

Graduate Section

Constructing the Establishment – Foreign Enemy Conspiracies: A Comparative Analysis of the Media Framing in the USA and Egypt

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Abstract: Conspiracy theories present a relevant phenomenon in society and are studied within different disciplines. One of the aspects of analyzing conspiracy theories is understanding the pattern whereby social movements utilize the media to construct and spread those narratives. In that regard, social movements frame certain events as part of a conspiracy. By applying an international comparative approach, this study examines the media framing of events as a conspiracy theory in the USA and Egypt. The study focuses on political conspiracies targeting the local elite or political establishment as serving foreign enemies. Qualitative framing analysis is applied to analyze news segments (n = 140), 80 articles, and 60 videos from the Egyptian Islamist media and the Make America Great Again (MAGA) conservative media in the USA. The results show a huge similarity in the frames utilized by the media in both countries in constructing conspiracy theories. The Egyptian and American media constructed conspiracy narratives about claimed secret collusion between the elite leaders and foreign enemies. Whereas the Egyptian media morally framed the conspiracy as treason, the American media framed it as part of corruption. Moreover, the historical continuity in the Egyptian conspiracy theories was more obvious than in the theories in the USA. The empirical analysis shows that conspiracy theories are strategically used in the media to achieve certain political goals.

Keywords: conspiracy theories, framing, social movements, Egypt, USA

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Introduction

On 6th January 2021, a mob attack on the capitol building in the USA took place. In a rare incident, at least in the USA's modern history, the peaceful transfer of power was threatened. One of the main narratives behind this mob attack was the QAnon conspiracy theory, which claimed that Donald Trump was saving the USA from a secret satanic cabal trying to rule the country (Bond & Neville-Shepard, 2023, p. 687). The incident and the discourse underlying it were an incarnation of the last episode of the negative anti-democratic repercussions of conspiracy theories (Bond & Neville-Shepard, 2023). It sheds light on the relevance of conspiracy theories and the media's role in spreading them. Besides, it alerts attention to the pattern whereby social movements and political actors instrumentalize the media to purposefully disseminate conspiracy narratives with the aim of mobilizing their supporters and achieving particular political goals (Mercieca, 2019; Plenta, 2020; Schmid, 2014).

Scholars from various disciplines (including psychology, politics, and sociology) searched for a scientific explanation for the spread of conspiracy theories (Douglas et al., 2019; Keeley, 1999; Oliver & Wood, 2014; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009; Uscinski et al., 2020). Communication scientists focused on the role of mainstream media (Yablokov, 2015), populist leaders (Hameleers, 2021), and the Internet (Clarke, 2007) in spreading conspiracy theories. However, most of the literature examined the Western world in general (Bergmann, 2018) and the USA, in particular (Fenster, 2008; Uscinski & Parent, 2014; Walker, 2013). Yet there are some scholars, such as Nefes (2013) and Allen (2016) who focused on certain countries, whereas a few others studied specific regions like the Arab world (Butter & Reinkowski, 2014a; Gray, 2010). Nevertheless, the comparative approach to studying the role of media in constructing and spreading conspiracy theories is still lacking.

Against this backdrop, this study aims to compare the media's role in constructing and spreading conspiracy theories in two culturally dissimilar countries, namely, Egypt and the USA. The study elucidates how social movements from both countries utilize the media to strategically construct and spread conspiracy theories and thereafter compare these constructed theories. The two examined social movements are the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement in the USA. MAGA is a populist conservative movement that has prevailed within the Republican party as a support group for Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential elections (for a summary of the roots of this movement, see Biebricher, 2024). As a result of its populist ideology, MAGA's media outlets propagated anti-establishment conspiracy theories, and they ultimately succeeded in dominating the conservative communication ecosystem (Benkler et al., 2018).

Through studying the conspiracy theories spread by these two groups, the ultimate goal is to elaborate on the similarities and differences between them and, accordingly, uncover the narrative templates utilized by these movements to construct

conspiracy theories that resonate with their target audience. This comparison contributes to the literature about (1) the strategic usage of conspiracy theories for political mobilization and (2) the pattern whereby the different socio-political and cultural contexts influence and direct the process of constructing conspiracy theories by political actors.

Conspiracy theories in the USA and Egypt

The history of the USA is filled with a plethora of different conspiracy theories. Initially, in the 18th and 19th centuries, most of these theories revolved around the idea of an outside enemy, such as a foreign government or the catholic church, plotting evil plans against the USA (Butter & Reinkowski, 2014b; Walker, 2013) or more specifically against the American government (Walker, 2013). This allegedly conspiring outside enemy has been shifting throughout the USA's history according to international political circumstances. For instance, during the Cold War, this enemy was the Soviet Union; thereafter, during the Trump presidency, it became Mexico, the Muslims, and China (Hellinger, 2019, p. 110).

In the middle of the 20th century, a relevant shift took place, as the perceived enemy became not only an outside one but the American government itself, and the recent conspiracy narratives entailed plots by, not against, the state (Butter & Reinkowski, 2014b, p. 11). One of the manifestations of this conspiracy template in US history emerged in the myriad of theories about the Illuminati, especially the American Illuminati, as a clandestine omnipresent cabal that controlled society and plotted against the American people (Butter & Reinkowski, 2014b). Such theories were connected to the populist sentiment of different epochs, whereby a discursive demarcation is established between the conspiring elite and the people (Bergmann, 2018; Hameleers, 2021). While it is hard to find a precise definition of what MAGA conservatives would define as the 'conspiring elite' in these theories, studies about the recent conspiratory discourse within the conservative ecosystem highlight that they usually remain vague but often refer to high-level governmental officials, academics, judges, media figures, and Democratic party politicians as the most common groups that are considered as falling under this category (Benkler et al., 2018).

Another ensemble of anti-elite conspiracy narratives accuses them of colluding with foreign enemies (Butter & Reinkowski, 2014a; Walker, 2013). This leitmotif has endured into the 21st Century, for instance, when Fox News accused Hilary Clinton of secretly selling Uranium to Russia (Benkler et al., 2018, p. 168). With the ascent of Donald Trump to power, building on canonical conspiratorial discourse from the past and linking it with contemporary American politics, these anti-elite conspiracy theories started to move from the peripherals of the American political spectrum into the mainstream (Barkun, 2003; Benkler et al., 2018; Bergmann, 2018).

From a media system perspective, the populist outlets within the Republican Party, such as the Gateway Pundit, Breitbart, and Infowars, have become the impetus for numerous conspiracy theories in the USA (Benkler et al., 2018). This trouble corresponds with the recent development in the American media system, wherein the conservative right-wing media became more polarizing and separated from the moderate voices inside the Republican Party (Hemmer, 2016; Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). As a result, especially after the rise of the MAGA movement inside the party (Biebricher, 2024), the conservative communication ecosystem transformed into an isolated propaganda network where populist discourse and conspiracy narratives find fertile ground to flourish, and the center-right is hardly represented (Benkler et al., 2018).

Meanwhile, in Egypt, conspiracy theories had a different history. In contrast to criticized culturally deterministic explanations for conspiracy theories in the Arab world, such as Pipes' (1996) view that the Arab culture is the reason behind their spread, recently, scholars started to inspect the socio-political reasons underlying their prevalence. For instance, Gray (2010) elaborates on how conspiracy theories that flourished in the Arab world were connected to particular historical developments and political circumstances.

According to Gray (2010), the fact that the region experienced real conspiracies in the past transformed these plots into archetypical events that gradually constituted enduring cultural templates to perceive the current incidents. For example, the coup organized by the CIA in Iran became an archetype for Western conspiracies in the region to have loyalist leaders in office. The coup was orchestrated in 1953 to topple the Iranian democratically elected prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddeq, and put the pro-Western Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in power instead (Fathi, 2014). Nonetheless, for Arabs, the most influential recent event that affected the conspiratorial discourse in their collective memory has been the establishment of Israel and its successive victories against the Arabs until 1967 (Gray, 2010; Rabo, 2014). The victorious rise of Israel, the Western support for it, and the Arab countries' defeats against it paved the way for many conspiracy theories as an easy interpretation for the successive failures (Gray, 2010, p. 54). Accordingly, political actors in the region purposefully expand on these historical conspiracies and their resulting narrative templates to claim that history is repeating itself in a cycle (Snyder, 2018) and that the constructed current conspiracies are an extension of the old ones.

Besides these historical explanations for conspiracy theories in the Arab world, Gray (2010) also emphasizes how the socio-political structures in the region, especially the perpetual power struggle between the autocratic regime and the Islamists, have been a source for the spread of many theories. Both sides have tried to instrumentalize conspiracy theories against the other to delegitimize it (Berridge, 2018; Gray, 2010). This point is particularly relevant to understand the recent conspiracy theories in Egypt.

After the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood President Mohamed Morsi by General Abdelfattah Sisi in 2013, the Egyptian public sphere became radically polarized between Islamists and army supporters (Badr, 2020; Hafez, 2015; Ranko, 2015). As a result of the triumph of Sisi's regime and the consolidation of its power, it declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization and closed all Islamist media outlets related to the Brotherhood, leading them to flee to Turkey and continue their political and discursive battle with the regime from exile (Magued, 2018). Consequently, the Muslim Brotherhood optimized its classical communication strategies (Richter, 2011), which have always entailed constructing frames that "tap into cultural experiences and collective memories" of their audiences (Wiktorowicz, 2004, p. 18), and started to formulate a new discourse against Sisi through its transnational outlets (Magued, 2018). Besides, as a result of the high level of political and discursive regional connectivity in the Arabic hemisphere (Kraidy, 2011), Saudi Arabia and the UAE stood with Abdelfattah Sisi against the Brotherhood due to their fear of the rise of the latter and they became also part of the anti-Islamist transnational alliance (Monier & Ranko, 2013, p. 118).

Due to the political developments in both countries, the MAGA movement and the Egyptian Islamists positioned themselves against the establishment. While the Muslim Brotherhood has for years been discursively and politically confronting the state (Ranko, 2015), the US conservatives have been moving in the last decades, especially since the rise of Trump and the MAGA movement, into more anti-establishment populist discourse against the establishment (Benkler et al., 2018; Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). The 'establishment' here refers to state institutions, such as the army, judicial system, or foreign ministry officials, in addition to the ruling government and high-level leaders like the president. This term is utilized to shed light on the conspiracy theories that target not only the current ruling actors like Joe Biden and Sisi but also the unelected officials and institutions such as the Department of Justice in the USA and army generals in Egypt.

Theoretical framework and research questions

Since conspiracy theories have been studied within various disciplines, there have been many attempts to provide an analytical framework to study them (Butter & Knight, 2015). One of the most prominent frameworks in that regard has been Hofstadter's (1964) approach to viewing conspiracy theories as a phenomenon of irrational discourse originating in pathological, irrational fear and confined within the margins of society. However, this approach has been criticized for trying to apply "a theory of individual pathology to a social phenomenon" (Fenster, 2008, p. 42). Additionally, such an individualistic psychological approach overlooks the socio-political structures underlying the spread of these theories (Göths, 2023). Against this backdrop, scholars started investigating the political and discursive circumstances wherein conspiracy theories flourish (Fenster, 2008; Miller, 2002; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009).

Building upon this “societal-centric” approach (Gray, 2014, p. 247), communication scientists moved forward in investigating the role of media in disseminating conspiracy theories (Stempel et al., 2007). With the rise of the internet, the focus shifted to how social media and the new communication ecosystems facilitate the diffusion of these theories (Smith & Graham, 2019; Wood, 2013) and the mechanism whereby theories circulate within online communities (Mahl et al., 2021). Another line of communication research framed conspiracy theories as part of the post-truth misinformation and fake news campaigns (Bergmann, 2018; Bessi et al., 2015).

Progressing from this point, some scholars began to deal with conspiracy theories as a form of strategic communication that aims to achieve particular political goals (Madisson & Ventsel, 2021; Plenta, 2020). This line of research examines how states (Yablokov, 2015) and social movements (Schmid, 2014) purposefully formulate conspiracy theories and utilize the media to disseminate them. Building upon this framework, this study focuses on the last aspect, i.e., how social movements construct and communicate conspiracy narratives for political gains.

Correspondingly, scholars have developed various conceptual and theoretical frameworks for studying social movements’ communication tactics (McAdam et al., 1996; Mattoni & Treré, 2014). One of the pivotal concepts in that regard is social movements’ framing, which explains how they tactically cover and depict ongoing events in a selective utilitarian way to reach particular ends (Snow & Benford, 1988; Snow et al., 1986). Hence, movements “frame, or assign meaning to and interpret relevant events and conditions in ways that are intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists” (Snow & Benford, 1988, p. 198). In that regard, the success of the movements’ framing depends on its consistency with the culture of the target audience (Snow & Benford, 1988, p. 198), or in other words, with the popularly accepted frames in the culture (Entman, 1993). Thus, social movements need to tailor their framing of the event in a way that achieves narrative fidelity with the main accepted narratives in the culture (Snow & Benford, 1988, p. 210).

This notion corresponds with van Gorp’s (2007) constructionist approach to framing, where he argues that the framing process incorporates the four reasoning devices developed by Entman (1993): *problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation*, plus an implicit cultural phenomenon or narrative that underlines the frames. Thus, frames are operating under overarching cultural templates and narratives that are accepted by society.

Against this background, this study seeks to fathom and compare the frames and their underlying narratives constructed by the two social movements. Accordingly, it tries to answer the following questions:

RQ1. Which frames are used by the MAGA media in the USA and Islamist media in Egypt to cover certain events as part of a conspiracy theory?

RQ2. What are the similarities and differences between the MAGA media and Islamist Egyptian media narratives in their framing of events as part of a conspiracy?

While the first question inspects Entman's four reasoning devices that constitute the frames, the second one examines the constructed narratives resulting from the framing and their connection with the popular cultural templates in both societies.

Methodology

Generally, there are myriad types and forms of conspiracy theories (see, for example, the typology of Walker, 2013). However, it is beyond the scope of this study to examine and compare them all. Thus, the aim is focused on uncovering the strategic political aspects underlying the construction of conspiracy theories and their relations with the canonical conspiracy narratives about the establishment and foreign enemies. Accordingly, this study analyses only political conspiracy narratives that revolve around the establishment and foreign enemies. These two particular forms were chosen because they were the most salient and repeated ones in the literature about the theories in the two selected countries.

The selection of the Egyptian Islamists and the MAGA movement was conducted with the aim of comparing conspiracy theories from different regions, cultures, and political systems to foster global comparisons (Butter & Reinkowski, 2014b, p. 3). Taking into consideration the different socio-political and ideological contexts wherein the two social movements operate, one of the main aspects of their selection was their political positioning against the establishment. Hence, on the one hand, comparing the two movements sheds light on the construction of anti-establishment conspiracy theories within different political, ideological, and cultural contexts. On the other hand, these different contexts also bring limitations to the comparison. One of these limitations is the dissimilarity between the ideological backgrounds of the two movements, which in turn can influence their construction of conspiracy theories and was out of the scope of this study. Another limitation is the different ownership structures of the chosen media outlets due to the variations between the media systems of Egypt (Badr, 2020) and the USA (Benkler et al., 2018; Hallin & Mancini, 2004). While in the USA, the MAGA conservative media are privately owned ones with political bias (Benkler et al., 2018), in Egypt, the Islamist media are owned by the movement and working from exile (Magued, 2018).

A qualitative methodology has been chosen to answer the two research questions. The selection of the platforms was conducted according to their prominence, number of followers, and how officially they are tied to the movement. Besides, the platforms were chosen according to their format comparability, i.e., a website and a broadcasting channel from each country. In the USA, the selected outlets were 'Breitbart' and 'Fox News' because they were the main actors in the MAGA conservative media ecosystem in the period after Trump's election (Benkler et al., 2018). The

chosen Egyptian Islamist media outlets are 'Ikhwanonline' because it is the official website of the Muslim Brotherhood, and 'Al-Sharq TV,' which is one of the main exiled Islamist channels (Magued, 2018).

To select the articles and videos from the four platforms, a purposeful sample was conducted, which is a non-probability sampling technique whereby the researcher chooses the sample that is relevant to answer the posed research questions (Bryman, 2012, p. 418). According to the literature review about the predominant recent anti-establishment and foreign enemies conspiracies spread by the two movements and deep observation of the main conspiratorial discourse on the examined outlets, particular keywords were chosen to search for the sample. These keywords included 'US media foreign power' 'deep state' 'globalist' for the USA, and 'Israel,' 'Arab leaders,' 'eamil sihyuniu' (Zionist agent), 'mukhatat sahyuniun' (Zionist plan) for Egypt. The chosen period of analysis for the American outlets was the years 2019 and 2020 because this period included the climax of the Mueller investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 elections, which was one of the main incidents utilized by the MAGA conservative media as proof of the so-called deep state coup against Trump (Benkler et al., 2018). For Egypt, the analyzed period was the two years from August 2019 until August 2021. This period was chosen to study the Egyptian angle presented by the Islamist media of covering how Arab states in general had interactions with the West and Israel, such as the Abrahamic accords. Ultimately, the selected sample comprised 40 articles from each news website (Breitbart and Ikhwanonline) and 30 videos from each broadcasting channel (Fox News and Al-Sharq TV). Therefore, each country's sample consisted of 70 units, and the whole sample was 140 units in total (80 articles and 60 videos)¹.

It is worth noting here that the selection of the sample according to these keywords brings limitations to the comparison as other forms of conspiracy theories are not included. In the USA, for instance, there are other circulating conspiracy theories from various actors (see, for example, Bergmann, 2018), but these particular conspiracy forms treated in this paper were repeatedly mentioned as highly relevant in the 2016 elections and Donald Trump's presidency to delegitimize the Democratic opponents (Benkler et al., 2018; Hameleers, 2021). Another corresponding limitation here is not studying the possible diffusion of one common conspiracy theory transnationally between the two countries, as the analyzed conspiracies are different.

A qualitative framing analysis (Scheufele, 2003) was performed to study the sampled content. The basic idea behind Scheufele's methodology here is to apply Mayring's (2015) format and rules for qualitative content analysis to create systematic empirical categorization and interpretation of the news frames. Thus, the present research applied qualitative content analysis to conduct a framing analysis of the text (Scheufele, 2003, pp. 118-120). Accordingly, a deductive-inductive code system

¹ For articles and news mentioned in this paper, see Appendix. For the full sample list, please contact the author directly.

was developed, in which the first deductive broad category consisted of the four framing dimensions of Entman. The second category was inductively developed, and it contained the main summarizing arguments on each framing dimension. Besides, to answer the second research question, an analytical step was conducted to encapsulate the narrative formulated by the framing dimensions and compare it with the prominent cultural conspiratorial discourse in both countries.

Findings

The American MAGA conservative media

In their framing of the *definition of the problem*, the most repeated notion was that the Democratic Party politicians and high-level officials are colluding with foreign enemies, such as China and Ukraine. The high frequency of this *problem definition* category was due to a significant focus on any kind of business relations or communication between members of the Biden family or the Democratic Party and Chinese companies. These interactions were framed as collusion between the US elite and America's enemy. "[h]e [Biden T.F.] is literally compromised. Why? Because (..) he personally has taken billions of dollars in bribes from the Chinese government in the form of direct payments to his son's businesses" (Breitbart, 29.5.2019, p. 4).

The second most repeated *problem definition* was that the 'deep state' is trying to plot a Coup d'état against President Trump. Since the phrase 'deep state' has an empty significance, the MAGA conservative media connotated the phrase with the Department of Justice, FBI, the Democratic Party, White House employees, elite businessmen, or, more broadly, any powerful person who stands against Trump. "Now remember months ago, we first reported this 'deep state' conspiracy to oust the president, a silent coup" (Fox, 15.2.2019, 5:20). To foster this argument, the examined media framed all the news about the Mueller investigations as a judicial camouflage for a political coup from the 'deep state' against the will of the American people incarnated in Trump. "But [we have] more evidence we have[about] high ranking officials, the highest in the FBI and [the] Department of Justice [are] discussing how to override the will of the American people" (Fox, 15.2.2019, 4:53).

The argued *causes* for these alleged problems were simple. Firstly, the elite and Democratic Party politicians are colluding with foreign enemies because they are getting money from them. The second formulated cause was the alleged perpetual opposition between Trump and the so-called 'deep state'. The argument was that because Trump was the 'outsider' president who tried to stop the 'deep state' conspiracies against the American people, his opponents tried to orchestrate a soft coup against him through the Mueller investigations.

According to these *problem definitions* and *causes*, *moral evaluation* has been posulated against the accused elite, politicians, and anyone else considered 'deep state'

actors, stating that they are corrupt and compromised. Also, the alleged ‘deep state’ officials were accused of secretly working against democracy and the will of the American people. Furthermore, in rare cases, echoing the rhetoric of Trump himself, the moral judgment escalated from mere corruption and personal gain to committing treason.

The most mentioned *solution* – as expected – was to re-elect Trump as president in 2020 so that he would be able to stop all these plots. Besides, some articles and videos alluded to investigating the linkage between the Biden family and China as a tool to expose and stop the collusion.

By combining these framing dimensions, the constructed conspiracy narrative can be synthesized: Allegedly, there was a secret conspiracy against the American people led by high bureaucratic officials in collaboration with foreign powers. These ‘deep state’ officials and their presidential candidate, Joe Biden, had economic and personal interests in conjunction with their conspiracies. The American people were not satisfied with these conditions and, therefore, elected their main adversary, a supposedly ‘outsider’ president: Donald Trump. Since Trump tried to stop their conspiracies, they secretly plotted the orchestration of a soft coup against him through the Mueller investigation. Consequently, the American people should instead support Trump, re-elect him, and investigate all the government officials who are against his policies.

By contemplating this framing process and its resulting narrative and comparing it with the archetypical conspiracy theories in US history, the pattern whereby the MAGA conservative media attempted to achieve framing resonance and narrative fidelity (Snow & Benford, 1988) can be scrutinized. Fox News and Breitbart attempted to discursively construct historical continuity between the enduring populist notion of secret collusion between the American elite and foreign enemies by accusing the rivals of Trump of secretly plotting with China. Although the narrative structure is the same, the colluding actor transformed from obsolete enemies like the Soviet Union into China. The other archetypical conspiracy theory optimized by the pro-Trump media was the speculation that the American elite and high-level governmental officials were crafting a secret plot to monopolize power against the will of the American people.

Today is the anniversary of the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor (...) It seems like a good time to consider the threats this country faces now, 79 years later (...) We are going to spend the foreseeable future reporting on the relationship between America’s political and financial elites and the communist government of China that has made many of them very rich. (Tucker Carlson Monologue on Fox News that was republished by Breitbart on 8.12.2020)

Egyptian Islamist Media

In the examined Islamist media sample, the most repeated conspiracy in their framing of the ongoing events was that Arab leaders are colluding with Israel against the

Arab peoples. The narrative sometimes went further to claim that Israel not only colluded with the Arab leaders but even appointed them to their positions. “For the million times. The appointment of the unelected Arab leaders comes from alleged Israel. Those (leaders) have been created under the eyes of Israel since they were children” (AlSharq, 8.2.2020, 4:20). This narrative was utilized in the framing of dissimilar incidents, such as the Abraham accords, news about minor cooperation or discussions between Israel and Arab governments, and even purely Arabic local events like the political triumph of the Sisi regime against the Islamist movements in Egypt. Besides this most recounted *problem definition*, they also sometimes framed the alleged plot as one between the West and Israel against the Arabs. In other less frequent circumstances, they defined the problem just as an Israeli conspiracy without specifying a cooperating actor. The rareness of this last category in the sample highlights how this media focused on the conspirator partners of Israel, especially the Arab leaders, not Israel per se.

The first and most frequent *causal explanation* for these alleged conspiracies in the sample was that Arab leaders collude with the enemy to stay in power. The argument here was that Israel and the West protect the unelected Arab dictators and support them politically and economically. In return, those leaders have to conspire with Israel against their own people. “We have exclusively told you last February in this program that those who brought [Mohammed, T.F.] Bin Zayed to power to surpass his siblings are the same people with whom he normalized relations today [Israel, T.F.]” (AlSharq, 16.8.2020, 7:21). Another interpretation for the alleged conspiracies between Israel and the Arab leaders was that Islamists and ordinary Arabs have been standing against Israel. The claim was that Israel knows how Islamists are presenting an existential threat to it, so the Israeli government has been conspiring to remove them from power by secretly cooperating with and directing the anti-Islamist regimes in the Arab world. The last formulated cause for the conspiracies was the benefits Israel and the West gained through the normalization and cooperation with different Arab regimes, which, despite being the most rational explanation, was not prominent in the sample.

Building on these *problem definitions and causal interpretations*, the *moral evaluation* was direct and simple: the Arab leaders are “traitors.” Any Arab leader or high-level official who agreed on, or even just participated in, talks about any deal with Israel or the USA was accused of treason. “Treason within the decision-making circle in Egypt has become an undoubted thing” (Ikwonline, 26.4.21, p. 1). Sometimes, Arab leaders were even accused of treason against Islam. “Also in the darkness, as part of the preparations for the highest treason against the religion, Arabism, and the truth, Saudi Arabia has printed a credited translated Hebrew version of the Quran” (AlSharq, 26.1.2020, 1:39). In contrast, in a populist sentiment, the ordinary Arab people were morally depicted as innocents who stand with the oppressed against the conspiracies of the “occupying entity” (Israel). Accordingly, the concluded *recommended treatment* was that the Arab people should revolt against the current ‘traitor regimes’ as a pre-step to revoke any deals they made with Israel

and stand against it. “We will never be liberated unless we got liberated from the traitors who are the leaders of the Umma [Arab nation/Muslim community]” (Al-Sharq, 14.12.2020, 4:25).

Thus, the framing process of the examined Islamist media stressed the claimed collusion between the Arab leaders and the enemy, such as Israel and the West. This narrative capitalized on the canonical culture templates, sometimes resulting from real historical conspiracies (Gray, 2010), about Western plots to install loyalist leaders in Arabic capitals. Hence, the Islamist media attempted to achieve discursive temporal continuity between the current framed events and the overarching historical narratives prominent in the culture to reach resonance with their audience (Baden, 2014; Snow & Benford, 1988). Moreover, the Islamist media tried to re-narrate the pivotal historical events of the Arab-Israeli conflict according to their contemporary strategic framing of the current incidents. Thus, they seek to reconstruct the collective memory according to the present (Bar-Tal, 2013). Accordingly, the past is contemplated and reconstructed through the prism of the contemporary uncovered conspiracy. “Coincidences! It is a coincidence that [Gamal Abdel, T.F.] Nasser and Moshe Dayan were in the Jewish quarter in Cairo. Moreover, that Sisi, born in Menofia, was raised and spent his life in the Jewish quarter. A coincidence [sarcastically]” (Al-Sharq, 17.2.2020, 6:09).

Comparing Egyptian and American conspiracy theories

By comparing the constructed conspiracies by the Egyptian Islamists and the MAGA conservatives, a similar framing pattern can be recognized. Both movements focused on news about the collaboration between their local rivals and their countries' foreign enemies to frame them as a conspiracy. In both countries, this narrative template was utilized to delegitimize their local political rivals and mobilize their audience against them. Furthermore, the results elucidate how conspiracy theories are merged with populist sentiments to attack the elite by constructing a discursive demarcation between the ‘colluding elite’ and the ‘victim people’ (Bergmann, 2018). Besides, both movements capitalized on the templates of canonical conspiracy theories in their culture to achieve discursive historical continuity between those popular and accepted theories and the current ones they propagate.

Nevertheless, this historical continuity was more salient in the Egyptian Islamist discourse, as they explicitly formulated their conspiracy theories as an extension of the old Israeli plots. On the other hand, the MAGA conservatives utilized only the narrative template of the elite secret collusion while replacing old enemies like the Soviet Union with temporary rivals like China. Another dissimilarity between the two movements lay in the harshness of their discourse. While the Egyptian Islamists were more rigorous and repeatedly accused their rival Arabic leaders of treason, the right-wing Americans were more careful and often charged their local rivals only with corruption.

Despite these differences, the discursive strategies underlying the constructed conspiracy theories by both movements were very similar. Both movements deployed conspiracy theories to entirely delegitimize their local political rivals. The crux of this discursive strategy lies in capitalizing on the canonical conspiracy theories that are widely accepted in the culture through a tailored framing of the current events as an extension or analogies of these old conspiracies. In the process of constructing conspiracy theories, this constructed temporal link between the commonly accepted past and the framed present is the key element in achieving cultural resonance with the target audience (Snow & Benford, 1988; Snow et al., 1986).

Another relevant comparison aspect between the two cases lies in the effect of the socio-political context in the construction of conspiracy theories. In both countries, the high political polarization was reflected discursively in the entire delegitimization of the local opponent as a traitor or corrupt actor who secretly cooperates with foreign foes and, accordingly, must be totally defeated. In Egypt, this socio-political context entailed a transnational dimension due to the political alliance between Sisi, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, and, consequently, the constructed conspiracies were not only targeting the Egyptian establishment but also the Gulf leaders as the conspiring traitors. In contrast, in the USA, the subject of the conspiring local actors was confined to American individuals or institutions who opposed the MAGA movement.

Conclusion

The results contribute to our theoretical understanding of the pattern whereby conspiracy theories are constructed and communicated in the media. They illustrate how conspiracy theories are mainly connected to particular socio-political structures wherein political groups tend to delegitimize their rivals through this conspiratorial discourse (Gray, 2010; Mercieca, 2019). Additionally, the cross-cultural comparison in this study goes against cultural deterministic views claiming that the USA is an exceptional case in adopting conspiracy theories (Knight, 2014, p. 357) and the Arab region has a “higher propensity for conspiracy thinking” (Fathi, 2014, p. 63). Despite the cultural differences between the two countries, the pattern of linking the current constructed conspiracy theories with the canonical conspiracy templates in the culture was similar. In that regard, the past played a bigger role in the case of Egypt due to the enduring effect of the old real conspiracies in the collective memory of the Arabs until now (Gray, 2010).

Moreover, the results highlight the significant role of the socio-political context in affecting the construction of conspiracy theories. This corresponds with the “socio-centric” (Gray, 2014, p. 247) theoretical approach of conspiracy theories that focuses on the socio-political contexts wherein they flourish. For instance, the political polarization in both media systems paved the way for antagonist conspiratorial discourse that entirely delegitimizes the local opponent as a traitor colluding with

foreign enemies. In addition, the identity of the local opponent in the political struggle influenced the constructed conspiracy narrative. This pattern can be recognized in the targeting of the Saudi and UAE leaders per se by the Egyptian Islamist discourse due to the transnational nature of the Sisi alliance opposing them.

It was out of the scope of this study to analyze the audience reception or the social and political repercussions of these constructed conspiracy theories in both countries. However, that is one of the most relevant aspects that needs to be scrutinized in the future. It is hard to imagine a functioning pluralist democracy built on rational communication when the media tries to persuade a huge proportion of society that the whole political establishment is conspiring against them. Also, it is hard to imagine a peaceful deliberative process built on negotiations while the media is accusing the leaders and political institutions of treason.

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Appendix: Sample

USA

FoxNews

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ed6DDEbmv9w> Hannity: The deep state and their abuse of power (Fox 15.2.2019)

Breitbart

<https://www.breitbart.com/radio/2019/05/29/steve-hilton-joe-biden-taken-billions-dollars-bribes-chinese-government/> (BB 29.5.2019)
<https://www.breitbart.com/clips/2020/12/08/fncs-carlson-russia-hoax-was-a-diversion-americas-elite-working-on-behalf-of-china/> (BB 8.12.2020)

Egypt

Ikhwanonline

<https://www.ikhwanonline.com/article/244760/> في سرية تامة.. شبكة مواسير عملاقة لتوصيل مياه النيل إلى الحدود الشرقية (ikw 26.4.2021)

Al-Sharq TV

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZrNCtyAxjBc> معتز مطر: رسمياً الصهاينة يزورون الحرمين الشريفين ونسخ عبرية محرفة من القرآن الكريم تحت اشراف السعودية (SH 26.1.2020)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YPt5YvVBsM> مرزوق الغانم "يرمي صفقة القرن في القمامة .. #معتز_مطر: لمع قرونك يا ملك لمع قرونك يا رئيس الاحتلال الاسرائيلي يحتفل بإفتتاح #السيدي (SH 8.2.2020)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rQEzlbSAiTE> في اول تعليق بعد تطبيع الإمارات (SH 17.2.2020)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=scR69kJ7wfo> (SH 16.8.2020)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wDv1tCQaXIA> لماذا يهودي مغربي يحسمها: لماذا يهودي مغربي يحسمها: لماذا يهودي مغربي يحسمها؟ (SH 14.12.2020)