

Do Egyptians Believe the Unbelievable? Media Exposure and Belief that January 25 Revolution was a Conspiracy.

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Introduction:

Mubarak's defense lawyer said at a televised hearing on August 2014, the ouster of former president was not a spontaneous popular revolution but rather a "foreign-funded conspiracy that took advantage of the anger of the people and inflamed it further." In his speech to the court, he accused the Muslim Brotherhood of cooperating with the Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas to fuel public unrest, claiming that the January revolution was part of a U.S. - backed plot to destabilize the region. He quoted several former officials to back his case.¹

The claim that the revolution of 2011 was a conspiracy was not surprising for most Egyptians. Following the collapse of Mubarak's regime, Mohamed Morsi, a Muslim Brotherhood leader, won the presidential elections on June 2012. He becomes Egypt's fifth president and the first from outside the military.² A hostile

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political opposition environment, in addition to political, ideological, and organizational failures, caused serious public opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood's rule.³ On 30 June 2013, millions of protesters demonstrated across Egypt demanding the resignation of Morsi. General Abdel Fatah El Sisi, then minister of defense, announced the change in leadership and a "political road map" to restore civilian democracy. These events sparked one of the bloodiest periods in Egypt's modern history.

After months of daily protests, shootings, and terrorist attacks, the choice for the majority of Egyptians was clear: stability comes first. General El Sisi was described as a revolutionary hero and the powerful man to lead the country out of the post-Mubarak political chaos.⁴ On June 8, 2014, he won the presidential elections by an overwhelming majority. These events dangerously polarized Egyptians between a sizeable minority who support the Brotherhood's rule, and the millions who called for him to leave during mass protests at 30 June 2013. But even the anti-Brotherhood camp was split between those who back the army, to restore stability and revive the economy, and those who see the army as just as great a threat to everyday freedom as the Muslim Brotherhood.

One of the first measures the state took after Muslim Brotherhood's removal was to close down media outlets owned by political Islamic groups. Meanwhile, private TV channels, owned by

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Mubarak loyalists, which played an important role in mobilizing the population against the Muslim Brotherhood when they were in power, claimed that Muslim Brotherhood's leaders collaborated with foreign powers to destabilize the country , come to power and jeopardize national interests. Two private TV channels, Sada El Balad ⁵and El Faraeen⁶ , launched sharp attacks not only against the Muslim Brotherhood, but also against Egyptian youth who sparked January 25 revolution. They were portrayed as foreign agents being paid to cause unrest in Egypt. The catchphrases "January 25 conspiracy" and "Egypt turning into Syria or Iraq" was repeatedly used to mobilize the public to re-support the military rule.⁷ Muslim Brotherhood channels based outside Egypt and Arab channels such as Al-Jazeera fiercely opposed the claim, assuring that 25 January revolution was a public revolution against a repressive regime and that the current regime is trying to proliferate a conspiracy theory to re- mobilize the public around the military and its hawkish policies.

Aim of the study:

This study examines the relationship between selective exposure and belief that January 25 revolution was a conspiracy. There are good reasons to predict that media consumers will develop extreme and polarized attitudes toward January revolution when they are exposed to media outlets that repeatedly reinforce conspiratorial attitudes. Communication scholars have measured changes in political attitudes as an outcome of selective media exposure.(Stroud, 2010; Warner,

2010 ; Warner and Neville-Shepard ,2014) . This study also investigates the role of regime support, threat perception and authoritarianism in conspiracy belief, particularly in light of evidence that the three variables polarize attitudes and beliefs.(e.g., Swami, 2012 ; Lavine, et al.,2005). Rather than pursuing the argument that regime support, threat perception and authoritarianism directly increases conspiracy belief, the study examines the proposition that the three variables may interact with media exposure and thereupon strengthen their influence on conspiracy belief. Results of the study are directly related to our understanding of the effects of selective exposure .If media can move the needle on people's beliefs and expectations toward their revolution , it would provide strong support for previous findings about the significance of slanted media.

Selective exposure:

Selective exposure relies on the assumption that individuals prefer exposure to views that resonate with their own rather than challenge their existing views (Festinger, 1957; Frey, 1986) .The high choice of media environment enables individuals to freely decide where to receive their news or whether to receive news at all . (Prior, 2007; Sunstein , 2007). Thus, people may be exposed to different perspectives and yet continue to experience attitude reinforcement because they filter or even counter-argue attitude-discrepant information (Baum and Groeling , 2008; Taber and Lodge, 2006). This filtering outlines the evaluation of news content such that

“hostile” news is perceived as less accurate and newsworthy than content that is consistent with their preexisting positions (Coe et al.,2008).

The existence of selective exposure has led researchers to study its effects on audiences. People's tendency to engage in selective exposure has been suggested to restrict informed opinions (Brundidge and Rice, 2009), decline tolerance, (Sunstein, 2001) and polarize citizens (Stroud, 2010). Meirick (2013) found that citizens' misperceptions are also the product of selective exposure.

Belief in conspiracy theories may also be considered as a result of citizens 'tendency to biased processing of information (Lodge and Taber 2005). Taber and Lodge (2006, p.756) noted that individual partisan goals encourage citizens "to apply their reasoning powers in defense of a prior, specific conclusion". Sigelman and Sigelman (1984, p. 627) investigated conspiracy viewership effects by arguing that “only when the powerful impacts of prior beliefs and preferences are considered can one fully understand” the role of media in conspiracy belief. A recent experimental research also showed that exposure to one-sided conspiracy messages increased belief in conspiracy theories (Warner and Neville-Shepard, 2014). A similar finding is expected here.

Hypothesis 1: Those who regularly view Sada el Balad and /or El Faraeen will be more likely to believe that January revolution was a conspiracy than those who do not.

Research Question 1: Will regular exposure to other media outlets affect belief in conspiracy theories?

Regime support and conspiracy belief:

Attempts to explain why people believe conspiracy theories have focused on people's need to explain events that are beyond their control. (Douglas and Sutton, 2008) . Most scholars agree that conspiracy theories emerge from a group's feelings of social and political marginalization ,(Goldzweig ,2002), low interpersonal trust (Goertzel, 1994), lack of power and perceived prejudice (Stempel, et.al., 2007) and lack of information to evaluate conflicting explanations proliferated by various media outlets . (Douglas and Sutton, 2008) .

Other important determinants of conspiracy belief include political factors. The rich literature on conspiracy belief has demonstrated a role for political values, especially party identification . Stempel, Hargrove and Stempel (2007), found evidence of robust positive associations between belief in conspiracy theories and party identification. Nefes (2014) argued that online users propose conspiracy theories rationally in line with their political arguments . Nyhan (2008) found that while Republicans were more likely than Democrats to believe Obama was not born in the United States,

Democrats were more likely than Republicans to believe the Bush administration was responsible for the deaths of nearly 3,000 Americans.

A similar finding is expected here. As pro-regime media channels , such as Sada el Balad and el Fareen , proliferated the belief that January revolution was a foreign-funded conspiracy to topple state institutions , especially the military , to destabilize the country , it is expected that those who support the current regime , namely a military figure as a national duty to restore security, stability and economic recovery , are most likely to believe the conspiracy .

Hypothesis 2: Those who support the ruling regime will be more likely to believe that January revolution was a conspiracy than those who do not.

The Interaction of regime support and media exposure:

Since partisans tend to seek like-minded messages and engage in biased processing, an interaction between partisanship and exposure to news that results in polarization is predicted. Jamieson and Cappella (2008, p.81) wrote that "the audiences of the conservative media outlets are inclined to hold attitudes, opinions, and ideology that are consistent with these media sources". Sunstein (2007) found that people may be less able to identify with people of different views , and ultimately more extremist. Stroud (2010) argued that selective exposure, partisan media and political polarization influence one

another. However, the relationship between polarization and selective exposure is still in question. Prior (2013) believes there is no proof so far that partisan selective exposure is making individuals more polarized, as this kind of content is confined to a small part of audience groups. Meirick (2013, p.50) also found no such interaction between party identification and Fox news exposure, thus Fox News exposure contributed to a mainstreaming of (mistaken) beliefs. To determine if there is an interaction between political affiliation and media exposure the following is hypothesized:

Hypothesis 3: Regime support will interact with Sada el Balad and /or El Faraeen viewership such that exposure to these media outlets will amplify differences between those who support the regime and those who do not in belief that January 25 revolution was a conspiracy .

Research Question 2: How will regime support interact with other media outlets?

Threat perception:

Many societies around the world are now faced with threats to the social order (e.g., terrorist attacks, wars, economic crisis). These threats may strengthen belief in conspiracy theories, which assume that illegal or harmful events were secretly and deliberately planned by powerful people or organizations (Van Prooijen and Jostman, 2013).

In the lens of intergroup perspective "in-group", who believe in a conspiracy theory, portray "out-group", actors of the conspiracy, as collective enemies with obsessive striving for power and hateful secret activities to harm in-group. (Kofta and Sedek, 2005; Bilewicz and Krzeminski, 2010; Bilewicz et al., 2013; Kofta and Slawuta, 2013; Mashuri, 2013). Bilewicz and Krzeminski (2010) found that portraying Jewish people as threatening Poland's group power triggered the Polish participants to believe in theories that the Jews have conspired to dominate the world. In the context of Muslims in Islamic countries, Ali and Esti (2014) have echoed these claims by arguing that there is a relationship between the belief that the West has invaded Muslim countries and acceptance that the series of terror attacks in Indonesia was created by the United States' and Zionist plots to destroy and weaken Islam in Indonesia. As Egypt has been facing a growing wave of terrorist attacks following the removal of the Muslim Brotherhood's rule in July 2013, this study gives rise to predict that:

Hypothesis 4: Threat perception will be positively related to believing in conspiracy theory.

The Interaction of threat perception and media exposure:

Studies showed mixed evidence for whether threat reduces or increases selective exposure. Some studies claim that threat perception encourages people to be more willing to process unbiased information (Marcus et al., 2000; Valentino et al., 2006). In contrast, from a

motivational perspective, some studies argued that the presence of threat activates biased information seeking among people to cope with the cognitive discomfort aroused by threat (Frey, 2011). Following major social, economic or political crisis, such as 9/11 or Iraq war, threatened citizens could be biased in knowledge acquisition about such events (Fischer and Ami, 2008), or actively screen out dissonant perspectives; their behavior can be characterized as “defensive avoidance” (Garrett et al., 2013). Furthermore, other clarifications of national tragedies that contradict with official statements can be rejected by mass publics because they evoke strong cognitive dissonance (Harmon-Jones and Harmon-Jones, 2008).

Threat perception and media exposure might interact as well. Recent research has demonstrated that increased media consumption in combination with heightened threat will increase support for hawkish foreign policy (Gadarian, 2010). Studies also found that threatening information and images bridge partisan divisions on controversial policies (Malhotra and Popp, 2012), increase intolerance toward groups perceived as threatening (Gibson and Gouws 2003; Wang and Chang 2006) and also increase the level of charisma attributed to leaders (Merolla et al. 2007; Merolla and Zechmeister 2009). As conspiracy theories include messages of threat, threatening groups and illegal or harmful event or situation the following is hypothesized:

Hypothesis 5: Threat perception and Sada el Balad and/or ElFaraeen viewership will interact such that exposure to these channels is associated with conspiracy belief especially among those who highly perceive threat.

Research Question 3: How will threat perception interact with other media outlets?

Authoritarianism:

Scholarly conceptions of authoritarianism have evolved significantly over time. Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford (1950) conceptualized authoritarianism as resulting from early childhood experiences. Later work drew on a social learning perspective . Altemeyer (1996, p. 6) proposed that authoritarianism is not a personality trait, but a cluster of attitudes consisting of three main aspects. 1) a high degree of submission to the established, legitimate authorities ; 2) high levels of aggression directed against various persons ,that is perceived to be sanctioned by established authorities; and 3) a high level of adherence to the social conventions that are perceived to be endorsed by society and its established authorities. Most recently ,Stenner (2005) argued that authoritarianism is best understood as a preference for social conformity over individual autonomy.

The different aspects of the basic nature of authoritarianism caused scholars to suggest a relationship between authoritarianism and conspiracy belief. Abalakina-Paap, Stephan, Craig, and Gregory

(1999) found a positive correlation between conspiracy beliefs and authoritarianism. Feldman (2011) noted that authoritarians are more likely to believe anti-Semitic conspiracy theories in Poland. In a recent study Swami (2012) showed that belief in the Jewish conspiracy theory was associated with greater right-wing authoritarianism. A similar finding is expected here.

Hypothesis 6: Authoritarianism will be positively related to believing in conspiracy theory.

The Interaction of Authoritarianism and Media exposure:

Recent work has provided some support for the idea that this main effect of authoritarianism on conspiracy belief may be amplified by an interaction with media exposure. When authoritarians encounter stories about the risks of a group they already dislike, they tend to consume messages that fit their relevant dispositions (Lavine, Lodge, and Freitas, 2005). Additionally, the introduction of an episodic threat, such as a terror attack or natural disaster, should serve to further increase authoritarians' tendency for selective exposure.(Hinckley,2014). Studies argued that exposure to information consistent with pre-existing attitudes activates individual's authoritarian predispositions: prejudice, aggression towards out-groups, and intolerance. (Hetherington and Weiler, 2009 ; Hinckley, 2014). In this light, it is perhaps unsurprising to predict the follows:

Hypothesis 7: Authoritarianism will interact with Sada el Balad and / or ElFaraeen viewership such that exposure to these media outlets is associated with conspiracy belief especially among high authoritarians.

Research Question 4: How will Authoritarianism interact with other media outlets?

Method:

Data were collected using a survey conducted on a sample ($n = 421$) of the Egyptian population in Greater Cairo and El Giza provinces, in February 2015. Questionnaires were completed by the help of well-trained research assistants. Islamists (Muslim Brotherhood , Salafis or Islamic groups) , also those who were not supporting the revolution from its start at 25 January, 2011, were excluded from the sample for the purpose of the study.

Sample:

In the sample, 58 % were male. Sample members ranged in age from 18 to above 50; 44.3% ranged in age from 18-29; 21.0 % ranged in age from 30-39; 19.0% ranged in age from 40-49 and 15.7% were 50 years old and older. Regarding education, 18.4 % were high school graduates, 21.3% were college students, 51.3% were college graduates and 9.0% postgraduate degree. The sample included three social classes: 26.4 % high class, 33.5 % middle class and 40.1 % low class. Politically, 38% of the sample have a political leaning (29% liberal - 9

% left-leaning) the rest were independent. As for religion, 83.6% were Muslims, 16.4% Christians.

Measures:

Media exposure: As an independent variable, media exposure was measured using two indicators, television cable networks and online outlets. Respondents were asked whether or not they got news regularly from each of the following sources: Sada el Balad, ElFaraeen, private satellites, state-controlled channels, Aljazeera and Muslim Brotherhood channels. The question was phrased: “What television cable networks do you regularly watch? Each item was coded "1" (*yes*) or "0" (*no*).

The second indicator focused on the consumption of online political information, was worded “when you surf the web for political information, what are the main websites you regularly use?” To classify online outlets, I used measures developed and applied by (Stroud, 2010, p.563–66). Stroud used content analysis to classify open-ended responses to a question asking respondents to identify the websites they used to obtain political information. In the next stage, Stroud created an index of selective exposure by summing respondents' reports of accessing ideological websites. In this study, a content analysis was used to identify the political leaning (pro-or anti-regime) of the different websites reported by respondents. Each item was coded "1" (*yes*) or "0" (*no*).

Support for the current regime: Following Muller and Jukam(1977) support for the current regime was measured by asking respondents to assess the six statements listed below : 1- I am proud to live under the current political regime . 2- I have an obligation to support the current political regime .3- I respect the political institutions in Egypt today. 4- I feel that the basic rights of citizens are relatively protected. 5-I believe that the courts in Egypt guarantee fair trials. 6- I feel that my personal values are the same as those advocated by the government. Respondents were asked to rate each of the six items on a 5-point scale where “1” indicates respondents 'strong disagreement with a statement and “5” indicates their strong agreement with the statement .These six items were then combined to form an additive index to capture a collective profile of a respondent’s support to the regime, ranging from six (indicating the lowest level of regime support) to 30 (indicating the highest level of regime support). Cronbach’s α for this measure was = 0.76)

Threat perception: Threat perception was assessed by means of a three-item three-point scale (1 = not at all; 3=to a very great degree) created by the author. Respondents were asked if they fear (1) the presence of foreign plots to divide Egypt after 25 revolution (2) youth movement's attempts to threaten stability in Egypt (3) Muslim Brotherhood's plots against Egypt . Cronbach’s α for this measure was 0.84.

Authoritarianism. To measure authoritarianism, the short form of the Right-Wing Authoritarianism Scale (Zakrisson, 2005) was used. This is a 15-item short version of the original 30-item measure (Altemeyer, 1988) and measures the degree to which an individual supports traditional social norms and submission to authority. (Sample item: “Our country needs a powerful leader, in order to destroy the radical and immoral currents prevailing in society today.”) All items were rated on a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Higher scores on this scale provide an index of greater right-wing authoritarianism. Cronbach’s α for this measure was 0.79.

Belief in the 25 January conspiracy: As a dependent variable belief in conspiracy theories was measured with three items. Participants reported how strongly they agreed with the statements where “1” indicates respondents' strong disagreement with a statement and “5” indicates their strong agreement with the statement. The three items were worded as follows: 1- January 25 revolution is an American plot to cause unrest in Egypt. 2- Egyptian youth who sparked the revolution are foreign agents being paid to cause unrest in Egypt. 3- January revolution is a Brotherhood's plot to destabilize the country, come to power and announce the Islamist state. Higher scores indicated greater conspiracy belief. Cronbach’s α for this measure was = 0.82)

Issue attention. As a control measure, respondents were asked “Did you follow the debate that 25 revolution was a conspiracy very closely, fairly closely, not too closely, or not at all closely?”

Perceived media slant: Respondents’ perception of the media’s treatment of 25 January revolution was assessed with the following question : “Do you think the media has been too biased , a great deal biased , or fair in the way it has covered January 25 revolution ?” Responses were coded such that the highest score indicated a perceived media objectivity toward the revolution, middle scores indicated perceived press fairness, and the lowest scores indicated perceived media hostility toward the revolution.

General political knowledge: Political knowledge should help prevent conspiracy belief. A political knowledge index was created using four true false items on general political knowledge. Scores of A and B were coded as (1) and C and D were coded as (0) . Don’t know and refused responses were coded as incorrect.

Political interest: Respondents were asked how closely they follow political news (very closely/not too closely/somewhat closely/not at all closely).

Party identification: Respondents were asked, “Do you consider yourself a liberal, a left-leaning or independent?”

Demographics: The analysis also included gender, age, education, religion, and social class.

Results:

This study sought to test the effect of media on belief in conspiracy theories. This study further sought to determine whether there was an interaction between regime support, threat perception, authoritarianism and media use. The results are reported in Table 1. In the interests of space, results for gender, age, education, religion, social class, issue attention, perceived media slant, general political knowledge, political interest, party identification were not reported in the table, but significant coefficients are noted here. Gender ($b=0.78$, $SE=0.16$, $p<0.01$) age ($b=0.65$, $SE=0.18$, $p<0.001$), education ($b=0.47$, $SE=0.19$, $p<0.01$), religion ($b=0.71$, $SE=0.20$, $p<0.01$) had a positive relationship with conspiracy belief in the overall sample as well as among respondents who highly support the regime, perceive high threat and among high authoritarians . Social class was unrelated to belief in conspiracy theories among the overall sample. However, lower- class individuals who perceive high threat were more likely to belief in the conspiracy ($b=0.24$, $SE=0.21$, $p<0.05$) . Of the other control variables, how closely one followed political news as well as conspiracy theories was positively related with the conspiracy belief in the overall sample, although the latter was stronger. Looking at subgroups, closely following political news and conspiracy theories was also positive among those who highly support the regime, highly threatened individuals and high authoritarians. General political knowledge, perceived media slant and party identification were

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unrelated to conspiracy belief among the overall sample as well as sub-groups.

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Table 1. Predictors of conspiracy belief

	All	Regime support		Threat Perception		Authoritarianism	
		High	Low	High	Low	High	Low
Sada el Balad /Fardeen	0.45** (0.23)	0.34** (0.19)	0.11 (0.19)	0.65** (0.22)	0.24 (0.11)	0.75** (0.21)	-0.02 (0.11)
Private TV Networks	0.64** (0.17)	0.47** (0.22)	0.12 (0.16)	0.51** (0.20)	0.10 (0.17)	0.65** (0.17)	0.21 (0.11)
State-controlled Channels	0.47** (0.23)	0.42** (0.21)	0.09 (0.12)	0.85*** (0.21)	0.11 (0.19)	0.74** (0.15)	0.00 (0.11)
Brotherhood Channels	0.53** (0.26)	0.45** (0.27)	0.22 (0.18)	0.75** (0.23)	0.03 (0.20)	0.59** (0.25)	0.18 (0.20)
Aljazeera	-0.87** (0.21)	0.14 (0.23)	0.22* (0.20)-	0.07 (0.19)	-0.24** (0.21)	0.11 (0.18)	-0.25** (0.18)
Pro-regime websites	0.77*** (0.27)	0.80** (0.11)	0.19 (0.10)	0.89** (0.23)	0.23 (0.19)	0.85** (0.25)	0.03 (0.16)
Anti-regime websites	0.14 (0.19)	0.11 (0.18)	0.17 (0.20)	0.07 (0.18)	0.13 (0.19)	0.06 (0.12)	0.11 (0.11)
Regime support (RG)	0.42** (0.17)	-	-	0.66** (0.21)	0.24 (0.17)	0.37* (0.23)	0.15 (0.16)
RG × Sada el Balad /Fardeen	0.51** (0.29)	-	-	0.24* (0.27)	0.05 (0.18)	0.35** (0.27)	0.09 (0.21)
RG × Private TV Networks	0.47** (0.29)	-	-	0.33** (0.23)	0.07 (0.16)	0.65** (0.19)	0.11 (0.17)
RG × State-controlled Channels	0.52** (0.24)	-	-	0.38* (0.24)	0.14 (0.12)	0.59** (0.23)	0.25 (0.18)
RG × Brotherhood Channels	0.56** (0.27)	-	-	0.35** (0.30)	0.10 (0.19)	0.74** (0.12)	0.17 (0.20)
RG × Aljazeera	-0.39** (.23)	-	-	0.12 (.24)	-0.21** (.20)	0.13 (.27)	-0.28** (.18)
RG × Pro-regime websites	0.71** (0.28)	-	-	0.88** (0.23)	0.23 (0.19)	0.85** (0.25)	.03 (0.16)
RG × Anti-regime websites	0.21 (0.29)	-	-	0.13 (0.19)	0.21 (0.22)	0.23 (0.21)	0.17 (0.18)
Threat Perception	0.33* (0.21)	0.74** (0.15)	0.13 (0.20)	-	-	0.22* (0.21)	0.11 (0.19)
Threat × Sada el Balad /Fardeen	0.66** (0.17)	0.61** (0.24)	0.22 (0.28)	-	-	0.44** (0.27)	0.12 (0.19)
Threat × Private TV Networks	0.24** (0.15)	0.35** (0.27)	0.18 (0.21)	-	-	0.37** (0.23)	0.17 (0.19)
Threat × State-controlled Channels	0.78** (0.22)	0.49** (0.26)	0.32 (0.18)	-	-	0.38* (0.24)	0.14 (0.12)
Threat × Brotherhood Channels	0.64** (0.14)	0.34** (0.22)	0.31 (0.22)	-	-	0.35** (0.31)	0.21 (0.29)
Threat × Aljazeera	-0.39* (0.27)	0.22 (0.27)	-0.28** (0.17)	-	-	0.11 (0.16)-	-0.76** (0.23)

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Threat × Pro-regime websites	0.39* (0.18)	0.75** (0.26)	0.13 (0.26)	-	-	0.88** (0.23)	0.23 (0.19)
Threat × Anti-regime websites	0.12 (0.21)	0.20 (0.21)	0.17 (0.28)	-	-	0.17 (0.19)	0.14 (0.22)
Authoritarianism	0.78** (0.23)	0.74** (0.17)	0.26 (0.19)	0.45** (0.25)	0.07 (0.16)	-	-
Authoritarianism × Sada el Balad /Faraeen	0.23** (0.17)	0.13* (0.26)	0.12 (0.19)	0.21* (0.21)	0.23 (0.21)	-	-
Authoritarianism × Private TV Networks	0.29* (0.26)	0.36** (0.18)	0.21 (0.11)	0.36** (0.22)	0.29 (0.20)	-	-
Authoritarianism × State-controlled Channels	0.41** (0.21)	0.22* (0.21)	0.19 (0.12)	0.89** (0.20)	0.27 (0.19)	-	-
Authoritarianism × Brotherhood Channels	0.19* (0.14)	0.25* (0.31)	0.11 (0.29)	0.41** (0.21)	0.13 (0.12)	-	-
Authoritarianism × Aljazeera	-0.41** (0.28)	0.01 (0.23)	-0.56** (0.18)	0.08 (0.17)	-0.22* (0.27)	-	-
Authoritarianism × Pro-regime websites	0.28* (0.17)	0.89** (0.13)	0.19 (0.16)	0.75** (0.26)	0.13 (0.26)	-	-
Authoritarianism × Anti-regime websites	0.23 (0.11)	0.20 (0.16)	0.11 (0.22)	0.23 (0.19)	0.17 (0.24)	-	-
Pseudo-R2	0.298	0.324	0.399	0.421	0.380	0.365	0.422
N	421	334	87	326	95	340	81

Coefficients are unstandardized logistic regression weights. Values in parentheses are standard errors. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$.

Hypothesis one predicted that those who regularly view Sada el Balad and/or El Faraeen channels would be more likely to believe that the January revolution was a conspiracy than those who do not. This was the case ($b = 0.45$, $SE = 0.23$, $p < 0.01$). Hypothesis one is supported.

In answer to research question one, exposure to pro-regime media outlets: private satellite channels ($b = 0.64$, $SE = 0.17$, $p < 0.01$), state-controlled channels ($b = 0.47$, $SE = 0.23$, $p < 0.01$) and

political websites ($b = 0.77, SE = 0.27, p < 0.001$) were positively related to conspiracy belief in the overall sample. Looking at anti-regime media outlets, while exposure to Muslim Brotherhood channels was positively significant ($b = 0.53, SE = 0.26, p < 0.01$), exposure to Aljazeera channels was negatively related to conspiracy belief ($b = -0.87, SE = 0.21, p < 0.01$). Exposure to political websites was not related to conspiracy belief.

Hypothesis two predicted that regime support would be related to 25 January revolution conspiracy belief. The significant positive coefficient ($b = 0.42, SE = 0.17, p < 0.01$) shows that belief in conspiracy theory is more likely for those who support the regime and less likely for those who oppose the regime. Hypothesis two is supported.

Hypothesis three predicted that regime support will interact with Sada el Balad and/or El Faraeen viewership such that exposure to these media outlets will amplify party differences in belief that January 25 revolution was a conspiracy. This interaction was positive and significant in the overall sample ($b = 0.51, SE = 0.29, p < 0.01$), consistent with the prediction. Looking at the regime support subgroups, Sada el Balad and ElFaraeen viewership significantly increased conspiracy belief for those who support the regime ($b = 0.34, SE = 0.19, p < 0.01$), but not for those who oppose the regime ($b = 0.11, SE = 0.19, ns$). Hypothesis three is supported.

In answer to research question two 2, regime support had positive and significant interactions with exposure to private satellites ($b = 0.47, SE = 0.29, p < 0.01$) state-controlled channels ($b = 0.52, SE = 0.24, p < 0.01$) and websites supporting the regime ($b = 0.71, SE = 0.28, p < 0.01$) in the overall sample. Looking at the regime support subgroups, regular exposure to private and state-controlled channels and regular use of websites supporting the regime significantly increased conspiracy belief for those who highly support the regime but not for those with low support. While regime support had positive and significant interactions with Brotherhood channels viewership ($b = 0.56, SE = 0.27, p < 0.01$), the interaction with El Jazeera channels viewership was significantly negative ($b = -0.39, SE = 0.23, p < 0.01$) in the overall sample. Looking at the regime support subgroups, while Brotherhood channels viewership was associated with conspiracy belief among those who highly support the regime, Aljazeera channels viewership played a role in decreasing conspiracy belief for those with low support.

Hypothesis four was that threat perception will be positively related to the belief of January revolution conspiracy theory. This was the case ($b = 0.33, SE = 0.21, p < 0.05$). Hypothesis four is supported.

Hypothesis five predicted that Sada el Balad and/or ElFaraen viewership and threat perception would interact such that these media outlets viewership would be associated with conspiracy belief especially among those who are highly threatened. The coefficient for

this interaction was positive and significant in the overall sample ($b = 0.66$, $SE = 0.17$, $p < 0.01$), consistent with the prediction. Looking at the threat perception subgroups, Sada el Balad and ElFaraen viewership was associated with conspiracy belief among highly threatened respondents ($b = 0.65$, $SE = 0.22$, $p < 0.01$), but not among those in the low threat perception subgroup ($b = 0.24$, $SE = 0.11$, *ns*). Also noteworthy is that the interaction between threat perception and Sada el Balad and ElFaraen viewership was significant among the pro-regime and high authoritarians subgroups, but not the anti-regime and low authoritarians subgroups. Hypothesis five is supported.

In answer to the research question three, threat perception had positive and significant interactions with viewership of private satellites ($b = 0.24$, $SE = 0.15$, $p < 0.01$) state-controlled channels ($b = 0.78$, $SE = 0.22$, $p < 0.01$) and pro-regime political websites ($b = 0.39$, $SE = 0.18$, $p < 0.05$) in the overall sample. Looking at the threat perception subgroups, regular exposure to pro-regime outlets had a positive and significant relationship with conspiracy belief for highly threatened individuals. While threat perception had positive and significant interactions with Brotherhood channels viewership ($b = 0.64$, $SE = 0.14$, $p < 0.01$), the interaction with Aljazeera channels viewership was significantly negative ($b = -0.39$, $SE = 0.27$, $p < 0.05$) in the overall sample. Looking at the threat perception subgroups, it appears that Brotherhood channels viewership failed to decrease conspiracy belief for those who are highly threatened.

while Aljazeera channels viewership played a role in decreasing conspiracy belief for those who are not highly threatened .

Hypothesis six predicted that authoritarianism will be positively related to believing in conspiracy theory .This was the case ($b = 0.78, SE = 0.23, p < 0.01$). Hypothesis six is supported.

Hypothesis seven predicted that authoritarianism and Sada El Balad and/or ElFaraeen viewership will interact such that these media outlets viewership is associated with conspiracy belief especially among high authoritarians. The coefficient for this interaction was positive and significant in the overall sample ($b = 0.23, SE = 0.17, p < 0.01$), consistent with the prediction. Looking at the authoritarian subgroups, Sada El Balad and ElFaraeen viewership was strongly associated with conspiracy belief among high authoritarians ($b = 0.75, SE = 0.21, p < 0.01$), but not among low authoritarian subgroup ($b = -0.02, SE = 0.11, ns$). Also noteworthy is that the interaction between authoritarianism and Sada El Balad and ElFaraeen was significant among those who highly support the regime and are highly threatened. Hypothesis seven is supported.

In answer to research question four , authoritarianism had positive and significant interactions with viewership of private satellites ($b = 0.29, SE = 0.26, p < 0.05$) state-controlled channels ($b = 0.41, SE = 0.21, p < 0.01$) and pro-regime websites ($b = 0.28, SE = 0.17, p < 0.05$) in the overall sample . Looking at the authoritarian subgroups, regular exposure to pro-regime outlets had a positive and

significant relationship with conspiracy belief for high authoritarians. As for anti-regime media outlets, authoritarianism had positive and significant interactions with Brotherhood channels ($b = 0.19$, $SE = 0.14$, $p < 0.05$) and Aljazeera channels viewership ($b = 0.41$, $SE = 0.28$, $p < 0.01$) in the overall sample. Looking at the authoritarian subgroups, while regular exposure to Brotherhood channels was associated with conspiracy belief among high authoritarians. ($b = 0.59$, $SE = 0.25$, $p < 0.01$), regular exposure to Aljazeera channels significantly decreased conspiracy belief for low authoritarian subgroups ($b = -0.25$, $SE = 0.18$, $p < 0.01$).

Discussion:

On 25 January 2011, demonstrators took to the streets, calling for freedom, justice and a voice in managing Egypt's resources. Today, after four years of protests, conspiracy theories have been proliferated by various media outlets that January revolution was a plot. This study investigated the roles of regime support, threat perception, authoritarianism and media exposure and their interactions in the belief that January revolution was a conspiracy. Indications pointed to the role of selective exposure in shifting people's attitudes toward January revolution. This study further found that exposure to attitude-incongruent information failed to reduce belief in conspiracy theories for those who support the regime, threatened individuals and authoritarians. While the three variables served as a strong predictor

of conspiracy belief, an interaction with selective exposure promoted this belief.

As hypothesized, those who highly support the current regime would be more likely to believe that January revolution was a conspiracy, and they were. Threat perception and authoritarianism were also strong predictors of conspiracy belief. This is consistent with past findings that conspiracy belief serve political, social and psychological needs .(Swami ,2012) . The study also showed that regular exposure to monopolistic conspiracy discourses on Sada el Balad and /or El Faraeen as well as other pro-regime media outlets was related to conspiracy belief . This result is consistent with Warner and Neville-Shepard's (2014) findings that exposure to one-sided conspiracy messages increased belief in conspiracy theories. Moreover , an interaction between regime support and exposure to media outlets supporting the current regime amplified the differences between those who support the regime and those who do not .Those with high levels of regime support were more receptive to conspiracy messages proliferated by pro-regime media outlets , than those with low levels of regime support , so a relative selective exposure effect may be at work . This result gives support to studies who argue that selective exposure leads to polarization (e.g., Holbert et al., 2010; Sunstein , 2007; Stroud ,2010) . It may also at part explain the highly polarized environment in Egypt.

A similar interaction was found between threat perception, authoritarianism and exposure to pro-regime media outlets. Threat perception and authoritarianism increased belief in conspiracy theories more prominently in the condition in which participants regularly view conspiracy messages. A three-way interaction showed that threat perception increased belief in conspiracy theories among authoritarians who highly support the regime and who chose to view conspiracy messages. Results are consistent with Lavine and his colleagues' (2005) findings that in the presence of threat, high but not low authoritarians became significantly more interested in exposure to attitude-congruent information. The interaction between regime support / threat perception / authoritarianism and exposure to pro-regime media outlets showed the complex role of these variables in both affecting and promoting conspiracy belief.

As for consuming different perspectives, those who highly support the regime and regularly view debunking information on anti-regime media outlets, such as Muslim Brotherhood and Aljazeera channels, showed attitude reinforcement. The interaction between exposure and conspiracy belief was positive and significant. This tendency conforms to the selective exposure thesis: People do not necessarily avoid alternative perspectives; they may be exposed to information that contradicts their position and yet strive to reinforce their attitudes because they filter incongruent information (Baum and Groeling, 2008; Taber and Lodge, 2006). However, regular use of anti

-regime media outlets showed different relationships with conspiracy belief for those who oppose the regime. While exposure to Aljazeera channels reduced belief in conspiracy theories, there was no such interaction with Muslim Brotherhood channels. Different indications could be attributed to the respondents' political predispositions. Respondents included in this study were all of liberal predispositions. Most of those who oppose the regime in Egypt may also oppose the Muslim Brotherhood regime, so as Zaller (1992) argued, they may question the credibility of the source.

Although programs presented on Muslim Brotherhood and Aljazeera channels repeatedly dismiss the notion of a conspiracy, it is not surprising, that exposure to these channels was positively and significantly related to conspiracy belief among threatened individuals. When confronted with dissonant information of the events of September 11, 2001, widely reported by the mainstream and dissenting media outlets, threatened citizens showed support for the official story, even to the point of fabricating arguments to support their beliefs (Manwell, 2010). Typically, high authoritarians who were exposed to diverse messages, experienced attitude confirmation and dismissed dissonant information. Strategies to counter-argue dissonant information serves to protect individual's current beliefs. (Lavine et al., 2005)

In contrast, while exposure to Muslim Brotherhood channels was not significant, low threatened people and low authoritarians

who chose to be exposed to diverse information on Aljazeera , were less receptive to conspiracy belief . They have a stronger motivation to consume balanced information, to develop accurate beliefs more likely than high authoritarians or those in high threat conditions.

Limitations and future research:

This study has answered Warner and Neville-Sheppard's (2014) call and examined media effects on conspiracy belief in a true case of media exposure. However, the major limitation of this study is the low percentage of respondents who reported low support for the current regime (only 20.7%). As prior work has indicated that individuals try to reduce existing dissonance by seeking out consonant information and avoiding challenging information, another limitation of this study was the low amount of respondents who sought out discrepant information (22.9%). Finally, participants in this study were all of liberal predispositions and are therefore more likely to share a homogenous set of political attitudes. Participants with political Islamic predisposition were excluded because they are part of the conspiracy theory .Perhaps media effect on conspiracy belief would be smaller in a group with different political attitudes. It should be tested by future research.

In spite of these limitations, the study contributes to modern debates on the effects of media on society in light of high media choice environment. The study also contributes important insights to our understanding of the effects of media exposure on conspiracy

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belief. Results also show that effects of exposure to attitude-affirming messages differ according to the source. (Effects of exposure to Aljazeera were more influential compared with the effects of regular exposure to Muslim Brotherhood channels offering the same debunking messages). Finally, this study addresses how the interaction of media exposure, regime support, threat perception and authoritarianism may play an important role in dramatically change people's attitudes and polarize society.

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Notes

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