004 by the businessmen Ahmed Bahgat and Naguib Sawiris all of which also held strong ties with Mubarak’s regime; the newspaper is characterized by its capitalist liberal reformist views (Z. Badr, 2021). Finally, our corpse included investigative pieces from the Istanbul based news website SasaPost (Politicians Post, n= 4) which adopts a less-centralized editorial strategy enabling emerging writers and citizen journalists to submit their articles.[[3]](#footnote-3) Sasapost was established in March 2014; its coverage caters mostly to younger web-surfing Arabs and bloggers in a progressive and even secular language, yet a careful examination of its political line, subtle ideological messages, and Qatari funding indicates that it is part of the extensive Muslim Brotherhood media networks in Turkey (Yavuz, 2020). Due to its position outside of Egypt, the website, as we will outline, have managed to produce a handful of the most valuable investigations by journalists in exile.

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

# Chronological Analysis: The Evolution of e-committees from amateur networks to multi-million enterprises

## 4.1 Amateur Accounts and Competing Rivals (2011- mid 2013)

In the wake of the 25th of January revolution, and while Mubarak’s government decided to shut down the internet, hoping that the protestors will leave the squares, his media institutions were trying to figure out how to infiltrate and control the new media spaces of Facebook and Twitter. Once the connection was restored on the 5th of February, Egyptian social media users were hailed by pro-state propaganda online mainly from recently created accounts with pseudonyms like “Lover of Egypt” (Herrera, 2014:119). Media scholar Hannan Badr (2013), argues that this was one of the earliest moments in which the term “electronic committees” started to surface in the digital sphere. Interestingly, the earliest reference of e-committees in Egyptian newspapers points to Mubarak’s National Democratic Party (NDP) as the first political actor to use such technology. On the 26th of February 2011, and only fifteen days after Mubarak had stepped down, the headline of brief news piece in al-Youm al-Sabe’ read: "The annulation of the-committees of the National Democratic Party (NDP) in solidarity with 25th of January [revolution]’[[4]](#footnote-4). The piece implied the young members of Mubarak’s ruling party (NDP) were sympathetic to the revolution and its youth, and thus have taken this decision independently from the party leaders. The piece did not offer any detailed information on the e-committees of the NDP beyond that the party “had created this committee recently, and had officially announced its presence after the terrorist attacks of al-Qidiseen church in early January to the attempts to drive a wedge and ignite a sectarian divide between Muslims and Copts”. However, this peculiar framing of e-committee remains quite isolated, without other newspapers picking up similar frames.

*Frame 1: Watch Out for the Internet*

During 2011, and after the fall of the regime, state controlled Egyptian media adopted divergent tactics from downplaying the protests in the beginning to underscoring the national and the societal dangers that are brought by the youth and their demands (Greenberg, 2019). At the end, most of the journalists and editors of the state-owned media were related to the NDP, yet they were not able to hold on to their anti-revolutionary rhetoric in this revolutionary moment (El-Issawy, 2014). Our data analysis shows that the internet in general had been blamed for the instability of the country. This rhetoric was not only present in news pieces covering political topics, but rather seeped into other sections. In its ‘woman and child’ section, Al-Ahram warned Egyptian parents through an article entitled: “The Internet … The ticking bomb in every household” (Figure 1). Written primarily for mothers, the article frames the internet as a dubious uncontrollable space in which teenagers are allured to oppose their parents and break societal norms. It provides a series of cautionary tales about porn consumption, run-away teenagers, and young men and women who get recruited by religious fundamentalist groups. In a paternalistic and patriarchal tone, the article offers advice and precautionary measures written by behavioral experts who call for the importance of surveilling internet content and communications by both the state and the parents.



Figure 1

Throughout 2011, the e-committees are scarcely mentioned in independent Egyptian newspapers except for few mentions of the figure in op-eds by prominent intellects and revolutionary activists (n=4). For example, a newspaper article titled “The nobles of Tahrir Square and the Slaves of the Disposed”, published in the independent – newspaper al-Shorouk[[5]](#footnote-5), the author entertains some of these rumors; telling a second-hand story about a group of youth hired by pro-Mubarak political actors who happen to be part of the “deep state” (al-feloul) to manage a set of fake accounts that tarnished and trolled political opponents. This group complained about the fact that their freelance employers promised them a daily wage of 350 Egyptian pounds (equivalent to 58 USD then) and later refused to pay them for their work. Their work consisted of setting up accounts under pseudonyms to propagate counter-revolutionary narratives and conspiracy theories. Evidently from its title, the article adopts a moralistic frame that casts the human figures behind this troll factory as “slaves of Mubarak”. In these early pieces the figure of the e-committee was bound to the desperate attempts of the remnants of old regime, or the so-called Feloul, who tried all possible attempts to tarnish the reputation of the revolution. As such, the hostility against e-committees was also a hostility against the counter-revolutionary camp. The whole frenzy around the e-committees was seen as “indicative of the triumph of the revolution” and the destabilization of the “old regime”.

*Frame 2: To Each Their Militia*

On the 7th of November 2012, the independent newspaper al-Shorouk published an op-ed titled “Salafism and Electronic committees” in which the journalist attempts to historicize the phenomenon of the e-committee[[6]](#footnote-6). The article shows that the e-committees have been central to four competing political actors: the pro-democracy activists who gathered around figures like Dr. Mohamed al-Baradie, the Muslim Brotherhood, the old remnants of the regime (feloul), and the Salafis:

“The oldest e-committees are those of al-Baradie. They emerged spontaneously (bi-shakl tilqāʼy ) after his return to Egypt in February 2010. They were powered by early bloggers and activist who wanted to defend him [al-Baradie] against the massive smearing campaigns orchestrated by Mubarak’s media. After the 25th of January, the Muslim Brotherhood established their own e-committees to campaign for the March 2011 constitutional referendum, the parliamentary elections, and later the presidential election. Meanwhile, the e-committees of the old regime (al-feloul) worked fiercely towards defaming the revolution and the revolutionaries. They defended Mubarak and his men in their trials and supported General Ahmed Shafiq in the presidential elections. [..] the last type of e-committees, that of the Salafis with all their different sects. […][[7]](#footnote-7)”

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

*Frame 3: Battlefield in the online Trenches*

Newspapers started to frame the e-committees are part of the ongoing “fourth generation wars” which are information wars aiming to attack “not the physical boarders and infrastructure of a country, but rather the minds of its youth” as described by al-Ahram article published on the 8th of February 2012, with the headline reading: “Electronic militias: replacing traditional militaries” (Figure 2). News articles as such, have advanced a militarized war rhetoric that highlights how the danger of e-committees goes beyond Egyptian politics and extends to different parts across the globe. The script structure of this article, situates the work of e-committees in post-revolutionary Egypt in the same trajectory of other events such as the cyberattacks of the Palestinian Ezz al-Din al-Qassam brigades over the websites of American banks, and the cyberattacks of Russia over Estonia.



Figure 2

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

*Frame 4: The Dangerous Brotherhood Online*

As the turbulent events of 2012 unfolded, and the Supreme Council for Armed Forces (SCAF) that once took over the responsibility of managing the country’s bloody transition to democracy handed power to the first democratically elected President Mohamed Morsi in June of the same year, the figuration of e-committees in Egyptian press became almost exclusively framed as a Muslim Brotherhood phenomenon. For example the independent newspaper al-Watan had published six different news pieces on the same day, the 31st of March 2013, to highlight how the Brotherhood manages its e-committees to smear their opponents and manipulate public opinion. The frontpage headline read: “The plan to confront the independent media: a news agency that broadcasts the Brotherhood's ideas and defends the group”[[8]](#footnote-8). The investigative piece unraveled the details of a new media program in which the Brotherhood was to train 700 young calibers on citizen journalism to contribute to al-Naba’, a news network that relies primarily on using social media platforms. Other headlines of this issue from al-Watan included: “"Ikhwani Kiddo’ A Facebook Page to smear the opposition and journalists”, which offered an investigation about specific Facebook pages specialized in producing harsh satirical content to ridicule the Brotherhood’s political opponents and frame, as well as other fake accounts that deny any affiliation with the group, yet repeatedly use the same comments copy-pasted to troll the opponents[[9]](#footnote-9).

Unlike the earlier anonymous framings of the e-committees, the articles in this issue identified the people by their names. The titles read “In Photographs – Al-Watan unravels the people behind the Brotherhood’s e-committees” and “The Former Editor-in-Chief of the Brotherhood's reveals to Al-Watan: Khairat Al-Shater manages electronic committees using the "isolated islands"[[10]](#footnote-10). In this framing, al-Shater – a wealthy businessman and the first assistant to the leader (al-murshid) – appears as the mastermind behind the e-committees which he had developed from merely separate networks of amateur trollers to a systematic media smearing apparatus. Another article of the same issue of al-Watan suggested how he was involved in creating the media apparatus of the Brotherhood long before the revolution and the emergence of e-committee. Titled “’Rassd’ the Electronic Wing of al-Shater”, the article interrogated the history of Rassd (Monitor) a news RSS network founded by the Brotherhood and later offered the service of sending its subscribers news on the mobile phones[[11]](#footnote-11). The script of this article suggests that the Brotherhood’s e-committees are not only limited to networks of fake social media accounts, but it is rather a bigger new media apparatus that includes news agencies.

It is worth mentioning that these journalistic observations were later confirmed by the scholarly investigations of Herrera & Lotfy, (2012) who defined some of the digital tactics of the Brotherhood e-committees from the copy-paste strategy that aimed at giving ordinary social media users the impression that the “public opinion” was leaning to a particular discourse and to convince them that there is a “majority” out there that adheres to a certain political interpretation, to the moral assassinations of specific public figures. In her book, Revolution in the Age of Social Media, Herrera, (2014:134) had also noted how the Muslim Brotherhood built upon its already existing social media networks[[12]](#footnote-12), for example she outlines how the famous Facebook page Rassd that was once established to monitor and report the violations of the 2010 parliamentary elections was rebranded in the aftermath of the 25th of January revolution to take its current transmedial form. Yet, this framing was not exclusive to independent newspapers like al-Watan. During President Morsi’s year in power (30 June 2012 – 30 June 2013), we have analyzed a total of twenty-one (n=21) news pieces from al-Shorouk, al-Ahram, and al-Youm al-Sabe’ all echoing the same framing of the e-committees as a weapon in the hands of Muslim Brotherhood who were on a mission to “capture” the minds of Egyptian youth, to “crush” their opponents, and to “alter” the identity Egyptian society. We have observed how this narrative intensified in the lead up to the mass demonstrations of the 30th of June in which millions of Egyptians took the street once more asking Morsi to step down and enabling the Egyptian military and a handful of opposition figures to remove the President and prosecute the Brotherhood (Hellyer, 2016).

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

In the months that followed the ousting of the Muslim Brotherhood, several terrorist attacks targeted Egyptian Copts and resources, like the gas lines and electricity stations (Hellyer, 2016). Most of these attacks were blamed on the Brotherhood and its followers. Amid this bloody transition, the figuration of the e-committee acquired an unparalleled prominence; they became a recurrent theme in many talk-shows and newspapers. After June 2013, the framing of the Muslim Brotherhood and its e-committees, as militarized technologies increased incrementally. Instead of being framed as “looming danger” (Khaṭar mūtarqb) they became the “ultimate enemies of the nation”, “traitors” and the main source of disinformation online. Our analysis indicates that at least sixteen articles (n=16) have suggested how the e-committees of the Muslim Brotherhood were involved in an advanced form of cyber warfare, either by attacking and hacking governmental websites as al-Watan reported[[13]](#footnote-13), or by propagating information from Israeli media for the purpose of “distorting the image of the Egyptian military” as al-Youm al-Sabe’ announced[[14]](#footnote-14). Yet, in addition to this continuing frame of militarization, two new frames emerged. The first frame encouraged the state and its supporters to use e-committees as a technology to defend the nation against the Muslim Brotherhood and other conspirators. The second frame, proposed a legislative solution for the problem of the Muslim Brotherhood’s e-committees, advancing claims on the need of the state to assert its sovereignty over the cyberspace .

*Frame 5: E-committees in Defense of the Nation*

In November 2016, and amid the first severe economic crisis that followed the devaluation of the Egyptian pound, the independent newspaper al-Shorouk published two short pieces discussing how the Egyptian state had appropriated the technology of e-committees for its own goals; the pieces were based on scenes from the talk show presented by the prominent journalist Ibrahim Issa titled. The first article titled “The State spends Millions over E-committees” highlighted how “the Egyptian citizen had been subjected to an unprecedented disinformation campaign [since the economic decisions]” and that “the state is spending millions and perhaps billions of pounds over the e-committees in order to lie and mislead, creating an artificial and unreal public opinion that has nothing to do with the reality in the streets”[[15]](#footnote-15). In the second article, Issa follows up this discussion, arguing that it is inappropriate for the Egyptian state to use the “immoral tools of the Brotherhood” and to address its citizens through e-committees[[16]](#footnote-16). It became evident then for Egyptian readers that the Muslim Brotherhood is not the only political actor employing e-committees. These allegations were confirmed in the same month when a series of leaked messages from closed Facebook group named “The Union of State Supporters” were leaked, and went viral online. The Facebook group was initiated by Mr. Khairy’s – the once revolutionary activist discussed in the opening of the paper – who actively recruiting members to his group and tasked them with “tarnishing and smearing” those he dubbed as the “enemies of the nation” [[17]](#footnote-17). Enemies of the nation refers here to both members and supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as revolutionaries who opposed the current regime. When confronted with these leaked messages in mass media, Mr. Khairy did not nullify these accusations. On the contrary, he admitted proudly and self-righteously that he is the head of this digital campaign that aims to “serve the nation” by discrediting its opponents; especially as the country was going through a rough economic crisis that made citizens “susceptible” to such messages. Mr. Khairy’s leaked scandal was celebrated by mass-media.

On the 27th of November 2016, al-Youm al-Sabe’ – which was then under the complete control of Egyptian Intelligence- published a news piece titled: “The Union of State Supporters initiates the Facebook Campaign ‘The Army has a people to Protect it’”.[[18]](#footnote-18) The article included a series of screenshots from a post issued by a Facebook page with the same title, calling on Egyptians to support their army against the terrorists and the Muslim Brotherhood. The post, written in a propagandistic rhetoric, echoed some of the earlier framings of the fourth generation war, and highlighted that the only way to evade the tragic fate of the neighboring countries [referring without direct mention to Syria] is through uniting as a people behind the Armed Forces. The article praises this social media campaign and calls upon the readers to join it by using the hashtag #al-ʻaskarīyah al-Miṣrīyah Sharaf (Egyptian Militarism is honorable), and changing their profile pictures into a unified image of a solider. In other words, what was intended to be a scandal about propaganda and disinformation, became celebrated as a patriotic act. It comes as no surprise then that one year later, in the first round of the Youth Forum 2017, Mr. Khairy would proudly promote a public workshop about the use of e-committees in the service of the nation. From this moment on, the e-committees were framed by Egyptian press as a two-faced figure. One that is associated with the Muslim Brotherhood and other political dissidents who are portrayed as manipulative and untrustworthy sources. The other is associated with the state and its supporters who use this technology for their own patriotic ends.

*Frame 5: Law is the Solution*

In 2018, the figure of the e-committees was used in other framings that emerged over the Egyptian press to consolidate the state’s control over media. Al-Shorouk headlines in January of that year read: “The Parliament's Communications Committee: The government will submit a project to combat "electronic crime" within two months”[[19]](#footnote-19). The details of this bill have mobilized all of the prior framing of the e-committees from the moral panics that parents had about the internet, to the looming dangers of the Brotherhood and their fake news. According to the newspaper, the bill aimed at forcing Google, Facebook, Twitter, and other search engines to censor porn to save family values. In August, another headline read: “Al-Sisi issues a law to combat electronic crime... "closing websites that threaten national security" announcing the decree of law 175/2018 which defined “electronic crimes” as well as their material evidences, penalties, and repercussions[[20]](#footnote-20). Famously known as a the New Media Bill, this legislation is considered by scholars to be a regressive towards closing the public sphere; it considered any social media user with more than 5,000 followers as a media entity subject to the laws and regulations of mass media, and resulted in the systematic blocking of hundreds of news website whose content challenges the state narrative (Shawky, Mohsen, and Nagy, 2020). This legislation, as well as the calls for re-instating the Ministry of Information – that was officially dissolved during 2011 – emerged as a solution to what was perceived by the pro-state media outlets as a state of “media chaos” (al-Infilāt al-Iʻlāmī) (Shawky, 2020). These measures were celebrated with headlines such as “Judges praise the anti-cybercrime law: “Society needs it’” and “The anti-Cyber Crime Law arrives 17 years late” in which experts are invited to give their opinions on how progressive and crucial these legal changes are, as they finally allows Egypt to catch up with the “civilized nations that enforce control over their digital borders as well as their physical ones”[[21]](#footnote-21). In this rhetoric, legislation is seen as the solution for all the dangers of the e-committees.

## 4.3 A Transnational Enterprise (2019 – and after)

From 2019 onwards, the pro-state Egyptian press continued to recycle some of the earlier framings of the e-committees, often combining two or more frames at the same time. A new feature, however, was the intense focus on the transnational financial ventures behind their making. Al-Youm al-Sabe’ insisted upon warning their readerships with titles such as “Bloggers expose the hypocrisy of the Brotherhood’s e-committees”, and “Watch out for the Brotherhood’s e-committees … an Ex-member reveals: The group relies on massive funds to propagate rumors and spread chaos”[[22]](#footnote-22). What these news pieces implied was how undemocratic the Brotherhood was internally, and how their e-committees were financed by Turkey, Qatar, and other undefined NGOs based in the USA and UK. They also stressed some of the main tactics to detect these networks of fake accounts from the repeated use of Quranic verses and religious metaphors, the copy-paste strategies, and the obscure profiles. Our examination of the full corpus of news pieces highlighted those two different framings appeared in this period. First, the statist e-committees as global players in regional politics. This builds on the aforementioned two-faced figure, yet now the transnational relevance of the work of e-committees becomes more evident. Second, the frame of e-committees as the work of the Brotherhood continues to serve as a scapegoat for all of the government’s corruption and mistakes.

*Frame 7: E-Committees as Regional Players*

While the pro-state Egyptian media had repeatedly framed the Brotherhood’s e-committees as part of Turkish-Qatari conspiracy without presenting any viable proofs or sources for such claims, emerging oppositional media such as SasaPost had reversed these allegations. In an article titled “The Story of the Egyptian Company that Facebook had shutdown” SasaPost presented and investigation[[23]](#footnote-23) based on the Facebook press release of 2020 in which the company’s cybersecurity team announced the detection of networks of fake accounts originating from the Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). These networks engaged in spreading political propaganda content for the current ruling regimes via impersonating the identity of public figures and posing as local entertainment pages that also produced miscellaneous content. They were all related to two marketing firms; New Waves in Egypt, and Newave in UAE (Gleicher, 2019) The investigative journalist of Sasapost built upon the findings of these report and traced the ownership of these “New Wave” dubious marketing firms to an ex-Egyptian Army officer who resigned in 2013 to start a new media empire. The journalist highlights how these new media companies serve various clients, including celebrities, popular singers, football teams, and e-commerce platforms. He stresses how these networks are not independent from the state, but rather intertwined with it. A month later, SasaPost published another investigation titled “Dot-Dev’ the company that Twitter cursed: Egyptian with Emirati money” this time focusing on the fake twitter accounts that are spreading propaganda for the current Egyptian, Emirati and Saudi regimes[[24]](#footnote-24). The authors build upon the earlier investigations to unravel a network of other shell companies operating for politicians and entertainment celebrities alike.

*Frame 8:Blame it On the E-Committee*

A media frenzy against the Muslim Brotherhood’s e-committees took place few days after the controversial whistleblower Mohamed Ali took over Facebook to ask the Egyptians to a million people March on the 20th of September 2020 to remove the current regime and reclaim the revolution (Haruyama, 2020). On the 7th of September 2020, six news pieces appeared in al-Youm al-Sabe’ focused extensively on the e-committees with headlines one of which read “Parliamentary warnings to citizens not to believe everything that is being promoted on social media: Ignoring the e-committees is the best response...and awareness is our only weapon”. In this frame, the ordinary Egyptians are either represented as the vulnerable target of this war, or they are called upon as victorious honorable citizens who defend their nation by striking blows to e-committees and the Muslim Brotherhood. Awareness is sought as the ultimate weapon to defend the nation against the chaos, rumors, and distortions of the e-committees. All of these news pieces derive their credibility from the presence of an “expert” whether a parliamentary representative, a scholar or a journalist who asserts these statements. As such, the figure of the e-committee is figured in pro-state Egyptian media to convince the reader that any political mobilization is part of a bigger conspiracy theory against Egypt.

The excessive use of term e-committee by the press turned this figure into an empty signifier referring to one thing, many things, and nothing at the same time. Any viral hashtag that opposes the government is immediately framed by media figures as “merely the work of e-committees” as al-Youm al-Sabe’ repeatedly claimed[[25]](#footnote-25). This indicates how the figuration of the e-committee is deployed to annihilate and discredit not only known opposition parties, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, but any opposing discourse or critique of the government is framed as “fake news”.

Given the adoption of the new media laws in 2018, this figuration of the e-committee is not inconsequential. Being part of an “e-committee” has now become a legal charge that is used to arrest and detain opposition parties and any whistle blowers. For example, amid the COVID-19 crisis, a video appeared on Facebook showing the death of four patients due to the lack of oxygen tanks in al-Husseiniya Hospital. As horrific as it was, the video was widely circulated as evidence of the failure of the health system and the absence of basic medical resources. In a matter of hours, the young man who captured and published the video was arrested and charged of being part of one of the Muslim Brotherhood e-committees. An Al-Ahram newspaper article framed this incident as an “electronic crime” that “threatens Egypt’s national security” as it “shakes the trust of the people in their leadership”[[26]](#footnote-26). The author insisted that the whole video is “fabricated” and based on an “invented, unrealistic incident”. The video-maker was called for investigation by the Egyptian prosecutor, there were no further news about him, so it remains unclear whether he was discharged or not.

# Discussion: The effects of Figurations of disinformation on digital politics

In the three stages of the development of the figuration of the e-committee over the last decade in Egypt, different frames of interpretation were evoked. An underlying theme recurring in all these framings is that of the “national enemy” which renders the internet as an inherently dangerous place and delegitimizes online voices that are critical of political abuse.

In this discussion we place our empirical findings into a broader perspective, connecting the chronological trajectories of this figure to the literature on digital politics and authoritarianism. Up until this point, we have demonstrated that e-committees have been figured through many frames, ranging from mysterious groups in the realm of rumors to evil conspirators that attack national security. Hassib and Shires (2021) demonstrate that both the Egyptian government agencies and political activists deploy digital tactics to create an atmosphere of uncertainty for their own gains. Creating ambiguity, in other words, has become embedded and self-evident in a highly censored and restricted digital realm (Ibid). We push this literature by proposing that creating confusion and ambiguity serves a political purpose, particularly as an authoritarian tactic to manipulate the political aspirations of the public.

This connects to the concept of “networked authoritarianism” by Pearce and Kendzior (2012) – discussed earlier in the introduction – as well as, the concept of “digital authoritarianism” set forth by Michaelsen and Glasius (2018:3807). In their analysis of digital authoritarian, Michaelsen and Glasius define authoritarian practices as those that “sabotage accountability and thereby threaten democratic processes” (Ibid:3797). Their analysis shows that patterns of secrecy and disinformation disrupts political accountability and can be understood as a practice of digital authoritarianism. Accordingly, we observe that the evolution of the figure of e-committee has led to a deliberate framing of events as disinformation and actors as enemies of the state. As we have highlighted, pro-state media mobilize the figure of e-committee demonize certain actors and discourses, especially political activists and dissidents. We propose that such framing can be understood as one of the several tactics of digital authoritarianism, where political accountability is hindered.

Through our analysis we observed that Egyptian newspapers have framed the problem of disinformation by centering on the figure of the e-committee as a source of danger and a reason behind the nation’s maladies. The trajectory of reporting on e-Committees reflects an understanding of the digital space as an outlet where scandals, rumors and conflicting information about events circulate freely and with the intention to deliberately confuse and disinform the public. In the midst of this chaotic and ambiguous online environment, where the sources and interests behind information are often uncertain, it is the government who present itself as the only reliable source of information to the public. In combination with the strict censorship laws, such framings create further disengagement and withdrawal from citizens in political mobilization or activities in the digital sphere. As a result, political accountability becomes more difficult (Michaelsen & Glasius, 2018).

# Conclusion

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

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

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

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