

THE OCTOBER 17TH REVOLUTION: EVALUATING MOTIVES AND
EFFECTS BEHIND SHARING FAKE NEWS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

A Thesis
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by
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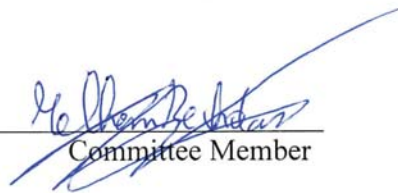
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Abstract

In light of the influence of fake news on the Lebanese revolution that was ignited on the 17th of October 2019, this research paper examines how Notre Dame University (NDU) students reacted, assessed and were affected by false information. Four focus groups were conducted with 24 NDU students from different faculties and majors to gather valuable results.

To answer this study's five questions and look deeper into the youth's behavior, comprehension, and evaluation of fake news spread on social media, the researcher adopted the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) developed by Katz in 1959.

The findings revealed that although students felt bombarded by excessive news sharing on social media platform to the extent that chaos was created, they were mostly not deceived by information they read online. Results also showed that teens do not majorly rely on social media to get news. However, when reading anything shared on these platforms, they depend on certain features that help them assess accurately the correctness of each.

Keywords: Fake News, Social Media, Lebanon, 17 October Revolution, Uses and Gratifications Theory.

Introduction

The unlimited freedom of access to the internet made social media platforms vulnerable to misuse, misinformation, and thus, fake news. In the last few years, social media have turned out to be a massive player in shaping public discourse in a democratic space (Marda & Milan, 2018). Nonetheless, online platforms have been tools that made the circulation of misleading information and rumors a lot easier due to the rapidity and low-to-none cost it requires. In Lebanon and during October 17 revolution, there has been a consistent increase of social media users and cases of misuse as well.

This issue, along with all inaccuracies and fear that resulted from it, have become a serious concern. That is particularly because this phenomenon challenged people's trust in the news. In addition to that, this phenomenon has been, to date, uncontrollable due to the lack of policy implementation or laws which could either limit fake news or hold the content creator accountable.

Henceforward, the aim of this research paper is to examine how Lebanese youths, represented by NDU students, analyze the link between social media and fake news, the motives behind sharing wrong information online, the latter's effect on them, how they spot news inaccuracies, and whether they believe whatever they read or fact check first.

The Main Problem

This study focuses on how Notre Dame University- Louaize (NDU) students react, perceive, and evaluate fake news. Furthermore, it scrutinizes how and to what extent they are affected by this phenomenon, and examines reasons behind sharing typical information via social media and if they consider fact checking it before doing so.

Notre Dame University- Louaize, established in 1987, is a private, Lebanese non-profit Catholic institution of higher education that adopts the American system. NDU accommodates three campuses which are distributed as follows: main campus in Zouk Mosbeh, North campus in Barsa, and Shouf Campus in Deir El Kamar (Notre Dame University, 2007-2008)

Objectives and Rationale

This study explores the topic of fake news spread on social media during the Lebanese uprising. To explicate, in the evening of October 17, many protestors hit the streets and blocked roads in protest due to, initially and debatably, a tax of \$6 that the Lebanese government was planning to impose on WhatsApp's voice calls to reduce budget deficits. During the protests, demonstrators expressed their anger towards corruption that has been occupying almost all governmental institutions since the 1990s and currently led to the destruction of different sectors. Accordingly, people revolted against, supposedly, "all of them" and remonstrated against youth unemployment, lack of basic healthcare and social security, environmental concern, pollution, poor infrastructure, etc.

This uprising has not only been, to date, highly controversial, criticized, and attacked, but has witnessed an unprecedented spread of fake news via social media platforms which increased youths' engagement in and sharing of false information on their pages without fact checking each, nor replacing the news with the accurate ones whenever the truth was revealed.

Literature Review

This chapter provides an overview on the concept of fake news and social media. Moreover, it presents information about the motivation behind the fake news phenomenon as well as examples of famous fake news stories and case studies. In order to understand the way NDU students react it is important to know how the term of fake news has been presented by various previous studies

1. Fake News

The phenomenon of fake news is not new. Media coverage seems to define fake news as viral posts based on fake accounts made to look like news reports. According to a recent study by Allcott and Gentzkow (2017), articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers, are defined as fake news. As Albright (2016) points out, fake news has become a buzzword, especially after the 2016 presidential elections in the United States, a democratic exercise marked by loads of misinformation and false news. Another simple but accurate definition about the term of fake news is stated by Leonhardt and Thompson (2017) in the New York Times in which they describe fake news as a type of propaganda or yellow and misleading journalism that consists of deliberate misinformation, spread via traditional media outlets or online social media. On the other hand, a recent study done by Tandoc et al. elaborates more on this by providing an overview of the various types of fake news. Briefly, the study detects six types of fake news: news sarcasm, news parody, fabrication, manipulation, advertising and propaganda (2018, p. 147). Summarizing these findings, one could describe fake news simply as stories that contain misleading and fake facts aiming at spreading propaganda and influencing the audience's political views, or at producing a funny content and making a profit.

In January 2018, the European Commission set up a High-Level Group of Experts (HLEG) to advise on policy initiatives to counter fake news and disinformation spread online. According to HLEG, (2018, p. 11) there is an urge of understanding disinformation as a phenomenon that goes well beyond the term "fake news". Disinformation includes all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to cause public harm or for profit.

This definition of disinformation is broader and combines different aspects of misleading information circulated online. One could say that fake news, as it is described above, is part of this broader definition of disinformation and when it comes to fake news the focus is mainly on data, facts or information directly related to what is known as news.

Michailidis & Viotty (2017) add that gossips, rumors, and misinformation do fall under the umbrella of fake news. Besides, they point out that the way journalists and news organizations report the truth in the digital age has been the subject of much debate.

The flow of misinformation around the 2016 US presidential election put the problem of fake news on the agenda all over the world (Nielsen & Graves, 2017). Wardle (2017) defines fake news as fabricated news reports produced either for profit or for political purposes. Based on the various definitions described above, it is clear that the term of fake news is in practice used broadly to cover any misleading and inaccurate information produced and delivered online as a news story with different motivations and purposes.

The rapid increase of fake news has been one of the most noticeable concerns among journalism and communication scholars in recent years. According to Shibutani's (1966) rumors arise when anxiety combines with uncertainty. When people face an uncertain situation and become highly anxious about it, and if accurate and trustworthy information is unavailable, gossips and rumors

will circulate to fulfill people's need for orientation. Fake news or rumors may be effectively controllable if credible institutions respond quickly and properly. In contemporary societies, fake news is also a political phenomenon in that they are often generated and spread to discredit specific groups or individuals.

2. Motives Behind Fake News

A crucial aspect to cast light on when it comes to this phenomenon is the reasons and motives behind the production and circulation of fake news on social media. According to Allcott and Gentzkow (2017), there appear to be two main motivations for the distribution of fake news. The first is financial: news articles and posts that become viral on social media can draw significant advertising revenue when users click on the original website. For example, a teenager in Veles Macedonia produced stories favoring both Trump and Clinton that earned him tens of thousands of dollars. This example reveals the fact that making a profit is a strong motivation among the producers of fake news circulated online, who prefer to generate and share misleading articles in order to collect more clicks by potential users and earn money through the advertising. The second reason, as describe in Allcott and Gentzkow's (2017) article is ideological. In fact, some fake news providers seek to advance specific political points of views and distribute their propaganda by using misleading facts and data within their articles.

Summarizing the above, two main motivations are behind the production of fake news: financial and ideological. On one hand, shocking and fake stories that go viral provide content producers with clicks that are convertible to advertising revenue. On the other hand, some other fake news providers produce fake news to promote ideas or people that they favor, often by discrediting others.

Moreover, there are social-psychological, political, and communicative bases for the fake news phenomenon. It is not surprising that the 2019 revolution marked a widespread circulation of a wide range of rumors and fake news. There is virtually no way to trace all rumors and fake news being spread during the revolution. It can be used by political power to destroy a protest movement, but it can also be used by a protest movement to put pressure on the political power to sustain itself.

3. Social Media and Fake News

Social media have been called “the life blood of fake news” since these platforms allow anyone to spread viral fake news to mass audiences easily and at low cost (Klein and Wueller, 2017). Moreover, the rapidity with which information travels through social media allows fake news to quickly spread unchecked and make it difficult to counter or correct. These affordances of social media have created a new avenue for propaganda on the Internet, which is being used with increasing sophistication to spread disinformation (Ruddick, 2017).

Students must make sure about the credibility of information they receive online and make decisions about whether to share such information with others. Credibility has been defined as the believability of information and sources as evaluated by an information receiver (Metzger, Flanagin, Markov, Grossman, & Bulger, 2015). Individual users conceptualize and define credibility in their own terms and according to their own beliefs and understandings (Hilligoss & Rieh, 2008). However, evaluating the credibility of information on social media is challenging due to structural changes in the information environment (Lazer et al., 2017). Online information sources often lack the filters and markers of institutional credibility and authority which promote reliability in traditional print sources (Metzger, Flanagin, & Medders, 2010).

Traditionally, credibility was maintained by professionals such as editors and reviewers (Rieh & Danielson, 2007). However, social media platforms enable the rapid, unchecked circulation of information among users with no fact-checking, or editorial intervention (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). In other words, responsibility of evaluating the credibility and trustworthiness of online information is for the user rather than to traditional expert. Fact-checking duties that used to be the responsibility of editors and journalists now is the responsibility of social media users (Wineburg et al., 2016).

4. Fake News in Lebanon

According to the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), Lebanon has witnessed misinformation and fake news long before the current uprising situation the Lebanese revolution 2019. Cristina Tardáguila, associate director at the International Fact-Checking Network conducted an interview with Roula Mikhael, executive director at the Maharat Foundation, a Beirut-based NGO working on media development and freedom of expression. The former asked Mikhael to list a couple of misleading pieces of content she had recently received. She presented more than five of them. They are:

“There were people sharing posts about a helicopter taking the president to the hospital and others confirming his death. There was one false news regarding politicians running away. There were pictures of the foreign minister, Gebran Bassil, on a plane with a caption that said he had fled the country. The picture, however, was old.”

“Another rumor ‘assured’ that ministers were entering the presidential palace in Baabda to join the council of ministers’ session on Oct. 21 by ambulance or by Red Cross’ cars. The Red Cross had to issue a public statement saying this was false so no one would attack them.”

Furthermore, the outcomes of misinformation, and the silence of official sources, were dominant when locals spread rumors about a drop in the value of the Lebanese pound over the past two months. Many locals rushed to withdraw their bank deposits in US dollars, spreading panic among bankers, companies, and citizens (Daily Star, 2019).

Fake news made it all the way to CNN's Arabic website, which published an unproven resignation letter credited to former Minister of Interior Raya Hassan during the first days of the revolution. The letter turned out to be false.

Not only that, but infinite news that, later on, proved to be wrong, were forwarded through social media as well. To illustrate, a piece declaring that the Lebanese Army announced an emergency status alert throughout Lebanon was disseminated. However, the Army Command issued a statement refuting this information. In its statement, the army encouraged Lebanese people not to get pulled by rumors, and to fact check all their statements and activities on their official website solely (Abdul Reda, N.2019).

Similarly, social media users shared headlines stating that the government has announced an internet ban/shutdown. However, the General Director of the Lebanese telecommunication service provider Ogero, Imad Kreidieh, addressed this false news in a tweet on his official Twitter account.

Another scandal reported that three local banks reduced their working hours to 2:30 and deducted 25% of their employees' wages. These banks, Blom Bank, Bank of Beirut, and Fransabank, announced in a statement that although it is true that their working hours were reduced exceptionally due to the situation (revolution), none of them have decreased the salaries

of their workers which, in the first place, cannot be messed with according to employment contracts directly linked to Social Security.

Finally, Lebanese people were exchanging false news about the Lebanese Internal Security Forces (ISF) threatening and accusing social media users for committing the crime of disrespecting the President of the Republic via text messages. Nonetheless, the ISF denied ever sending out typical messages to anyone (Abdul Reda, N.2019).

Theoretical Framework

Within this chapter, the theoretical framework of this study is presented. The Uses and Gratifications Theory is used in order to answer the research questions. This chapter is the first step to understand the way users interact with news, messages, and sources on social media. Add to the above, it contributes to this study by providing information about the role new media platforms play in the spread of fake news and users' online behavior. This information is important to construct the theoretical framework of this study in order to collect and analyze data about the way NDU students spot fake news on social media and counter its spread.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

The Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) places more focus on the consumer, or audience, instead of the actual message itself by asking what people do with media rather than what media do to people (Leung and Wei, 2000). This theory was first proposed by Katz in 1959. Consecutive relevant studies were conducted by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch in 1974. Based on the definition provided in Hui-Fei and Chi-Hua's recent study, UGT states that the audience selects media based on personal needs and knows which media can satisfy their needs.

This theory assumes that members of the audience are not passive but instead they implement an active role in interpreting and integrating media into their own lives. In order to study the way NDU students interact with fake news distributed on social media, this theory could provide a sufficient theoretical framework to understand the users and how do they operate.

UGT is a framework that explains how and why people actively seek out specific types of media (Phua et al, 2017). According to UGT, people receive gratifications through media, which satisfy their informational, social, and leisure needs.

Media gratifications are often grouped into two categories:

- process, the act of using the medium,
- content, the information and messages conveyed.

The process category includes general activity, such as web browsing or creating profile content, and the content category includes actual information gathered (Kayahara & Wellman, 2007; Stafford, Stafford & Schkade, 2004).

Despite the fact that this research does not study or analyze motives for using social networking sites, the UGT is used as an overall framework to conceptualize the active role NDU students employ when they identify fake news on social media.

The historical beginning of the UGT can be traced back to communications research where audiences were tested for the types of content on the radio that satisfied their needs (Cantril, 1941). In this early research by Cantril, participants were asked to narrate their gratifications received from listening to radio. Other media effects research elaborated on the motives and selection patterns of audiences when using radio and television (Cantril, 1941; Ruggiero, 2000), resulting in studies formulating lists of functions by which the audiences were gratified.

While the medium has changed, this researcher utilizes the theoretical base of the UGT to evaluate the premise of how and why people seek information from social media. Because of the social nature of human beings, the connection with people automatically leads to information

seeking, passing the time, sharing, and using the medium as a communicatory utility. The fulfillment of basic human needs demonstrates the premise of UGT (Whiting & Williams, 2013).

Previous studies have shown that gratifications are appropriate predictors of recurring media usage (Palmgreen & Rayburn, 1979). Palmgreen and Rayburn (1979) were among the UGT pioneers for the study of television viewing habits. Since television is similar to social media regarding nature and technology, the researcher utilized the guidelines in the scale developed by Palmgreen and Rayburn. Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) offer components that examined the gratification theory with regards to the use of the internet. Whiting and Williams (2013) utilized the UGT to categorize and describe reasons users access social media platforms. Building upon themes developed by Palmgreen and Rayburn, Papacharissi and Rubin, and Whiting and Williams, this study identified ten concepts that will be engaged to guide the current social media use gratification study. The ten concepts of the Uses and Gratification Theory are as follows:

- **Information seeking and self-education**

Followers use social media to seek information and educate themselves on various topics. Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) defined self-education for seeking the internet usage, while Korgaonker and Wolin (1999) called it “information motivation.” Social media users who access social media for this purpose find it convenient for information on a variety of topics such as product reviews, community events, or service recommendations. For this research, information seeking and self-education are categorized under the same category. For example, social media users seek information and educate themselves using social media for day-to-day needs. One basic example is when people receive information about simple things like sports (results of

games) from their friends on social media. Self-education can be related to receiving food recipes from friends, followers or do it yourself (DIY) videos on social media.

· **Entertainment**

Identified as escapism by Korgaonkar and Wolin (1999), this theme addresses social media utilization for pleasure, fun, and enjoyment. Palmgreen and Rayburn (1979) in addition to Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) defined entertainment as an experience because of the medium like radio, newspaper, television, and the internet. Social media is a form of medium used in today's world, and it can be associated with both escapism and enjoyment. Entertainment has always been a part of human nature and remains as one of the sources of escapism from routine life. For instance, social media platforms are used as tools for escapism. People use social media to receive and share photographs and stories, watch videos and news, play games, solve quizzes, and chat with friends and followers. All these activities can be grouped under the category of entertainment.

· **Social Interaction**

Palmgreen and Rayburn (1979) used the term “companionship” to describe the need to communicate and interact with others. Korgaonker and Wolin (1999), on the other hand, described it as social motivation. For this research, social interaction is related to social media users spending time using these platforms with likeminded people for a variety of activities. As an example, virtual socialization may include meeting and following people with similar interests. Indeed, spending time on social media with people of similar views is quite common in the virtual community.

✓ **Pass time**

Whiting and Williams (2013) extend Palmgreen and Rayburn's (1979) work in television exposure to include the use of social media to pass the time and relieve boredom. It was an era when people had newly discovered the use of technology to watch something that would not only occupy time but relieved boredom. Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) used the scale statements, "use the Internet when I have nothing to do" and "to occupy my time."

✓ **Relaxation**

As opposed to using media to relieve boredom, users seek relaxation and access social media to relieve stress. Whiting and Williams (2013) illustrate that relaxation activities provide relief from stress-related tasks. It must not be confused with entertainment as entertainments focuses on enjoyment, fun, and pleasure.

✓ **Communicatory Utility**

In 1979, Palmgreen and Rayburn's study helped to understand the notion of how people gather and communicate with each other. Whiting and Williams (2013) described social media as both a communication facilitator and source of information as a result of respondents' reporting their use of Facebook as a conversation starter. Korgaonkar and Wolin (1999) used a similar label and called it socialization motivation on the internet. They added that the internet was used as a medium for interpersonal communication and had a conversational value.

- **Information Sharing**

Whiting and Williams (2013) were the first communications researchers to use this theme, even though it has been used in marketing studies. The users share information about themselves with others, such as photographs, videos, and travel experiences.

- **Expression of Opinions**

Respondents in Whiting and Williams' (2013) study reported that they were gratified by expressing their thoughts and opinions either through "liking" photographs or others' comments or via their own posts. Whiting and Williams used the scale statements, "vent out my opinions," and "to vent" for expression of opinions.

2. Research Questions (RQ)

The main purpose of this study is to examine how NDU students react, assess and are affected by fake news on social media. Do they believe a news according to its source or less likely to think critically and more likely to accept the information that aligns with their beliefs? Also, it aims at knowing what are the purposes and motives that make them share typical information on their social pages.

- **RQ 1:** How NDU students evaluated and reacted to fake news during the Lebanese 17 October revolution?
- **RQ 2:** How does the youth perceive news on social media?
- **RQ 3:** What, in NDU students' opinion, were the purposes and motives behind spreading and sharing fake news during the uprising?

- **RQ 4:** What do they rely on to assess news accuracy?
- **RQ5:** Were NDU Students able to differentiate between false and accurate information?

Methodology

This part explains the research design used in this thesis. It describes the method and variables adopted along with the sample chosen and procedure followed to obtain rich insights.

To answer the research questions, the researcher relied on one qualitative method: focus groups. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), a qualitative approach is a tool that the researcher utilizes to study things in their natural environment, interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the study and collection of a variety of empirical materials such as personal experience, people's attitude and behavior, visual texts. This study employed focus group to understand students' behavior and attitude towards fake news, how they react and assess typical content on social media.

Qualitative research methods collect and work with non-numerical data which attempts at generating meaning and understanding social life by exploring targeted populations. It allows the researchers to investigate people's behavior, actions, and interactions with others. Moreover, methods that are regarded as qualitative render valuable information when identifying relationships between variables. Employing qualitative methods has lots of advantages. In fact, they create an in-depth comprehension of the attitudes, behaviors, interactions of the participants. In addition to the above, it is flexible and adaptable to changes in the research environment and can be conducted with minimal cost (Crossman, Ashley, 2019).

According to Wimmer, and Dominick (2010), a focus group, is a "research strategy for understanding people's attitudes and behaviors." It engages six to twelve people in an unstructured discussion, led by a moderator, about the topic under investigation.

Sample

To ensure that the sample will be representative of NDU students, participants were selected from different faculties, majors, and college year. For confidentiality, only the initials of the partakers were mentioned.

Four focus groups each consisting of 6 students were conducted. Each group was asked a variety of questions that provided rich insights and helped the researcher answer all the research questions mentioned above.

Procedure

A focus group discussion requires a team consisting of a skilled moderator and the participants (Burrows & Kendall, 1997; Krueger, 1994). The facilitator is central to the discussion not only by managing existing relationships but also by creating a relaxed and comfortable environment for unfamiliar participants.

To study or measure whether students believe any piece of news they read and discover the reasons behind trusting or distrusting them, fake and true online news that were spread during the revolution from different, known news websites or sources were shared with the partakers.

Add to that, conducting focus groups required the researcher to:

1. Define the problem
2. Eliminate the issue of obtaining a representative sample. Hence, four focus groups were conducted to discuss the same topic with the exact same questions asked throughout the four sessions. Four groups were also helpful when it comes to ensuring saturation; i.e. when youngsters no longer provide varied, fresh ideas.
3. Analyze and compare the results to reach insightful conclusions.

Data Collection

This section presents the findings collected from the four focus groups. All gathered information are interpreted, analyzed, and compared based on the theory's concepts to generate conclusions.

Overview

Due to the pandemic and the ongoing economic crisis, particularly the increased price of fuel, the four focus groups were conducted virtually via video-conferencing service Zoom. As explained earlier, the participants were NDU students who were randomly asked to volunteer in this study. They were randomly separated into four different groups:

- Group 1 was conducted on the 7th of January 2022. It consisted of four males and two females:
 - AD, male, 21 years old, Bachelor of Science in Mathematics
 - JB, female, 22 years old, Bachelor in Nursing
 - KS, male, 19 years old, Bachelor of Arts in Physical Education and Sports
 - MN, male, 23 years old, Bachelor of Laws
 - SS, male, 22 years old, Bachelor of Hotel Management & Tourism - Food & Beverage Management
 - VB, female, 19 years old, Bachelor of Arts in Translation & Interpretation

- Group 2 was conducted on the 14th of January 2022. It consisted of two males and four females. They are:
 - MBK, female, 19 years old, Bachelor of Business Administration – Accounting
 - MG, male, 21 years old, Bachelor of Arts in Political Science

- MM, male, 22, Bachelor of Engineering in Chemical Engineering
 - PM, female, 19, Bachelor of Arts in International Affairs & Diplomacy
 - RY, female, 18, Bachelor of Science in Medical Laboratory Technology
 - VK, female, 21, Bachelor of Science in Nutrition & Dietetics
- The third group was held online on the 27th of January. Half of the participants were females and the other half were males. They are:
- CT, male, 18 years old, Bachelor of Business Administration - Banking and Finance
 - EH, female, 22 years old, Bachelor of Arts in Interior Design
 - JBK, male, 19 years old, Bachelor of Science in Economics
 - SA, male, 24, Bachelor of Architecture
 - SK, female, 31, Master of Arts in Media Studies
 - TN, female, 20, Bachelor of Engineering in Petroleum Engineering
- The last group was conducted on 15 February 2022. Six partakers; five females and a male participated:
- AS, female, 21 years old, Bachelor of Arts in Graphic Design
 - GB, male, 25 years old, Master of Business Administration - MBA
 - GMA, female, 28 years old, Master of Arts in Psychology
 - LC, female, 21, Bachelor of Arts in Communication Arts
 - JK, female, 19, Bachelor of Arts in Advertising & Marketing
 - PG, female, 20, Bachelor of Arts in Psychology

Findings

1. What Sources Are the Most Reliable and Why?

Responses provided by different focus groups revealed that the majority of the participants rely on TV for news in the first place. One of the main reasons cited by the youngsters is its accessibility. “It is for free, easily accessible, has no conditions or subscription fees”, said VB. Moreover, AD mentioned that “TVs have a variety of options to keep a person updated; we can watch the news, or simply tune in when there’s breaking news, or watch a certain political program which can give me a rich, sometimes deeply explained, idea on the topic.” By the same token, SS added that, unlike social media platforms, TVs give voice to different opinions even if the station has a very clear political affiliation. For example, we can see Progressive Socialist Party’s Bilal Abdallah frequently being a guest on OTV which is linked to the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM). Same goes to when FPM leader Gebran Bassil appears on MTV which is linked to the Lebanese Forces (LF); Bassil’s opponents. By doing this, they offer a broader idea and enhanced understanding of a topic. MG in group 2 thinks that all media are unreliable and not credible to a certain point. Yet he believes that TV can be more reliable because of his ability to clearly see the nonverbal communication and body language which distinguishes whether the teller is lying or not.

While many named news applications as another commonly trusted source, GMA stated that websites can be more reliable. That is because, “unlike apps or social media, journalists have time to write, check, and correct before publishing any news. So this is just like newspapers back in the days.” JK added that the majority of the websites were initially well-established newspapers like Annahar for example. Because of that, they care about maintaining a good reputation. That’s why, they tend to minimize mistakes as much as possible. LC disagreed by insisting on the idea that

each has its own agenda “which makes them care less about their reputation.” “Yes, money will make them do anything” affirmed AS. Yet, LC deemed that “at least they won’t be as careless as a random, sometimes anonymous, page on Twitter or Facebook for example.” Group 2 as well deliberated this topic and assumed that news websites are preferable due to gatekeeping and the time they have to do their job accurately. Nevertheless, the two platforms aim at getting as much exclusives as possible as well as increasing their click baits which increases their chances of publishing fake news or providing wrong information.

2. Social Media vs. Traditional Media: Which Is More Reliable?

While many partakers in all focus groups admitted that they rely on social media to stay up-to-date, many claimed that traditional media remain the most credible. To begin with, some of those who depend on social media for news reported that they usually follow the pages of news websites on diverse social platforms. Examples of these pages, as stated by NDU students include: Agence France Press (AFP) News Agency, The Independent, Al Siyasa, Al Saham, Annahar, Lebanon Debate, Tayyar.org, LBCI News, Al Jazeera, etc. “These are somehow traditional media who decided to follow the trend and move online so it’s the same”, said PM. Others explained that they follow official, trustworthy sources “so rather than reading the journalists’ articles or watching their reports, we get the latest news from their accounts directly” clarified SA. For instance, GB named a couple of sources like Edmond Sassine, who is a reporter at LBCI TV station, Lebanese Presidency and Grand Serail pages on Twitter that provide constant updates about the activities of the President of the Lebanese Republic and the cabinet respectively. He added following the official page of the Lebanese Army “which issued a lot of statement denying fake news or clarifying things especially when they were facing attacks during

the revolution.” While some said that they get all of their news from random accounts on social media, RY considered that influencers on social platforms are trusted sources that are capable of delivering facts and objective news. She listed some like Political Pen and The Lawyard.

However, MM argued that “while these pages can provide a few accurate information, we cannot deny that they are giving their opinion and attacking some parties which does not make them objective hence reliable.” In group 4, three participants shared similar opinions like that of RY (group 2), and even said that they can trust random people voicing their opinions on their personal pages. Nevertheless, LC believed that she can’t follow, read, nor trust pages like Political Pen since she is “somehow skeptical about typical pages because she constantly searches for a clear identification of the original source reporting the news”.

When debating if news websites are more credible than TV stations, the partakers first agreed that both follow mostly in depth reporting. They get experts which increase the credibility hence competency of the medium. MN clarified that specialists are important but the degree to which they affect news trustworthiness vary by topic. “For example, my trust increases when the TV station gets an expert discussing something political or geopolitical more than I get affected if he is talking fashion and trends.” Second, the youth settled that each has its own political agenda so none of them is 100% genuine. What basically differs is not the accuracy nor affiliation, but the features they can enjoy. Point in fact, some of the participants in group 1 favor TVs because ads do not interfere with news. Also, reports do not take time to load. Add to that, “we have a specific time to get informed, like from 7:45 till 8:30PM, not bombarded every two seconds with notifications.” On the other hand, those who prefer websites explained that, unlike TVs, online pages allow for engagement which is a feature that helps ensure that the news is flawless. The reason, according to KS, is that “people can mention that this news is fake or can correct

something wrong using the comments section.” JB furthered by emphasizing on the idea of two-way communication that new media offers. “That is true, we now have a dialogue not a monologue”, concluded AD.

3. How Credible is the News Shared on Social Media?

Since many claimed that they get the latest news and analysis from social platforms, the moderator asked them to rate how credible they think news shared on social media is. The results were as follows:

Scale	Always Credible	Mostly Credible	Sometimes Credible	Barely Credible	Not credible at all
Responses	0	0	14	7	3

To elaborate on these responses, some of those who answered “sometimes credible” or “barely credible” perceive social media content from a subjective point of view. PG (group 4), for example, explained that her answer highly depends on the page or profile sharing the news. She considers that some platforms often publish news only for propaganda, whether positive or negative. Nevertheless, other pages do their job in a professional and ethical way. GMA deemed new media is sometimes credible because the sources he checks are not people voicing their opinions, but originally well-established media outlets like TV stations or newspapers that currently have an online presence. According to VB (focus group 1), “social media is just another source”. All news sources are not fully credible, “so just like any news website might make mistakes, social platforms are prone to making errors as well. That’s why, we cannot label this type of media as not credible at all because it is a source after all.” On the other hand, JBK in group 3 stated that it is not credible at all because “it was so clear lately that it has been used to

manipulate people by masking the truth.” When asked how would a news source do so, the participant presumed that spreading fake news, hiding half of the truth, selectively sharing news, defending someone, challenging our views, or making *us* all look a certain way are all forms of manipulation. “Also when they try to propagate a specific belief through agenda setting or *matraquage*, incite us to do something mainly by relying on influencers, or character assassinating someone, all of these are proof that these platforms do mask the truth” added TN. SK too referred to the numerous social media users which make the managers of these accounts exploit this fan base to fulfill their agendas by including appeals that make their information catchier; hence easily accepted and trusted. SA built on this idea by saying that social media gives voice to anyone, anywhere, “so any person can suddenly become an opinion leader therefore trusted. That way, people can be influenced easily.” “We’re all becoming robots”, finally deduced SK. Group 4 had similar opinions. For instance, LC considered that some social platforms are “made to grow audience with cheap content”. She refers to TikTok as an example “which helped many users become so famous simply by producing irrelevant and goofy videos.” JK furthered that it is not only about silly content, but many are becoming popular because they rode the wave. “For example, it is enough to shame or criticize ex-minister Gebran Bassil on Instagram or Twitter or Facebook to become so known, liked, and followed and 2019’s revolution is an accurate proof”, JK said. AS alluded to “the chaos” that happened when the COVID19 vaccines were issued. She explained that almost every person theorized online about the advantages and disadvantages of getting the shots, that even singer Maya Diab warned her followers not to take it while specialists were recommending it! In summary, all of these, according to the partakers, make social pages a less credible source than other traditional media not only on the political level, but on the social and medical one too.

4. Why Do NDU Students Share News on Social Media?

If social media is not the most reliable platform, why do the youths share news on their pages?! Half of the participants (12 students) answered “I don’t share news on social media”, while the other half do. To begin with the reasons behind not sharing political information, MN in group 1 rated this practice as something useless. He commented: “although I am politically affiliated, I believe that life is too short to waste it arguing with strangers or people we know about politics, especially in Lebanon!” The partaker explained that sharing political news online will always be subject to non-ending discussions that most probably can escalate to a fight. All of what might result from a simple “share button” is pointless because no one will be able to change the opinion of another party’s supporter, so why start it in the first place?! As three other participants (SS, KS, VB) supported MN’s viewpoint, AD argued that sometimes, it is necessary to spread important information regardless of the consequences. He also compared an “online situation” to the “offline situation”: “if you’re sitting in a public place with your friends and found something noteworthy to mention, why not say it? Maybe it won’t be a big deal, or maybe discussing it can help reach a common ground?” To end his argument, AD considered that we can simply not reply to prevent a fight or turn off the comment section. However, MN attested: “doing so opposes the concept of freedom of expression as well as the reason behind social media; it is made for us to interact, so we either do it properly or not at all.” On the contrary, JB (Bachelor in Nursing) claimed that she shares news on her social media pages to spread knowledge, not about politics, but something scientific. She increasingly did this during the pandemic to spread positive news (example: the number of healers while everyone else was talking about death), to fight misinformation (example: when many were saying that COVID19

vaccines alter the DNA), or for information sharing (example: posting an article that makes readers aware of something vital). Equally, RY (group 2, BS in Medical Laboratory Technology) expressed a similar opinion to that of JB. She mentioned sharing some scientific articles that help spread awareness on a medical topic. The student enjoys uploading “Fact vs. Myths” posts to correct misconceptions too. MBK and VK declared that they only do so if there is an urge to do it for the public’s sake or if it makes a beautiful impact. MG (Political Science student) admitted that because he is so active on Twitter and has a high number of followers, he frequently shares news for more exposure. He clarified that the more he does, the more this will make him reliable and even a political reference. This also will help him remain constantly updated with the latest news therefore better educated. Nevertheless, MM, who, unlike MG has a little number of followers on the same medium, said that he only tweets his opinion regarding something, but never news. The reason is that “I am not that famous on Twitter, hence not their go-to for any update. People will know these updates eventually via different sources not via me, so there’s no need for this kind of effort!” In group 3, four out of six NDU students never share news on social media and two out of them (EH and SA) reported never being politically active on any medium. As they both had similar opinions to that of MN (group 1), SA furthered that revealing his political affiliations online will, in real life, put him in situations that he prefers to avoid. To illustrate, he questions what might happen if his boss knew his political affiliations which does not match his? “This situation can easily be prevented if I refrain from sharing politics on my page, that’s why I limit my online activity to reading the news for self-education and sending them privately to my friends to either discuss them or make fun of them” he concluded. Participants of the fourth group had different aims for posting news on social media. For instance, GB and LC stated that they share articles or retweet something they are proud of. These

are usually posts that cast light on Lebanese achievements. Examples of these, according to them, include Lebanon's IXSIR Winery voted best rosé wine in the world (2021), Lebanese National Basketball Team winning a championship, chairman of the therapeutic company Moderna that was a pioneer in developing COVID vaccines turned out to be Lebanese (2021), or simply beautiful facts or images about Lebanon taken by local photographers. Additionally, LC mentioned that she frequently reposts content that showcases the truth about a topic. For example, she recalls retweeting a short report published by journalist Jad Ghosn which narrates and provides footage and documents as a timeline of the Lebanese crisis. Moreover, AS clarified that she spreads news that serves the truth whenever a topic creates controversy. She explained that she once republished an article written by Le Temps magazine which revealed that the Lebanese Central Bank hid the current crisis' warnings sent by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). While PG and AS' thoughts were alike, PG added that she never does it unless she is 100% sure of the thing she read. Otherwise, she would be deceiving people instead of serving the truth.

5. 17 October's Revolution and the Role of Social Media

To examine the role of social media during the revolution, the students were asked to classify whether it played a positive or a negative role and justify their answers. While many perceived it as totally negative, the most common answer was "both"! In details, AS announced that "social media made the revolution something trendy to the extent that anyone anywhere wanted to join." Yet, LC argued that "it was portrayed as such." When asked why, she made clear that "media framed the uprising as an atypical revolution. The majority of the time we were seeing the demonstrators partying, eating *Knefe*, smoking hooka in the middle of Jal El Dib's highway, painting the walls and so on that even we could spot many tweets about the revolution with

captions saying: “not your typical revolution”. Not only that, but taking pictures holding the Lebanese flags while taking part in the protests became so common that “I saw at least five of these posts each day!” Still, GB considered that it fostered patriotism and increased engagement. AD in group 1 said that it played a beneficial role because it provided on time updates. Equally, MBK in group 2 deemed social media as a beneficial source of information during that time. KS (group 1) claimed that it covered the real pain of people who genuinely went down the streets to make a change. Add to the above, many NDU students thought that some platforms were the reason behind this unprecedented involvement. Indeed, VK declared that social media increased the youth’s awareness of what was going on and even engaged people of different age groups with different views. MM added that it encouraged the Lebanese to hit the streets and refute corruption, take part in movements and political talks. PM explained that social media, or media in general, “showcased a positive picture that is rarely seen in Lebanon which is all the Lebanese standing together as one, not as political parties or confessions, for the sake of their country.” She exemplified by pointing out the media’s huge promotion and coverage of the human chain that the protestors did from Tripoli to Tyre, or the show that they did on Lebanon’s Independence Day. “Many pages highly relied on influencers and celebrity endorsements that portrayed these events as ‘never to be missed’.” SK gave credit to new media for reaching a large, young audience faster and knowing their feedback directly. “This gave the opportunity to target a new generation which I belong to and motivate us to revolte for our rights” she concluded. TN (group 3) mentioned that it gave more exposure to the demonstrators and helped them voice their opinions on a national level. However, she reported that “media outlets with specific agendas exploited the citizens’ freedom of expression and used their honest pain to sell by playing on the emotional appeal.” As an example, “we all remember the video of the soldier

crying during the protests that went viral on every social platform or the old woman that was sitting in the middle of the highway saying I don't have a place to go because I can't afford the rent anymore. All of this was used to shame people who are opposing the revolution or have not joined the rebels yet." Students who reported social media playing both, a good and a bad role, clarified that this depended on "who was posting what." According to RY (group 2), those who had no political agenda were uploading news with the purpose of informing or educating whereas others who were politically affiliated were posting biased news. PM also thought that the negative role it played was giving false hopes and exaggerating things. SA (group 3) mentioned that he was able to follow in details what was happening almost everywhere due to the citizen journalists; "social media especially Twitter's biggest advantage. Nonetheless, "with citizen journalism comes a lot of inaccuracies and rumors, so things were no longer under control which speed up the spread of fake news." The increasing number of fake news was an idea that almost all participants agreed on while stating that it created chaos. Besides, MN reported that rumors caused anxiety and made people constantly stressed. In fact, JB said that what was happening negatively affected her mental health as she started to overthink the situation and become anxious about her future which she perceived as ambiguous. Other than that, MN adjoined that it created a form of peer pressure to join the demonstrations especially that those who supported the revolution were humiliating those who don't on social media. VB explicated that she couldn't properly follow up and got lost on what to believe or not. While VB reckoned that the chaos that happened negatively affected the revolutionaries too as it disunited them, MG described social media as a tool that "created more problems between the Lebanese people. The reason is that those who had different opinions were subjected to hate, marginalization and bullying. This was a further reason why pro-revolutionists could not convince the other parties to

join.”. By the same token, LC supposed that new media was “a main player in spreading hate speeches under the misconceived umbrella of freedom of expression.” Add to that, media escalated threat, legalized bullying, encouraged defamation and normalized disrespect. LC clarified: “I am not talking about disrespecting the politicians, I am talking about disrespecting and not tolerating the opinion of the different other as if freedom of expression is limited to a certain group and illegal for anyone who opposes your opinion.” The examples the student gave to the negative effects listed above were:

- demonstrators referring to those who still support political parties as “sheep”
- saying that a civil war will take place soon due to what is happening
- a group of protestors going to the house of the lady who supports the Free Patriotic Movement and chanting the “*ba3dik mabsouta*” they created
- pro-regime people making fun of the lady who was screaming “*thawra*” while producing a beat using the cooking pot.

LC ended her discussion by explaining that media in general “made the so-called journalists or public figures who have been for so long considered unprofessional or unethical as opinion leaders and super credible sources and they themselves were sometimes the sources of the fake news spread not to mention that they as well normalized disrespect, cursing, and bullying.” To sum it up, GMA deduced that media tried to create better citizens via education. However, it did the opposite since it gave voice to everyone, relied on endorsements that serve its agenda, and broke all “ethical barriers and restrictions”.

6. Youth’s Reaction to News Coverage on Social Media

As youngsters were debating the negative and positive roles played by social media, the majority hinted that they were bombarded with too much news and information. Thoroughly,

most of the partakers in all four groups, even those who considered that the media positively contributed to the revolution, developed a collective attitude towards media: “after a few days of the revolution, we stopped following/listening to the news shared”. According to them, they were mainly annoyed by the nonstop and constant coverage and opinion-sharing by everyone all of the time. Point in fact, PM (group 2) affirmed “at the beginning, it was something new and fixed my perspective regarding many political aspects, but with time, things got out of hand and what was broadcasted and shared as “beautiful” and “unique” turned into something tiring and frustrating.” VK acknowledged that the novel 24/7 coverage of the revolution as well as it being the talk of the hour made her develop a new habit which was reading the news more often. Hence, she followed many pages on Instagram and Facebook to stay connected and become more familiar with local politics. However, she admitted that “after a while, I felt so bombarded, so first I started ignoring the posts, then muted the stories, and finally I unfollowed them all.” Same goes to MBK (group 2) and LC (group 4). The first partaker revealed that she was highly swayed at the start and what was happening encouraged her to educate herself more and ask more questions to determine the reasons for why joining the revolution is essential. The second student explicated that she began disregarding news even those cited by credible news sources. She even muted and unfollowed her Facebook friends or Twitter/Instagram followings who shared or theorized nonstop about what was happening. Yet, MG (group 2) argued that even at the start, he couldn’t believe whatever was disseminated because “if we pay close attention and analyze the news spread, we can see that the fake news was so close to that in Syria when the revolution began.” He, along with MM, thereof remained aware of the false information and did not allow media to tell them how to think. Other students were enthusiastic at the beginning, but turned into selective audience after a couple of weeks. In VB’s opinion, what social media did was

beneficial at first since it gave the Lebanese hope that some change might occur. But then, “old and new media became tools manipulated by the ones who pay more and correspondingly started to disseminate hate and useless speeches so I started choosing what I want to listen to or read and dismiss what others were telling me.” Also, PG (group 4), assumed that protestors and the political parties told their side of the story through their mouthpieces. Therefore, each person was looking for the news or channel that matches their beliefs. In general, the participants were eager to know more at the beginning, but lost interest at some point later.

7. Why Were Fake News Spread During the Revolution?

Based on the study’s literature review, fake news was being disseminated everywhere and in an unprecedented manner. Why? In group 1, MN and VB agreed that what happened aimed at creating chaos and uncertainty because “there was an agenda to do so”. Bearing in mind that the uprising majorly targeted President Michel Aoun and former Minister, leader of the FPM Gebran Bassil who were defamed in the streets, AD, KS and SS inferred that media in general wanted to instigate the citizens against this party. SS explained that the “regime’s opponents failed for so long at literally fighting President Aoun and the FPM so targeting their popularity during a massive demonstration would be ideal to decrease their influence and inherit their popularity.” Groups 3 and 4 summarized SS’ opinion in one term: character assassination. For instance, TN, JK, LC, and GMA assumed that what happened was purely political and strategically planned. According to JK, “this was so obvious if we consider the number of fake news and the huge *matraquage* that was made by the media.” GMA furthered that political assassination was so clear that it became “a trendy content [...] so whomever wanted to create a buzz or increase their exposure and become popular felt free to share something false or shame specific targets.”. By the same token, MG mentioned that “some news was shared for a “scoop” and some were shared

because it was the trend, thus giving more exposure for influencers and media makers.” To add, LC clarified that the *assassinators’* strategy was easy; that’s why fake news was spread so fast because many people remain illiterate when it comes to “these media games” especially when they serve their interests. On the other hand, partakers in group 2 strongly believed that it was a plan developed by the politicians to attack the revolution. In PM’s viewpoint, politicians aimed at weakening the huge support and admiration that the revolution had and breaking the Lebanese’s faith in a better tomorrow. They were also trying to regain and preserve their supporters. RY too declared that the leaders needed to frighten the revolutionaries and prove to them that what they are doing is useless and will lead to turmoil. Other than spreading fear, VK presumed that what the admins of social media pages were making was harm others’ reputation or even an entire ideology. As mentioned by MBK, MG, and MM (group 2), social media outlets wanted to “sabotage the revolutionaries”, “sway the public to one side over the other”, and “weaken its main goal and objective.” Finally, the remaining students in the four groups claimed that the main reason was to manipulate people by creating arguments or content that favor the interests of weakening the opponents’ positions and strengthening theirs.

With all of this in mind, do NDU students fact check the news they read online?

Scale	Votes
Always	11
Frequently	3
Sometimes	1
Rarely	4
Never	2

Depends	3
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The chief way that the participants rely on to verify information is either checking different sources, or seeking an expert's opinion. Moreover, SA declaimed that while going through different sources, he makes sure that each has a different political affiliation. He accordingly assesses what is common between all and thusly deduces that at least the mutual part is true. As for GB, he cleared up that he is an active citizen hence part of two WhatsApp political/patriotic groups. He usually relies on both to make sure whether things spread on the Internet is correct or not. That is done via discussions, analysis, or one group affiliate checking with the subject directly and informing all other members. LC described that whenever she reads something on Twitter, she writes down the keywords on Google to see what credible news websites talked about the same topic. JK, who also utilizes Twitter for constant updates, expressed that she also uses the same platform for fact checking. That is because she can directly visit the official page of the main subject of the news and see what he/she has written. For those who answered "depends", they explained that they fact check based on how prominent the content is. "Sometimes, the content is useless, so no need to bother in the first place", professed CT. "True, it is a waste of time if the news or subject is not that important" added VK. According to JB and KS, this task depends on how fishy they feel the information they read is. The dubious it is, the more they tend to surf the internet for an accurate article.

8. What Makes Youth Believe or Disbelieve News?

Considering the vast number of false information disseminated during that time, the researcher aimed at discovering how youngsters recognize fake news. To quantify the

respondents' answers, they were given the freedom to vote for more than one feature. Yet, the majority selected "source of the news". In details, the results were as follows:

Feature	Number of Votes
Source	14
Attached visual, audio, or document	5
Choice of words	5
Author/Journalist	1
Nothing specific	1
All of the above	2

Even though many answered that the source is essential for the accuracy of the news, partakers had different opinions when justifying their responses. For instance, KS announced that the neutrality of the source is what matters the most. For example, he can't believe whatever MTV, a Lebanese TV station, writes because "its agenda is so clear, it is highly subjective with obvious goals of assassinating the FPM and Hezbollah". GB (group 4) shared the same point of view towards the same channel. He explained that "it has an already set agenda and they are financially benefiting from serving it. How ridiculous was it when their newscast's introduction was "thank you Iran for bringing COVID19 into Lebanon?!" This is pure brainwashing, so in this case, the source is never considered reliable", he concluded. Equivalently, LC furthered that although the source is very important, even the well-established media in Lebanon are disseminating fake news and this is why differentiating accurate from false information became harder these days. AS too, said that the source is vital, but how biased it is affects the viewer's

trust. Indeed, MG (group 2) claimed that how the facts including the historical ones are reported and how the frames are chosen have a huge impact on credibility. On the other hand, others found out that the choice of words and the visual accompanying the news are crucial as these also have an effect on trustworthiness. In SS' opinion, biased language alters public's perception of news events. CT, PG and VK added that words that offend the readers create a perception that they are only utilized to distract people from the truth and make them focus on useless details. Eventually, "the accuracy in wording is key" said JBK. Other factors affect news credibility too. As mentioned by TN, the author's political affiliation can make someone trust or distrust whatever he/she is reading. "Suppose that TV host Dima Sadek writes a tweet. Because she is known as a strong FPM and Hezbollah opponent, whatever she tweets will be deemed by the supporters of these two parties as not credible at all." TN, in addition to other participants like SA, MN, and GMA avowed that an attached picture, video, document, or audio are necessary. "It is a plus and it is easier for us to believe when we see or hear something, or when there is tangible, rather than simply reading without proof", clarified GMA. However, in PM's opinion, visuals and documents can be edited and adulterated. She exemplified that when TV host Joe Maalouf accused minister Gebran Bassil of owning an airplane and a yacht, the presenter showed pictures during his show on LBCI back then. However, when Bassil filed a lawsuit against Maalouf, it turned out that the latter's report was fake even though he showed proof. Group 4 discussed the same Bassil-Maalouf example. Accordingly, LC argued that "believing or not highly depends on the public's mentality and affiliations. She elaborated that even though Bassil was proven innocent by the court, many still believe that he really owns a private jet. "That's why no news feature can affect credibility especially in Bassil's case".

Lastly, while some assumed that every feature matters since all of them make up the entire news, SK (group 3) stated that there is nothing specific that affects human's perception. The reason is that even the most trustworthy sources can spread false data and fake visuals. That is why it is the audience's responsibility to remain alert and media literate to filter the misleading information and refrain from sharing everything they see or read especially online.

9. Fake News During 17 October: Did Students Believe It?

After identifying the elements that affect the accuracy of news, the moderator shared six false pieces that were spread on different media and created controversy in 2019. Correspondingly, participants were asked to classify which was fake and which was true and justify their answers.

News 1:

" بعد تدهور مفاجئ لرئيس الجمهورية ميشال عون إلى مستشفى أوتيل ديوقنة لحالته الصحية "

Source: LBCI¹ – October 23, 2019

For this headline, 15 participants claimed it was fake, while 5 deemed it true and 4 said "I don't know" or were hesitant. Many of those who answered "fake" claimed that this story became so consumed that it became clear it was character assassination, "or at least uncovers what his opponents wish for." VK explained that the media keep on spreading fake news about the President's health because "it became music to the public's ears", taking into consideration that many joke about him being old. While many rationalized that what the media share about President Aoun's health aims at politically assassinating him, JB (group 1) considered that the goal of it is to justify for the citizens why the president is not standing beside them during these hardships. In group 3, the greater number of partakers took the news' date as a reference.

¹ LBCI: The Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation International is a private local TV founded in 1985.

Suitably, they agreed that the timing of spreading this headline is not innocent which makes them doubt it. MM (group 2) said that there is no evidence although the statement is coming from LBCI which is considered a credible source. Also, RY mentioned that “it feels not true even if LBCI shared it”. Comparably, PM (group 2) and SS (group 1) justified that news about the President is usually issued from his office only, that’s why the information is false. In SS’ words, “regardless of how credible I believe LBCI is, the source that issued a statement is vital to the accuracy when there is a certain protocol for doing things”. However, all of those who believed what LBCI wrote avowed that the station is well-established and known to be neutral and trustworthy.

News 2:

ة في لبنان رم التي لا صوت يعلو فوق صوت الثواباسيل ثابت لا يتزعزع. ففي هذه الأي... ولكن جبران، يريد لصوته أن يبقى مسموعا، تقه على عة تدومة الجكفأخذ ملف تشكيل الح، حتى أنه، رجاحين بدأت تلوح أو هام المخ، بالاتفاق على الوزير لتشكيل الحكومة ففدي رئيسا مكلالسابق محمد الص، وتاريخ الاستشارات النيابية الملزمة اسم قفز إلى الإعلام وحدد، وشكل ف له بالمرصادة لكن الشارع و. الحكومة العتيدة، فأسقط الصفدي الذي تربطه علاقات مميزة بالعهد ومنعه من تسجيل اسمه في نادي رؤساء الحكومة.

Source: Al Hurra² (الحررة) – November 22, 2019

Concerning this part of Al Hurra’s article, 12 NDU students classified it as fake, 7 true and 5 had no clue. Majorly, participants referred to the source’s affiliation or political agenda to make up their minds. In fact, 8 out of the 12 explained that news shared from Al Hurra about Gebran Bassil will definitely be against him due to the channel’s policy which stands against him and the FPM in general. MN summarized the above idea with a short expression: “It’s always vendetta

² Al Hurra is a United States-based public Arabic-language satellite TV channel launched in 2004 that airs news to audience in the MENA region.

against Gebran”! MM mentioned that this article seems like an opinion not a fact; hence, subjective content. Besides, “it gives no value nor has a slight effect on what was going on, so why bother assessing it anyways?!” MM’s response thus describes the relation between news prominence and fact checking discussed earlier. SA evaluated the news with respect to the political events that were taking place. Indeed, he clarified that as far as he knows, Bassil is not close nor allied to former minister Safadi. Therefore, he has no benefits to endorse him. LC and GB (group 4), based their assumptions on different factors including Al Hurra’s agenda, their choice of words, and the political situation in Lebanon. To illustrate GB announced that: “even if we disregard the source, bias in the news is obvious. It is mainly reflected through the choice of words. For example, a neutral medium will never prejudge that “no voice will ever be stronger or louder than that of the revolution.” This is so subjective. Also, it was clear that after making former Prime Minister Saad Hariri a hero following his resignation, the demonstrators were rejecting everyone for different reasons not just Safadi no matter who endorsed him.” LC too stated that “considering the political agenda of Al Hurra as well as the choice of words used in this text, this is definitely fake, not to mention that Mr. Safadi is not close to the FPM nor the President which gives us zero chance to believe this article.” The seven persons who trusted the news acknowledged that Al Hurra is a credible source. EH, JBK (group 3), and PG (group 4) believed that what’s written is compatible with the events that were taking place locally. In the same group, CT ensured that this news was also mentioned by sources other than Al Hurra hence it is accurate.

News 3:

The moderator showed the students Hicham Haddad³'s tweet in which he reported that during Gebran Bassil and Saad Hariri's meeting on the 5th of November 2019, Bassil said that I will not leave the cabinet because of two random people who protested as this aims at targeting the Christians in Lebanon. He furthered that the demonstrators began to fight each other so politicians can wait until the revolution is over to discuss the formation of a new cabinet.



This tweet was believed by only 2, 3 were hesitant, and 19 did not trust it. The main reason for classifying it as fake was the source. In the participants' opinion, Hicham Haddad is not that qualified to talk politics. "Being famous does not make him eligible to discuss everything", argued PG, VB and JBK. Other than "he is not reliable", reasons for distrusting him included:

- "based on his show's content, the way he talks and the sarcasm he throws everywhere, I would never believe him" (EH)
- "Hicham imaged a story and wrote the script on Twitter for the public to see it" (SA)

³ Hicham Haddad is a TV host/comedian and one of the leading public figures who had a great influence during the uprising.

- how did he know that? Where was he during that meeting? (JBK)
- “Hicham is a comedian, I can’t take him seriously” (PG)
- “Knowing that it is really probable that Gebran might use typical words, I think that Hicham was smart enough to use expressions that are attributable to Bassil like talking about Christians’ rights, so that his tweet will be believable, but same as Al Hurra news, considering Hicham’s political views and past relationship with the FPM, I can’t think of him as credible when he talks about the FPM, Bassil or President Aoun regardless of his influence especially in this tweet. That is purely ‘nonsense tea spilling’. Like seriously where was he hiding during Hariri-Bassil meeting to hear all of that and say the word “verbatim”?” (LC)
- “He’s a comedian with a huge interest in politics, but that doesn’t make him reliable to know what was happening behind the scenes” (GB)
- “Hicham is no longer close to either parties, there is no way that he might have a clue regarding what was going on” (SS).

Those who believed Haddad reckoned that he is credible source and probably knows some details. VK assumed that it is so likely for any politician to utter the words mentioned in this tweet. Therefore, what Hicham wrote makes sense. On the flip side, MG, who said that the tweet might be true, clarified that what makes him not sure of the answer is the fact that “Hicham surely hates Gebran after the conflict between them both when the former was an FPM supporter. Yet, what he is saying might be correct if we consider the tension that was occurring at that time between Hariri and Bassil.”

News 4:

Thawra Map, a social media platform that maps all locations where protests take place or where politicians are, spotted Gebran Bassil leaving the country using his private jet and shared this image on its Instagram page. [Check Appendix]

20 out of 24 partakers did not believe what Thawra Map posted on Instagram. According to them, there is still no document that proves that Bassil has a private jet. More accurately, SA argued that “the court has already proven that the former minister does not own an airplane so what the social platform shared is outdated news that can no longer convince anyone especially that typical news about Bassil’s wealth has circulated too much and became clear that its aim is character assassination.” While 15 out of 20 guaranteed that this is part of the political assassination strategy made on the politician, the remaining 5 partakers examined the image to justify their answers. Point in fact, LC declared that this is not how a private jet looks like on the inside and that the blue seats are that of the Middle East Airlines! RY said that the pictures seems old, KS and AS viewed that the photo is cropped hence not clear, while MM could not consider a random picture as a real proof. Nonetheless, PM ensured that Thawra Map previously shared many locations that were true so the Lebanese rely on it to remain updated on the movement of the politicians. “It can be that Thawra Map has people working on the airport who sent that picture; thus I believe them.” However, MG disagreed by stating that “there is no logical reason behind what this platform has been doing and that their content and actions are childish and without any objective”. At last, PG concluded that what they shared is fake and was a trial to incite the citizens and make them join the revolution.

News 5

انعقدت في تمام الساعة الـ11 من صباح اليوم بتوقيت بيروت أولى جلسات الحكومة منذ اندلاع التظاهرات والاحتجاجات التي شملت جميع أنحاء الشعب لبنان، وذلك بعد مبادرة من نائب رئيس الوزراء سعد الحريري للتوافق بين القوى السياسية

د تم نقل بعض الوزراء التي تتألف منها الحكومة على تنفيذ فوري لحزمة من الإصلاحات المالية والاقتصادية العاجلة. وء إلى اللبناني لتسهيل مرورهم بين حشود المتظاهرين الأحب بعيدا عبر سيارات الصليرقص، باعتبار أن المحتجين يسمحون بمرور سيارات الإسعاف التابعة للصليب الأحمر وعدم إعاقتهما.

الإثنين 21/أكتوبر/2019

Source: Reuters

Knowing that Reuters is not the source that wrote this news, the researcher added it to check whether it will affect the students' perception or not. Truly, 3 out of the 5 who trusted the news referred to Reuters as a credible news service. However, GB refuted this by questioning whether Reuters really share such details about a certain country. He furthered that if it does, this is a proof that even credible sources can mention false things! Besides, VK believed it because she assumed that politicians would exploit anything to protect themselves, and SK professed that "anything can be done in Lebanon". Hence the news "logically makes sense". The 3 people (RY, AS, JK) who said "I am not sure" agreed that they need to see a picture or a video that will make them take a final decision. All of the rest denoted that the Red Cross' mission is noble and humanitarian so they would never do so. VB described that "it is shameful to ridicule a sacred mission of an international organization." SA avowed that this is illogical because it will ruin the Red Cross' image worldwide. Also, people were everywhere on the streets and some of them where in front of the politicians' houses so they could have easily spotted them and attacked them if they wanted. Add to this, politicians were able to move around easily at times when the roads were blocked even on the doctors! "Take the case of Socialist and Progressive Party's leader Walid Jumblatt. The rebels not only opened the road for him and his son (a deputy), but took selfies with them too! Accordingly, our politicians don't have to ask the Red Cross for

help!” Regardless, PM recalled the events and deduced that the council of ministers was not doing meetings until the resignation of PM Saad Hariri which was on the 29th of October.

Thereof, she classified the news as fake.

News 6:

The Lebanese Internal Security Forces (ISF) summoning social media users who have disrespected or assaulted the President of the Republic via text messages. [Check Appendix]

Concerning the last news shared, 4 claimed it is true while the rest said it is fake. They all had mutual justifications. Everyone, except SA and VB, who rejected it noted that there is a process that the ISF follows to summon those who assault the president. “It is never done through SMS”, they explained. TN added: “what if someone does not show up, deletes the message and says that he never received it?!” Moreover, SA and VB paid close attention to the text and realized that there is a mistake ("إساءة" must be written: إساءة). Suitably, they adjudged that it is a fabricated message. On the contrary, the 4 participants who considered that the news is true relied on past events in which the ISF summoned citizens who shamed Lebanese presidents. That’s why, they believed that “this is doable”.

In general, most of the students were able to discern that all news was fake using the features they have mentioned, while only the minority assumed they are true for a variety of reasons.

Discussion

In an attempt to link this study's findings to the literature, one would firstly deduce that, just like the United States' 2016 presidential election, Lebanon's 17 October uprising has "put the problem of fake news on the agenda" too (Nielsen & Graves, 2017). According to the data generated from the four focus groups conducted with 24 NDU students, social media has really "been the life blood of fake news" (Klein & Weller, 2017). Similar to Tandoc (2018) explanation, partakers deduced three out of six types of fake news (RQ1). They are fabrication, manipulation, and propaganda. But they added to these concepts agenda setting and character assassination. Correspondingly, they concurred with Tandoc's definition that misinformation is all the "stories that contain fake facts aiming at spreading propaganda and influencing the audience's viewpoints, producing funny content, and making profit.

On the students' level, and to answer research question 3, their responses proved that, compared with the Uses and Gratifications theory, they utilize, read/watch, and share news on their social platforms for six purposes. They mainly rely on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook to stay updated and be able to make good decisions. For example, they frequently checked social pages to know about road blockage and accordingly determine what route to take. Add to that, they

consider social media as a communicatory utility, opinion expression, data sharing and hence social interaction tool. By voicing their opinions, correcting misleading data through comments or quote retweets, sharing facts, achievements, or beautiful images about Lebanon, as well as liking and retweeting content, they engage with others and showcase their standpoints regarding patriotic and political topics. However, because many said that they do not often share news on their social media pages, and based on their justifications, one can conclude that they refrain from doing it either because they find it useless to engage in online political fights or since they are afraid of social isolation. As for entertainment, they not only use social media for escapism and enjoyment, but based on SA's answer, he screenshots and sends things he sees online to his friends "to make fun of" the content creators. A seventh usage was deduced from MG's response and it is that he benefits from Twitter mainly for more exposure. This makes him a reliable source of information which is important for him as a Political Science student with ambitions of becoming a trusted political analyst.

Bearing in mind that many responses were biased, basically pro-revolution versus anti-revolution, all participants have agreed that many false information was circulating throughout the protests period. In congruence with Allcott & Gentzkow's (2017) motives, youngsters expressed that the causes behind spreading typical news were financial, political/ideological, and socio-psychological (RQ1). To elaborate, the students explained that platforms have agendas and by serving it, they benefit financially. Also, some news is shared for a scoop; hence clickbait which generates revenues as well. On the political level, they considered that all of this was strategically planned from either the pro-regime or pro-revolution. The aims were character assassinating the Free Patriotic Movement, MP Gebran Bassil, and President Michel Aoun, targeting their population, harming their reputation and distorting their ideology. These social

pages also wanted to instigate demonstrators against politicians by creating and disseminating false content. On the other hand, politicians, through fake news on social media, wanted to preserve their supporters and convince them that the revolution is harmful for the entire country. Both in general needed to sway the audience through news fabrication. As for the social-psychological level, wrong information against particular people, especially Bassil in the partakers' opinion, that were shared on social media created a buzz. Accordingly, theorizing about everything became trendy so almost everybody wanted to jump on that bandwagon. This gave these people more exposure which increases their self-esteem.

With all of this in mind, NDU students do not think of social media as a reliable source of information (RQ2). However, those who do, majorly follow credible sources like well-established TV stations or newspapers, or journalists not any user spreading news. Additionally, some believe that influencers or pages like Political Pen and The Lawyard are trustworthy, while the majority don't. They think that they mainly spread opinions; therefore, they are subjective therefore not reliable. Similarly, when it comes to Hicham Haddad on Twitter or Thawra Map on Instagram, partakers do not believe them because they are either not qualified to provide political news or have a set agenda. All of this, add to the fact that students listed traditional media like LBCI, Annahar, The Independent... who developed an online presence, indicates that regardless of all development in the media industry, even the youth still depend on old outlets to stay updated with what is happening around the globe.

Even though the participants agree that social media played a positive role throughout the demonstration, almost everyone acknowledged that it harmed the society as a whole. The positive aspect of it was framing the revolution as a nation-wide, atypical event that is essential for the future of Lebanon in addition to increasing the citizens' patriotism. Nevertheless, it

created chaos and fear. Thereof, in conformity with Shibutani (1966), the more anxiety and uncertainty happened, the more rumors were circulating to fill the public's need of orientation. Yet, social media users were no longer able to differentiate between what was accurate and what was false which aggravated confusion. It also gave voice to everyone; so anyone was able to voice his/her point of view and theorize about everything even if he/she is not eligible to do so. In the same context, it helped in the emergence of citizen journalists with which "come a lot of inaccuracies and rumors." Moreover, they consider that social media exploited freedom of expression to serve each page owner's agenda and sometimes precipitated the spread of hate speech; a term often confused with free speech! For instance, partakers listed some cases where many were defamed and made fun of because of their different political views. All of these made participants believe that "things were no longer under control which speed us the dissemination of fake news. As a result, almost everyone, even the ones who said that social media had a beneficial role, admitted that "at first it was valuable and advantageous, but after a while we became bombarded by too much posts and coverage that we stopped following news, listening, or even interacting" (RQ1).

As mentioned earlier, social media is not the primary source of news for teens. But, because any news outlet, even the most credible ones, are prone to making mistakes, students assume that one cannot label social media as "not credible at all" and people can rely on it for information. However, the participants mentioned certain features that affect news accuracy and their belief or disbelief of any piece they read (RQ4). Foremost, the majority said that the source is the most vital followed by the visuals that accompany the news, the author and the choice of words. Besides, 14 out of the 24 partakers claimed that they do fact check. While 11 out of the 14 practice this always, 3 avowed that it depends on the prominence of the news and how fishy they

think it is. In general, most of them do this by checking different sources or seeking an expert's opinion. Others visit the social media pages of the subject of the news and see what this person has written or rely on official pages like that of the Lebanese Presidency, Lebanese Army... from which the official and accurate clarification is issued.

When the moderator shared with the participants some of the fake news spread during the revolution, it was clear that they took the features they have mentioned into consideration to assess each's precision (RQ5). Correspondingly, NDU students reflected on the source upon reading news that mentioned inaccurate information about President Aoun or deputy Bassil. As many classified it as "fake", their justification was that the outlet's policy stands against them. Others did not believe it due to its repetitiveness, so "it became consumed and no longer trusted". Other news was evaluated based on the political scene or from a political perspective. For example, Hicham Haddad's tweet was deemed as fake or imaginary considering the conflict between him and Bassil when former was an FPM supporter. A few participants considered Haddad's current job which is a comedian; hence cannot be taken seriously when he talks politics. Haddad just like Thawra Map were classified as influencers with certain aims like instigating the protestors, thereof not believable as well. The main reason is that not every influencer is qualified to discuss political topics add to the idea that the content they shared is naïve. Additionally, partakers relied on their faith in a certain organization like the Red Cross to reject a piece they read about it. Their chief explanation was "the Red Cross would never do this". Finally, they looked into typing mistakes, errors, or examined an attached picture to accept or refute the news presented to them by the moderator. Same applies to those who said that the pieces presented were true. In addition to "the source is credible", some believed whatever was shared because they related it to what was happening, what is usually uttered by politicians, and

what these officials usually do. Accordingly, they assumed that fleeing away from the country during a crisis, using the Red Cross to arrive somewhere, summoning revolutionaries... are all logical and probable to happen in Lebanon. But in summary, the majority were not tricked by fake news disseminated during the revolution and were able to identify the games that the media was playing during that time using misleading information.

Conclusion

Fake news is, and has always been, an increasingly common part of the media (Tandoc et al., 2017). As fake news have become part of our daily news routine particularly after the emergence of an unprecedented Lebanese revolution in 2019 along with social media which offered the tools to generate and distribute fake news rapidly.

Considering the chaos this phenomenon created, it has become paramount to explore causes, effects and motives behind social platforms' sharing of inaccurate information from a Uses and Gratifications perspective. Generating insightful results was possible by conducting four focus groups with NDU students majoring in different fields.

By employing this method and the theory, the researcher was able to find out that the main motives behind sharing fake news online are financial, socio-psychological, and political including character assassination. Add to that, this study shows that many false information is preplanned keeping in mind that platforms creating this content have an agenda to serve. The findings were aligned with the literature which mentioned that social media helped precipitating this phenomenon. They were additionally congruent with the theory's motives of media usage. That is to say, youths utilize and share news on their pages for education, interaction, communication, opinion expression, and entertainment purposes. On the other hand, it was clear

from the partakers' answers that Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are not reliable when it comes to news; therefore, they were not swayed by what they read and were able to differentiate between false and true data. Also, whenever they failed at guessing if what they read was accurate, students sought fact checking using different methods. Nonetheless, this phenomenon has affected the society especially by creating too much doubt and exploiting freedom of expression, all of which resulted in a nation-wide chaos.

Limitations

The current Lebanese crisis and the pandemic made it hard for the researcher to conduct live focus groups. Therefore, they were done online which prohibited the moderator from assessing nonverbal communication. So the findings were only limited to what was expressed verbally.

Also time limitations and social restrictions due to Covid hindered the opportunity of implementing a quantitative methodology that would also be beneficial and would allow the study to be generalized on the Lebanese population.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Picture showing Gebran Bassil leaving the country.



Appendix 2

The Army Command issued a statement refuting the circulating "news" that the army has declared an Emergency Status Alert and imposed curfews.



تداول بعض مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي بياناً يُزعم أنه صادر عن قيادة الجيش لإعلان حالة الطوارئ وحظر التجول في المناطق اللبنانية، يهّم هذه القيادة أنّ تنفي صحة هذا البيان والمعلومات الواردة فيه، وتدعو المواطنين إلى عدم الانجرار وراء الشائعات والتأكد من صحّة المعلومات التي تصدر عن هذه القيادة على مواقعها الرسمية.

Appendix 3

The general director of the Lebanese telecommunication service provider Ogero, Imad Kreidieh, addressed this false news in a tweet on his official Twitter account.

Government announces an internet ban/shutdown



Appendix 4

The Lebanese Internal Security Forces have denied ever sending out any such messages.

Threatening messages from ISF accusing social media users of the crime of disrespecting the President

