Conspiracy Theories in the Egyptian State-Controlled Press[*]

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Abstract

Why do states promote conspiracy theories? Previous scholarship has largely focused on the demand for conspiracy theories in democratic settings, neglecting the role that conspiracy theories play in autocracies. We ask two questions about the supply of conspiracy theories in society. Are conspiracy theories prevalent because of local culture or is their supply influenced by political leaders and institutions? And if leaders and institutions matter, are state-promoted conspiracy theories best understood as messaging about elite fears and priorities, or as distraction to deflect criticism away from the regime? To answer these questions, we develop a model for detecting conspiracy theories in the Arabic-language text of Egyptian newspapers. We compare the supply of conspiracy theories in a state-owned Egyptian newspaper, *al-Ahram*, to an independent Egyptian newspaper, *al-Masry al-Youm*, between 2005 and 2015. We find evidence that institutions matter: the content and prevalence of conspiracy theories varies by newspaper and changes as state institutions change.

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1

1 Introduction

On August 14th, 2013, Egyptian security forces killed approximately 1,000 demonstrators gathered in Raba'a square to protest the ouster of Egypt's first democratically elected President, Muhammad Morsi.[1] Thirteen days later, as Egypt reeled from the aftermath of its bloodiest internal conflict in recent memory, the state-run newspaper *al-Ahram* ran a front-page headline, alleging a "New Conspiracy to Undermine Stability: Politicians, Journalists and Businessmen Involved." The article claimed the existence of a plot between rather unlikely conspirators — United States' Ambassador to Egypt, Anne Peterson, and Muslim Brotherhood leader Khayrat al-Shater — to smuggle "300 armed men from Gaza to Egypt through tunnels, to spread chaos throughout Cairo and storm numerous prisons." Some critics interpreted *al-Ahram*'s provocative posturing as an attempt to "intimidate dissenters and rally the public,"[2] but is this correct? Why would the state newspaper promote a conspiracy theory sure to increase diplomatic tension between the United States and Egypt during an already tense time?

These high-profile allegations of conspiracy, prominently placed on the front page of a newspaper under the control of the Egyptian state, provoke our guiding questions: Why, and how, do states promote conspiracy theories? There has been substantial scholarly interest in the demand for conspiracy theories, whether by individuals or societies. This research suggests that conspiracy theories are heuristics that help individuals cope with the complexity and ambiguities of modern politics, particularly individuals who believe in unseen forces, like ghosts or angels, and stark narratives contrasting good and evil (Oliver and Wood, 2014). However, there has been less attention to the supply side of conspiracy theories. Scholarship about the supply of conspiracy theories has tended to focus on culture or psychology, suggesting, for example, a "paranoid style in American

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[1]This incident and subsequent political violence made 2013 the single bloodiest year in Egypt's modern history. See Karim Fahim and Mayy El Sheikh's August 14, 2013 article in the *New York Times* titled "Fierce and Swift Raids on Islamists Bring Sirens, Gunfire, Then Screams" (http://http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/15/world/middleeast/fierce-and-swift-raids-on-islamists-bring-sirens-gunfire-then-screams.html); see also Jay Ulfelder's August 18, 2013 blog post at https://dartthrowingchimp.wordpress.com/2013/08/18/egypts-mass-killing-in-historical-perspective/.

[2]See Ursula Lindsey's August 29, 2013 article in the *New York Times* titled "The tall tales of Cairo" (http://latitude.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/08/29/the-tall-tales-of-cairo/).

politics" (Hofstadter, 1965), or that "conspiracism provides a key to understanding the political culture of the Middle East" (Pipes, 1998, 1).

We argue that scholars have not adequately theorized or empirically examined the ways that political institutions might shape the supply of conspiracy theories in society. There are some acknowledgments that political institutions matter among those who support the cultural view. For example, Pipes (1998, 353) suggests that political institutions such as autocracy may have something to do with the seeming prevalence of conspiratorial thinking in the Middle East, though he gives greater weight to cultural explanations. Gray (2010a) goes further in the direction we suggest by offering a number of theoretical insights about the possible motives for "the state as conspiracy theorist" (118). Still, institutional explanations for the prevalence of conspiracy theories have not been fully articulated and the resulting sense is that culture explains the variation in conspiracy theories across time and space. We disagree.

If we are correct that political institutions are important for explaining variation in the supply of conspiracy theories, then this prompts further questions about the purpose of state-promoted conspiracy theories. On one hand, conspiracy theories may serve as messaging from the government to communicate fears and priorities. On the other, they may serve to distract from regime incompetence, failure, or repression. Of course governments could mix between these strategies, depending on their goals, though we are skeptical that conspiracy theories can be successfully deployed for both messaging and distraction simultaneously. A number of possible government strategies could fall under the two broad logics of messaging and distraction, including some suggested by Gray (2010a) and others. We are not necessarily the first to propose these theoretical arguments, but we are among the first to adjudicate their relative importance with systematic data.

Empirically, we apply statistical text analysis methods to identify conspiracy theories in two Egyptian newspapers between 1998 and 2015. Our focus on Egypt is a result of data availability and our expertise — it is easier for us to identify conspiracy theories in a context we know well, and several of us are familiar with Egypt's political environment. Our goal is to use data from Egypt to offer preliminary tests of our hypotheses and also inductively develop more complete supply-side theories of autocratic conspiracy theory promotion that could be tested on new data we have not

yet collected.

Within the Egyptian context, we compare the prevalence, timing, and content of conspiracy theories in Egypt's main state-owned newspaper, *al-Ahram*, and a prominent independent newspaper, *Al-Masry Al-Youm*. With just two newspapers, we are not able to fully map the use of conspiracy theories in the Egyptian news arena, but this is not our goal. Instead, we seek to understand what the government is trying to accomplish with conspiracy theories in the state-run newspaper by comparing it to its independent counterpart. We deploy workhorse text analysis models to automatically classify a subset of 33,720 paragraphs across the two newspapers, resulting in 27,039 paragraphs containing a conspiracy theory and 6,681 that do not.[3]

We find that the frequency of conspiracy theories in the Egyptian press varies substantially over time. Changes in the frequency and content of conspiracy theories correspond with changes in Egypt's political institutions, supporting the claim that institutions matter. However, we find very different patterns of conspiracy theory reporting under different periods of autocracy, so it is not the case that regime type is sufficient to explain the supply of conspiracy theories. Instead, new institutional configurations seem to bring about new patterns of conspiracy theory promotion by both the state-run and independent newspapers. On the issue of messaging versus distraction, we find more evidence of messaging on balance. Some of our quantitative results suggest that the state is keen to promote conspiracy theories with foreign actors to distract from domestic politics, but in a case study, we find a surprising lack of distracting conspiracy theories following an incident where we expected them. We are investigating further.

These new insights about the supply of conspiracy theories in the Egyptian press are important for at least two reasons. Egypt is currently experiencing an authoritarian resurgence which has swamped the brief opening associated with the "Arab Spring." Press freedoms, freedom of speech and assembly have all been dramatically curtailed. Domestic political institutions, particularly the Egyptian congress and judiciary, have been brought firmly under the control of the current government of President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi. Previous research has highlighted the importance of control of the media environment in authoritarian contexts. Insights into the promotion of

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[3]A future iteration of our model will distinguish between credulous and skeptical mentions of conspiracy theories.

conspiracy theories in these two prominent papers have the potential to improve our understanding of how authoritarian regimes attempt to manage perceptions of events. By examining almost eight years of data, including periods of relative calm, as well as periods of unprecedented political turmoil, we hope to provide a better understanding of the use of conspiracy theories, especially during periods of heightened domestic tension.

More generally, anecdotes suggest that conspiracy theories are widely used by autocratic regimes, but autocratic strategies for deploying them are not well understood. We are under no illusions that Egypt is in some way representative of all authoritarian regimes, so further work is needed in a number of autocratic contexts to understand this phenomenon. Still, we think our approach offers a way forward and some intriguing early results.

The next section discusses the literature on conspiracy theories, demonstrating its overarching emphasis on the "demand" for conspiracy theories. In section three, we develop several arguments about the supply of conspiracies in autocracies, drawing on literature on information, media, and censorship to complement the insights we gather from the literature on conspiracy theories. Section four provides background on the Egyptian media. Section five describes our approach for automatically detecting conspiracy theories in newspaper articles. Section six presents the main empirical findings of our comparison of conspiracy theories across the two newspapers and over time, and section seven concludes.

2   Conspiracy Theories: Supply and Demand

Following Oliver and Wood (2014), we consider conspiricism to be a "type of political discourse" that is defined by three features: (1) a propensity to "locate the source of unusual social and political phenomena in unseen, intentional, and malevolent forces," (2) a propensity to interpret events "in terms of a Manichean struggle between good and evil," and (3) the implication that "mainstream accounts of political events are a ruse" (953).

Conspiracy theories are widely prevalent. According to survey results reported by Oliver and Wood (2014), "half of the American public consistently endorses at least one conspiracy theory." Similar data are not available for Egypt, the country we study in this paper, but our experi-

ences while conducting fieldwork for other projects suggests that conspiracy theories are relatively widespread there as well. We suspect that understanding conspiracy theories, those who believe them, and those who produce them, is important for understanding politics in virtually any country.

Scholars have been interested in conspiracy theories since at least Hofstadter's *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (1965). Scholars of conspiracy theories in philosophy (Clarke, 2012; Popper, 1945) and history (Bale, 2007; Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009; Lipset and Raab, 1970) have long focused on societal prevalence of conspiracy theories, identifying cultural and historical factors that seem related to conspiricism. Scholarship from these disciplines draws on primary and secondary sources to advance definitional debates and develop taxonomies (Räikkä, 2009), examine the relationship between culture and conspiracy theories (Fenster, 2008) or address philosophical questions, such as the rationality of conspiracy theories (Coady, 2012; Pigden, 1995). These explanations tend to discuss the impact of specific events, historical periods, or societal forces on the diffusion and popularity of conspiracy theories (Parish and Parker, 2001; Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009).

Previous scholarship highlights the wide diffusion of conspiracy theories across cultures, time and place (Bruder et al., 2013). While there is no uniform consensus in the academic literature, conspiracy theories are thought to be particularly prevalent in situations where information and trust (or both) are low. Under these circumstances the identity and motivations of individual actors are obscure or inscrutable.

The bulk of the scholarship on the role of conspiracy theories in the Middle East follows in this tradition (Al-Azm, 2011; Butter and Reinkowski, 2014; Graf, Fathi and Paul, 2011). Some claim that the promulgation of conspiracy theories is a manifestation of a regional political culture (Pipes, 1998; Zonis and Joseph, 1994). Others emphasize the role of historical experience in explaining the prevalence of conspiracy theories in the region. These scholars note that secret negotiations between France and Britain *did* lead to the establishment of colonial "spheres of influence" under the Sykes-Picot agreement; covert American support *did* help force the democratically elected Iranian Prime Minister Muhammed Mossadegh from power; and the Israeli "false-flag" campaign of bombings and sabotage, known in Egypt as the "Lavon Affair," *did* attempt to pressure the British to maintain

troops in the Suez canal. These scholars emphasize that the popularity of conspiracy theories in the Middle East cannot be understood without recognizing that historic precedent gives ample cause to be suspicious of conspiracies and plots (Gray, 2010a, 2008; Silverstein, 2000). While these works provide a rich sense of context and clearly communicate the long-term resonance of clandestine operations by regional powers in popular discourse, they typically rely on unsystematic evidence.

Other scholars in the disciplines of political psychology (Goertzel, 1994; Wood, 2015), public health (Bogart and Thorburn, 2005), and sociology (Parsons et al., 1999; Spark, 2001), have focused on generating a body of quantitative results about the causes and effects of individual belief in conspiracy theories using surveys and experiments. Some focus on individual characteristics that make some people more or less receptive to conspiracy theories (Brotherton, French and Pickering, 2013; Wood, Douglas and Sutton, 2012), while others examine the impact of conspiracy theories on other beliefs (Dixon and Jones, 2015; Lasswell, 1927) or behavior (Einstein and Glick, 2014). Together, these studies give a relatively clear picture of the causes of individual demand for conspiracy theories. These findings point to the usefulness of conspiracy theories as heuristics. For example, Oliver and Wood find that "the likelihood of supporting conspiracy theories is strongly predicted by a willingness to believe in other unseen, intentional forces and an attraction to Manichean narratives" (Oliver and Wood, 2014). While scholars disagree about the individual traits that correlate with a greater proclivity to believe in conspiracy theories, scholars generally accept that conspiracy theories provide a mechanism for establishing a sense of order and purpose in the face of complex events that are difficult to understand.

This growing quantitative literature on conspiracy theories has largely been confined to the context of the United State. One exception is Gentzkow and Shapiro (2004) who examine how media use and education shape using data from a 2002 poll conducted by Gallup in nine predominantly Muslim countries. Their findings suggest that respondents in these countries who watch Aljazeera satellite television are less likely to accept authoritative reports that Arabs carried out the September 11th 2001 attacks than those who get their news from other sources, especially CNN. However, as the authors note, it is difficult to tell whether Aljazeera makes people conspiracists or conspiracists simply prefer Aljazeera.

There is substantially less work on the supply of conspiracy theories. Often, the literature conveys that demand for conspiracy theories explains their supply; if humans have psychological propensities to believe such ideas, then they will naturally arise. Fewer studies focus on the role of the state in promoting conspiracy theories, and those that do tend to give highly contextual accounts for specific countries such as Russia (Yablokov, 2015), Venezuela (Hernáiz, 2008), Kyrgyzstan (Radnitz, 2016), or Iraq (Gray, 2010b), rather than general theory. The lack of a general theory of state-promoted conspiracy theories is surprising because we have strong reasons to believe that the government plays an active and highly politicized role in regulating the media landscape in autocracies (Black, 2008; Peterson, 2011), but our understanding of the actual mechanisms at work, in our case in print media, is limited.

Gray (2010a, Chapter 4) offers the most complete treatment to date of the supply of conspiracy theories by autocratic states in the Arab World. Gray suggests a number of reasons why the state promotes conspiracy theories, but does not empirically adjudicate between them, or provide any empirical assessment of their relative importance. Gray sees conspiracy theories as a possible diversionary tactic: a cynical but rational response of autocrats when "calls for reform or democratization need to be silenced" (120). Under these circumstances, the state may promote conspiracy theories to explain its failings and direct rage away from the government and toward an alternative source, creating a "channel for popular disquiet or mistrust" (121).

An alternative possibility is that autocrats promote conspiracy theories because they believe them. There is substantial evidence that many autocrats genuinely believed they were being conspired against, and in the Middle East, the long list of leaders who have lost power at the hands of conspirators suggests that this belief is not irrational. Autocrats may communicate the conspiracies they fear to explain policies aimed at stopping these conspiracies, especially if these policies are unpopular, repressive, or violent. Finally, Gray suggests that conspiracy theories may serve long-range state-building goals by identifying and articulating the aims of enemies of the state and communicating to citizens which organizations the regime views as incompatible with the state's projects Gray (2010a, 133-134).

Although Gray (2010a) supports some of these claims with anecdotes, he provides no systematic

tests. This means that while all of the arguments are plausible, it is difficult to tell which are most prevalent, either generally or in any specific case. In the next section, we build on Gray's propositions to develop more complete theoretical expectations for whether state institutions can explain variation in the prevalence of conspiracy theories in society. We then propose a number of ways these arguments can be tested systematically using data on promotion of conspiracy theories in state-run media.

3 Why Do Autocrats Promote Conspiracy Theories?

In order to develop more precise theory about state promotion of conspiracy theories, we engage with two sets of debates. The first debate revolves around whether the prevalence of conspiracy theories in society can be fully explained by some aspect of culture, or whether political institutions play a role. If, as we argue, institutions affect the supply of conspiracy theories, then the question is how? Although institutions can affect the supply of conspiracy theories in many ways, we focus on intentional promotion of conspiracy theories by the state. We frame this as a debate about whether state-promoted conspiracism is best viewed as *messaging* or *distraction*. The rest of this section takes up these two debates in turn.

Culture or Institutions?

The prevailing view of much of the literature on conspiracy theories, especially in the Middle East, is that they are an outgrowth of political culture. Pipes (1998, 2), for example, writes that "the fear of conspiracy serves as the ubiquitous currency of Middle East political rhetoric." According to this argument, people in the Middle East, and to varying degrees elsewhere, have simply developed an appetite for conspiracy theories that results in their wide circulation throughout society. The causes of this cultural appetite may vary from place to place. Pipes (1998) suggests a number of possible factors, including the frustrations of modern Muslims at finding their region falling behind the 'Christian' West, the spread of Western-origin anti-Semitic conspiracy theories throughout the Middle East, and the "great number of actual conspiracies in the past two centuries" (325). Pipes even acknowledges that political institutions have helped to create a culture of conspiricism: "By their very nature, autocratic regimes…spawn conspiracy theories" (358). However, the argument re-

8

mains fundamentally cultural. Even if political institutions help to create an culture of conspiricism in the Middle East, it has taken on a life of its own.

The cultural argument can also extend to explain state promotion of conspiracy theories. After all, the elites who run the states in the Middle East generally come from the same cultural milieu as their citizens, and thus have the same cultural propensity toward conspiricism. Perhaps if conspiratorial language and thinking are an important part of society's discourse as a whole, the regime applies them as well. In the extreme, it could be that governments promote conspiracy theories only because those who occupy positions in government believe them. This also suggests an analogous argument about how conspiracy theories end up in the news. Journalists are no doubt subject to the same cultural influences as others in their societies, so reporting that promotes conspiracy theories may simply reflect the cultural preferences of journalists rather than influence by state institutions or some other force.

We are skeptical of the cultural argument and suggest instead that institutions shape the supply of conspiracy theories in important ways. Broadly speaking, we expect that institutions of government — democracy, autocracy, and everything in between — can create incentives for elites to promote conspiracy theories or try to limit their spread. If institutions are the "rules of the game," then promoting conspiracy theories may be more beneficial under some rules than others.

Fundamentally, the difference between democracy and autocracy can be characterized as a difference between the incentives that elites face when forced to satisfy relatively large or small portions of their populations to stay in office (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003). This in turn influences whether elites have incentives to provide public or private goods to their supporters, and shapes whether they attempt to retain office by providing good policies or by buying off supporters and repressing the opposition.

The free flow of correct information is a public good, and the spread of untrue conspiracy theories is likely to have negative externalities for society. For a politician attempting to retain office with good policies, promoting conspiracy theories is of limited use as a general strategy and has substantial risks. On the other hand, politicians whose ability to retain office is not tied to providing public goods are less concerned about the negative effects of promoting conspiracy

theories and thus benefit more from the short term benefits of spreading any single conspiracy theory. This suggests that broadly speaking, democrats are less likely to find it useful to promote conspiracy theories than autocrats. This conclusion is in line with the prevailing sense in the literature that autocrats may benefit from promoting conspiracy theories. Gray (2010a) describes a number of benefits that autocrats might derive, including distraction from the failings of the state. Pipes (1998, 358-361) says that they can "lay a trap," "protect the ruler," "win support," "burnish a reputation," "relieve responsibility," "justify misbehavior," "explain away awkward situations," "impugn a rival," "establish a tyranny," and more. We suspect that some of these benefits to autocrats are real, though the ability of conspiracy theories to do all of these things may well be overstated.

We expect that different institutional arrangements within the broad categories of autocracy and democracy also influence state promotions of conspiracy theories. We do not yet have clear theoretical predictions for how particular institutions matter, and we expect that these dynamics can be quite context specific. The point is that under different institutional arrangements, elites have different incentives to promote conspiracy theories.

Messaging or Distraction?

If institutions matter for the prevalence of conspiracy theories in society, then how do they matter? We expect that there are many possible answers to this question, but we focus on theorizing about the direct promotion of conspiracy theories by an autocratic state. We expect that institutions also have indirect effects on the prevalence of conspiracy theories, but these are beyond the scope of our paper.

We argue that although there are many reasons that autocrats might promote conspiracy theories, these reasons can be grouped into two broad categories: messaging (conspiracies that communicate regime priorities), and distraction (conspiracies that deflect criticism). In making this distinction, we draw on the work of King, Pan, and Roberts (Forthcoming), who shed light on the Chinese government practice of creating massive numbers of "commissioned" social media posts to support regime goals. Although the common wisdom has been that these paid social media posts argumentatively confront anti-government posts during moments of crisis, King, Pan, and Roberts

find that the vast majority of commissioned posts are irrelevant to the crisis at hand. This suggests that the Chinese strategy is to distract social media users by flooding the Chinese Internet with banal posts rather than argue for any particular message. We are not sure whether the Egyptian government will be more interested in messaging or distraction, but we believe these two goals are fundamental for the media strategy of any dictatorship.

By "messaging," we mean conspiracy theories that are intended to convey information to the intended audience about regime perceptions, intentions, and priorities. Messaging can result from several processes that are empirically difficult to separate without access to inside knowledge about the intentions of the state. The first possibility is that elites sincerely believe that they are threatened by conspiracies and believe it is useful to communicate the nature of those perceived threats to their citizens. Gray (2010a, 126) believes that the value of doing this may be "to build support and cohesion in the face of a perceived threat." Gray is skeptical that this can be the primary explanation for state promotion of conspiracy theories, however, because "the state does not want to appear weak," as if it is "meekly seeking the counsel of the people it is supposed to be boldly leading" (126). However, this is largely speculation. It is not clear how citizens in autocracies respond to state allegations of conspiracy, and mass responses may be very contingent on the context and content of the alleged conspiracy. Conspiracy theories might reveal the weakness of the state, but they may also drum up nationalist fervor, resulting in a "rally round the flag" effect that autocrats facing conspiracies find useful.

Autocrats can still use conspiracy theories for messaging even if they do not actually believe the conspiracy theories they promote. Regimes may use conspiracy theories to communicate which actors they view as enemies, and by extension, the actors that their supporters should oppose. In this case, the intended message is not that the regime is actually under threat, but rather that actors identified as conspirators are "bad guys." The intent may be to send a message that discredits regime opponents by insinuating or alleging improper connections with foreign forces, for example. Similarly, the regime may use conspiracy theories to communicate disapproval to domestic and international opponents or perhaps even to international allies. If these actors take actions that the regime dislikes, it may begin promoting conspiracy theories about that actor to punish

them with negative publicity and try to shape their future actions. In addition to communicating information about who a regime sees as its enemies, the content of conspiracy theories can also communicate its priorities and goals. Autocrats may see this as helpful for building broader support for state-building projects.

The alternative to the messaging argument is that autocrats use conspiracy theories to distract the public from events that present the regime in an unflattering light (Gray, 2010a, 130). This view of conspiracy theories casts them as a tool of regime control, similar to propaganda and other symbolic regime communication designed to stifle dissent and maintain power. One mechanism for distraction is the previously mentioned "rally round the flag" effect. Political scientists have long recognized that external threat can increase support for anti-democratic government actions during times of crisis. If states promote conspiracy theories cynically, rather than sincerely, it may be because this is a viable means of increasing support for the government to distract from their own repression, as in the anecdote cited at the beginning of our paper. Regimes might be expected to use official media to promote conspiracy theories focused on the malevolent actions of an external entity. In the Middle East, these distraction conspiracy theories are most likely to implicate the United States or Israel because these two countries enjoy little domestic support. Moreover, both countries are powerful regional actors that have plotted against various governments in the Middle East, so they can be plausibly linked to shadowy plans that threaten domestic stability.

Similarly, the government may seek to assign blame for its failures elsewhere, perhaps blaming a foreign agent for the regime's inability to keep its promises. If this is the case, we expect conspiracy theories about irrelevant, external actors to spike during times of regime crises.

The sustained promotion of conspiracy theories may have benefits for regimes beyond the distraction caused by any single conspiracy theory. In Wedeen's (1999) account of Bashar al-Asad's Syria, the purpose of state propaganda is two-fold: to create mental powerlessness by cluttering the space of ideas and to demonstrate regime power by forcing everyone to publicly ratify bald falsehoods. Conspiracy theories could serve similar purposes for autocrats. On one hand, a proliferation of conspiracy theories clutters the news space, potentially distracting citizens from news that might otherwise trouble them. On the other, the crazier the conspiracy theory, the more rep-

etition identifies one as a partisan of the regime who is willing to parrot the party line no matter what. Repetition of these manifest falsehoods alienates participants from the opposition which is marked by its members refusal to participate in the celebration of official untruths or who promote their own conspiracy theories to undermine the regime.

4   Research Design

We test these competing theoretical arguments by looking for observable implications of each argument in the prevalence and content of conspiracy theories published by the main regime newspaper, *al-Ahram*, from July 18, 1998 to May 14, 2015, and Egypt's main independent newspaper, *al-Masry al-Youm*, from November 24, 2005 to May 18, 2015.

Our data is derived from the online archives of two different newspapers: *al-Ahram* and *al-Masry al-Youm.al-Ahram* is Egypt's flagship newspaper. Founded in 1875, *al-Ahram* was an independent newspaper until 1960 when it was nationalized by Nasser as part of a larger effort to bring independent institutions under the direct control of the government (Ayalon, 1995; Khamis, 2011). For more than 28 years *al-Ahram* was not just the dominant newspaper of record, but because of the importance of the Egyptian media market, one of the most influential papers in the Arab World. With the reestablishment of the Saudi financed *al-Hayat*, based in London in 1988, *al-Ahram*'s dominance began to wane, especially among educated elites and the Arab diaspora, but its domestic power was largely uncontested until the emergence of *al-Masry al-Youm* in 2004 and further eroded by the popular news site *al-Youm al-Saaba'a*, launched in 2009.

The absence of reliable data of subscribers or circulation statistics make it difficult to assess how the domestic media market changed with the arrival of *al-Masry al-Youm*. Data from Google, however suggests that online searches for the newcomer rapidly exceeded searches for *al-Ahram* by 2007. Currently Alexa.com rates *al-Masry al-Youm* as the 18th most popular website in Egypt while *al-Ahram* is 116th. We do not focus on Egypt's most popular newswebsite *al-Youm al-Saab'a* because it was a weekly rather than daily paper until 2011. Furthermore its populist, tabloid style is substantively different than the elite oriented focus of *al-Ahram* and *al-Masry al-Youm*.

Given the tight regulation of the Egyptian media market, some might challenge our characteri-

zation of *al-Masry al-Youm* as independent. *al-Masry al-Youm* was established by Salah Diab, CEO of the PICO group, and a powerful businessman with a background in the oil business (Al-Azm, 2015). But in an autocratic regime financial freedom does not guarantee editorial independence. Government approval was required to establish the newspaper and anecdotal evidence suggests that *al-Masry al-Youm* has been occasionally subject to government pressure or intervention (Peterson, 2011). For example, in 2015 Diab and his son were arrested on charges of owning an unlicensed handgun, a charge many described as "political."[4] Some fundamental differences distinguish the two papers. *al-Ahram*'s editor-in-chief is directly appointed by the Egyptian government and tend to enjoy long tenures in power. For example, Ibrahim Nafie, served as editor-in-chief of *al-Ahram* from 1979 until 2005. After Nafie, Osama Saraya serve from 2005 until 2012. [5] In contrast *al-Masry al-Youm* has had seven different editors in chief since it was founded in 2004, with Magdi Galad serving the longest, from 2005-2012. Furthermore, scholarship on Egypt's media landscape suggests a clear difference in the level of state intervention between the two newspapers. While rare, there are numerous occasions of direct intervention in *al-Ahram's* editorial process (Hammond, 2005) we are not aware of comparable examples in the case of *al-Masry al-Youm* where self-censorship appears to be more of a concern than direct intervention by the government.

Drawing on previous research we infer that the promotion of conspiracy theories, as with other editorial content, is generally shaped by far more subtle applications of power. Of particular importance, are so-called "red lines," implicit or explicit restrictions by the state on what topics can be discussed by the media, which ensure that only certain kinds of conspiracies regularly appear in print (Cooper, 2008; Hammond, 2005; Peterson, 2011). These red lines dramatically reduce the need for direct state intervention in the editorial process. While red lines may shift over time, based on our close reading of the academic scholarship on contemporary politics in Egypt we understand them to be the following: direct criticism of the office or person of the president, the military, or religious doctrine (Black, 2008; Cooper, 2008).

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[4]See Khaled Dawoud's article entitled "The Motives behind Salah Diab's Arrest and Release" (http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-motives-behind-salah-diab-s-arrest-and-release)

[5]The period from 2012-2014 proved unusually tumultuous for *al-Ahram*'s editorial board with three different editors between 2011 and 2014. See http://www.alahram.org.eg/ahram_board.htm for a full list of editors.

Our data do not allow us to discern how conspiracy theories make their way into the newspaper. However, anecdotal evidence about red-lines has direct implications for variation in the content of conspiracy theories which our data do allow us to test. Following on previous research on media regulation and self-censorship in Egypt (Cooper, 2008; Peterson, 2011), we expect that, in the regime newspaper, authors will never (or almost never) promote conspiracy theories that implicate the president or the military. We expect that conspiracy theories about the president or the military should be far more common in the independent media, particularly during periods where there is significant uncertainty about the regime's ability or willingness to police red lines.

We identify all of the conspiracy theories in each newspaper over the time periods we compare. This task would be very time consuming for human coders, so we develop an automated method for identifying conspiracy theories in Section 5.

We first test the implications of the cultural argument against the institutional argument using the period of overlap in dates between the newspapers. If the cultural argument is right, we expect to see high rates of conspiracy theory language in Egyptian newspapers. It is hard to say how high is high enough to count as the "ubiquitous currency" Pipes (1998) claims, but it should be a substantial presence in many, if not most news articles. The cultural argument also predicts that certain actors will be especially prominent in news articles. If, as Pipes claims, "Middle Easterners fear two main conspirators, Zionists and imperialists," (103), then we expect to see conspiracies that focus on Israel and the United States rather than other foreign or domestic entities.

We also expect that there will be little variation in the prevalence of conspiracy theories over time or across newspapers. Culture is a 'slow-moving' variable that is 'sticky,' so if culture is the dominant cause of variation in the prevalence of conspiracy theories, then there should be hardly any variation within a given country over a relatively short time period. Of course there may be day-to-day fluctuations in conspiracy theories, but this variation should disappear when we look at the time-scale of months and years. Instead, cultural arguments would predict variation across countries and regions, or perhaps variations across different cultures within the same country. In the same vein, if culture is the key, we expect to find few differences between state-run and independent newspapers serving the same media markets, because presumably, the culture of both readers and

journalists will be the same.

In contrast, if the institutional argument is correct, we expect several types of variation in the prevalence and content of conspiracy theories across newspapers and over time. First, we expect differences between the number and types of conspiracy theories in the state-run newspaper and the independent newspaper. We believe that in the Egyptian context, institutional incentives differed between independent and official media entities between 2005 and 2015. We are under no illusions that the independent press is somehow free of institutional constraints, but it is not affiliated with the government and thus less likely to reflect government priorities. While independent media in authoritarian regimes cannot totally ignore regime directives or pressure, independent media outlets enjoyed greater editorial independence and at least some financial autonomy from the state. While they may be careful not to cross red-lines, they should generally enjoy greater editorial latitude and direct attempts by the state to manipulate content should be rare. A direct implication of this hypothesis is that the amount of conspiracy content should be different, all things else being equal, between independent and official media outlets.

Another implication of the institutional argument is that we should observe substantial and abrupt changes in the conspiracy theories of both newspapers following major shifts in Egyptian institutions. We take advantage of the fact that government control of the Egyptian press differed dramatically across at least three time periods in our study. In our first period, from 2005 to January 2011, the Mubarak regime was firmly in power. This provides us with an opportunity to examine the supply of conspiracy theories in both newspapers during a period with relatively limited domestic turmoil. From January 2011 until July 2013, Egypt witnessed an unprecedented period of instability. With the resignation of Mubarak, massive demonstrations, the first free and fair parliamentary and presidential elections since independence in 1922, Egypt's institutions enjoyed a freedom not witnessed in at least the last 80 years. This includes the press, which appears to have benefited from the uncertainty and instability that characterized so much of this two year period (Peterson, 2011). Finally, we examine the period after the 2013 coup which brought President al-Sisi to power. In the aftermath of the coup, freedom and institutional independence have decreased across Egyptian society, to include the press.

We examine trends in conspiracy theories in each newspaper in several time periods defined by major changes in the institutions of the Egyptian state: the pre-revolution period before 25 January 2011, the post-Revolution period from 25 January 2011 to July 2013 that included democratic elections, and the period after the military coup in July 2013. If institutions matter, we expect changes in the prevalence and content of conspiracy theories at each of these junctures. We check whether the actors mentioned in conspiracy theories differs across the newspapers. If culture dominates, then both newspapers should report conspiracy theories involving the same actors, most likely Israel and the United States. If institutions matter, then the actors mentioned in conspiracies should vary by newspaper and time-period.

Assuming that we find evidence that institutions matter (spoiler alert: we do), we move on to testing whether conspiracy theories seem to follow a logic of messaging or distraction. We expect that conspiracy theory promotion for distraction may look different than messaging, though it is hard to know for sure. Messaging requires a consistent message within and across statements alleging conspiracy theories. Distraction could be characterized by similar consistency ("look over here, not over there") but could also result in far more inconsistency within and across state-promoted conspiracy theories ("look anywhere but over there"). If the distraction logic is dominant, then conspiracy theories published in the official media after a major event should direct the attention of readers to unpopular, external actors like the United States or Israel.

We also hope that the timing of conspiracy theory promotion will help us to empirically separate messaging from distraction. Messaging is more likely to be steady, while distraction will be intense during times when the government fears criticism but relatively short-lived. Thus, we look for upticks in conspiracy theories in the official media in the aftermath of a major events, particularly those that are embarrassing to the regime.

5   Automated Conspiracy Theory Detection

With adequate time, the best approach to identifying conspiracy theories in Egyptian media would be to read each article and code whether a conspiracy theory is present. However, this would require carefully reading every article published over at least a ten year span in each newspaper. Manual

coding is infeasible, so instead we turn to automated methods. But even the standard approach to training using a supervised[6] automated method—which begins with randomly selecting a "labeled set" from the population of texts—is infeasible here because conspiracy theories are relatively rare, a fact that quickly became clear to us from a manual examination of the articles published in both newspapers.[7] To overcome this problem, we take advantage of the fact that the Egyptian media use formulaic and consistent vocabulary when discussing conspiracy theories. We produce a set of keywords that appear in most conspiracy theories, and then limit our training procedure and analysis to the subset of texts that contain contain our keywords.[8]

An important measurement decision was to determine our unit of analysis—the level of text at which we think conspiracy theory language will be most detectable. The default unit in most text analysis settings is each natural text, in this case, each news article. However, based on manual examination of conspiracy theory-related articles, conspiracy theory language composed a relatively small portion of such articles. Because of this, we attempt to improve classification accuracy by instead breaking articles into paragraphs, a decision we made before conducting any analysis.

Additionally, we developed a set of guidelines to guide our two coders as they hand-coded our labeled set. Existing definitions used by previous scholars characterize conspiracy theories as highlighting the role of "unseen and malevolent forces," providing an interpretation of events using "Manichean" language, and finally discrediting "mainstream" explanations (Oliver and Wood, 2014). However, our approach is more precisely characterized as identifying conspiratorial language, based on our understanding that the politics of conspiracies may not necessarily require the author to explicitly provide a comprehensive "theory." We see this approach as a necessary adaption of

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[6]Supervised methods depends on a hand-coded set of texts, and stand in contrast to unsupervised methods which often require nothing more than the number of topics in a model.

[7]As additional evidence to this point, the measurement strategy we do employ found that one out of every 250 paragraphs in these newspapers are conspiracy theory-related. Thus, to obtain even 50 examples of conspiracy theory-related paragraphs using standard approaches, we would have had to sample and read 12,500 paragraphs.

[8]The set of keywords consists of variations of the words "conspiracy" (e.g. المؤامرة، التآمر, etc.), "trick" or "machination" (e.g. دسيسة، مكيدة, etc.) and "collusion" (e.g. التواطؤ، متواطئ, etc.). We considered using other keywords, such as iterations of the words for "plan" (خطط) and "interference" (التدخل), but paragraphs containing these words often included many non conspiracy theories.

accepted definitions of conspiracy theories to our particular context. Thus, our strategy focused on determining a set of guidelines to weed out clear non-conspiracies from the set of paragraphs containing our keywords, rather than on identifying Manichean language. First, we decided to eschew any guidelines that involved determining the factuality of a particular conspiracy theory, feeling that this would be impossible to maintain and would increase the subjectivity of our procedure. Second, we also decided that even if the conspiracy theory mentioned in a paragraph was not explicitly endorsed, or even if it was being explicitly criticized by the author, it would remain labeled as a conspiracy theory paragraph. We felt that doing otherwise would risk sufficiently decreasing the accuracy of the classifier.[9] Third, we decided to exclude any paragraphs that referenced non-political conspiracy theories, such as religious discussions of conspiracies against the prophet Muhammad or discussions of machinations within Egypt's domestic soccer league. Fourth, we excluded any mentions of non-modern political conspiracies (i.e. from before 1900). Fifth, we excluded any paragraphs about criminal conspiracies (e.g. news articles about individuals charged with conspiracy to commit a crime). Sixth, we excluded discussions of conspiracies in television, films or works of art. After two separate coders followed these guidelines, they reconciled any differences in coding to come up with a single coding for each paragraph. This process left us with a set paragraphs related to modern, political conspiracy theories. More information on this process, as well as examples of coded paragraphs, can be found in the online appendix.

In summary, we began our detection procedure by separating out the 10,499,177 paragraphs that composed our 1,063,040 articles. We then used our keywords to identity the 33,720 paragraphs that were likely to be conspiracy theory-related. From this subset, we took a random sample of 840 paragraphs to hand code as conspiracy-theory related or not, out of which we classified 517 as conspiracy theory-related, 290 as not, and 33 as too short/ambiguous to classify from a single paragraph.

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[9]To mitigate this problem, we introduced two additional training categories in our labeling procedure, one for whether a paragraph was critical of the conspiracy theory it contained, and another for whether a paragraph was reporting on a conspiracy theory in a neutral manner (e.g. quoting a politician who had endorsed a conspiracy theory). We have not been able to use these in a classifier to a satisfactory level of accuracy yet, so we present results from a binary classification instead.

With this labeled set in hand, we then used a random forest classifier to classify the remaining 32,880 paragraphs that contained our keywords. The usual document term matrix preparation of stemming, removing stop words and punctuation was carried out before running the classifier. Using the Caret package (Kuhn et al., 2014), we partitioned the labeled data into an 80/20 split of training set and test set, both with about 64% labeled conspiracies. We used out-of-bag resampling with 10 resamples and 1,000 trees. After running the classifier on the identical training/test set over a range of possible parameter values (the number of trees, the number of out-of-bag resamples and the number of variables randomly sampled at each split), we chose the specification that performed best on overall accuracy, sensitivity, and specificity. Our final model yielded an accuracy of 0.84, with a sensitivity of 0.92 and a specificity of 0.71. Combining our labeled set with the set predicted by the classifier, 27,039 (82.2%) of our original 33,720 paragraphs remained marked as conspiracy theories.

6 Evidence About Autocratic Supply of Conspiracy Theories

6.1 Quantitative Trends in the Supply of Conspiracy Theories

We first examine the frequency and nature of conspiracy theory paragraphs quantitatively across newspapers and across time. Figure 1 displays a monthly moving average for the daily number of paragraphs marked as conspiracies (hereafter referred to as conspiracy theory paragraphs). The x-axis indicates the date, with three separate panels for the Pre-Revolution, Revolution to Coup, and Post-Coup time periods. Lastly, within each panel there are four lines, two blue-colored (al-Masry) and two red (Ahram). The solid lines indicate the monthly moving average; the dotted lines indicate the overall average during each of the three time periods.

We draw attention to three descriptive findings: (1) there is substantial variation over time in reaction to specific incidents, (2) there is a distinct increase in conspiracy theory paragraphs across our three time periods of interest, and (3) this increase is most noticeable within *al-Ahram*, the regime newspaper. This increase over time is not due to an increase in the number of total paragraphs per day.[10] Rather, distinct shifts in the production of conspiracy theory paragraphs

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[10] Across our three time periods, the average total number of paragraphs per day goes from 1,106 to 1,114 and then
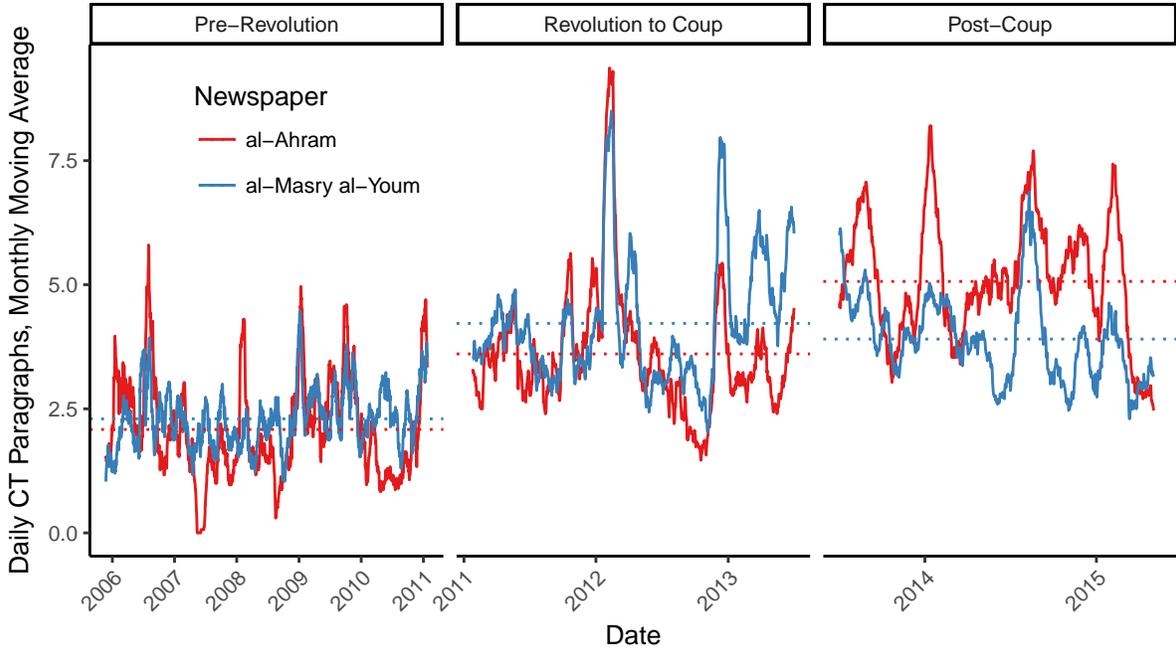
Figure 1: Monthly moving average for the number of conspiracy theory (CT) paragraphs in *al-Ahram* and *al-Masry al-Youm*. The three panels separate our three time periods of interest; solid lines represent the moving average, whereas dotted lines represent the overall average for the time period.

occur between three time periods: from 2008 until January 2011; February 2011 until July 2013 and after July 2013. Before the revolution, there was an average of just 2.1 (*al-Ahram*) and 2.3 (*al-Masry al-Youm*) paragraphs per day. After the revolution and before the coup, these numbers jumped up to 3.6 and 4.2, respectively. And after the revolution, *al-Ahram* continued its climb to 5.1 per day, while *al-Masry al-Youm* dropped slightly (while still remaining above its pre-revolution average) to 3.9. This variation in the use of conspiracy theories is not easily explained by regime type or culture.

down to 1,035. This represents an approximately 6 percent decrease in the total number of paragraphs from our first time period to our last (contrast this with the increase in conspiracy theory paragraphs, which more than doubled over the same time). Additionally, there are only slight differences between newspapers, with *al-Masry al-Youm* averaging approximately 1,056 paragraphs per day and *al-Ahram* averaging approximately 1,133 over all three time periods. This means that the conspiracy theory paragraphs our classifier has identified constitute approximately 0.4% of these newspapers, or one out of every 250 paragraphs.

Entities in Conspiracy Theories

Beyond the number of conspiracy theory paragraphs by itself, we quantitatively explore changes in conspiracy theory content over time and across newspapers by looking at when and how different entities—countries, social groups, and concepts—are mentioned in conspiracy theory paragraphs. Such an exploration helps us determine the extent to which the regime and independent newspapers implicate different entities in their conspiracy theories. This approach is not perfect, because it cannot distinguish between incidental and non-incidental mentions, nor can it tell us whether entities are implicated as perpetrator or victim. We use qualitative methods in later sections to explore those questions. But looking at conspiracy theory paragraphs that mention entities does allow us to make descriptive observations about the changing nature of conspiracy theories over time.

We examine seven separate entities in our analysis, as seen in Figures 2 and 3. First, there are four foreign entities relevant across our time range: (1) America; (2) a set of Middle Eastern countries often seen in an adversarial light in Egypt after the revolution: Iran, Qatar, and Turkey; (3) Israel; and (4) the West and interventionism.[11] Second, there are two sets of domestic entities that we examine: (1) the Muslim Brotherhood and (2) regime-associated entities.[12] Third, we looked at references to terrorism as their own "entity," because of its relative frequency and its apparent importance to regime messaging. We recognize that this list is not representative of all possible entities mentioned in conspiracy theories. However, they constitute a set of salient political actors and concepts across our three time periods.

Figure 2 mirrors the analysis of total conspiracy theory paragraphs in Figure 1, but in this case, the y-axis represents the total number of conspiracy theory paragraphs mentioning an entity, with a separate row of graphs for each of our seven entities. Figure 3 looks at the same data but weighting

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[11] These were combined because they are often difficult to entangle. Examples include references to the West, e.g. "the West" (الغرب) and "Western intervention" (التدخل الغربي), as well as references to intervention from abroad and foreign powers, e.g. "foreign intervention" (التدخل الأجنبي) and "outside powers" (قوى خارجية).

[12] Regime associated entities include but are not limited to the army, government ministries, the armed forces, and the police. In addition, we used keywords for figures (e.g. Mubarak) associated with the regime at various points in our timeline.
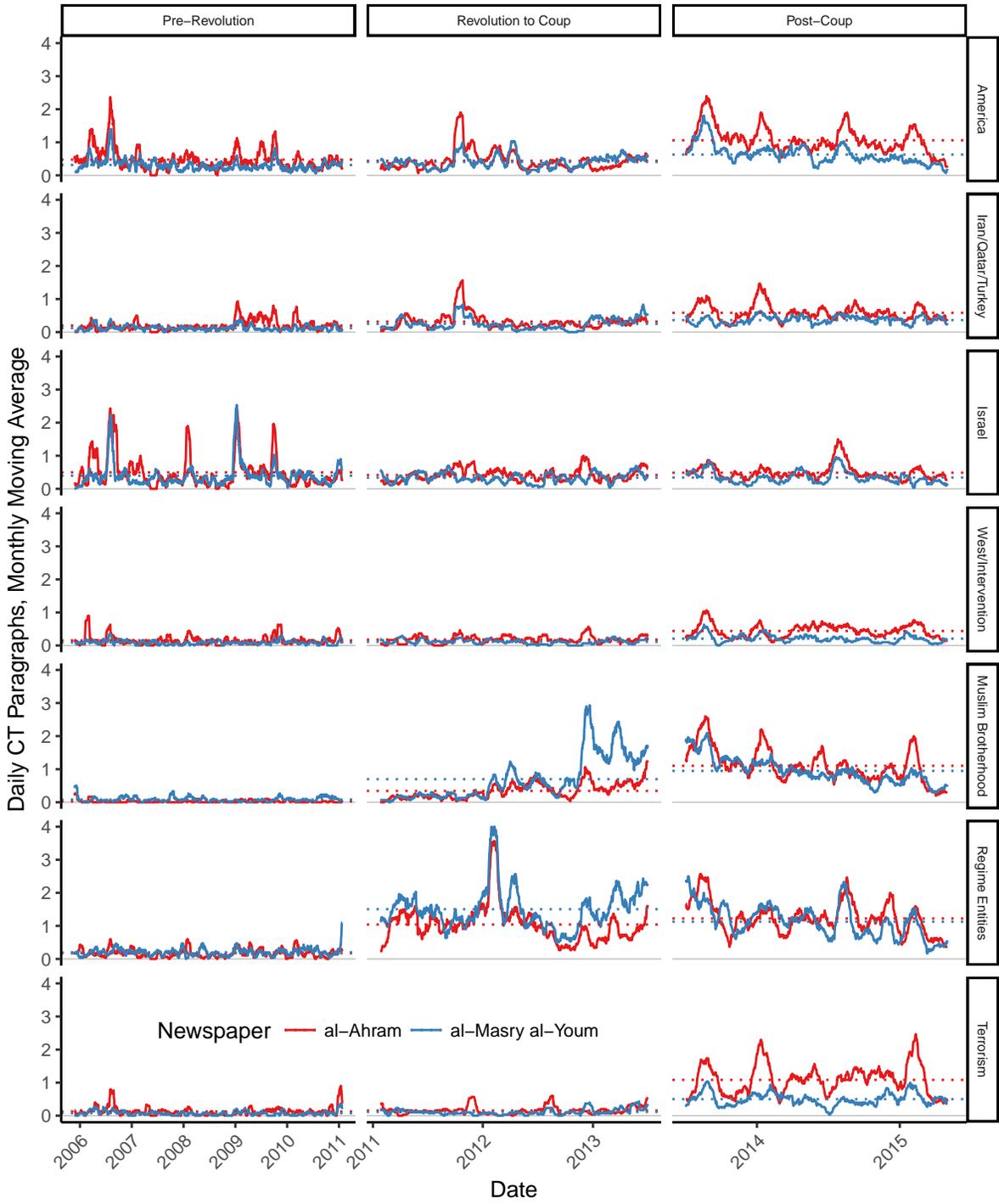
Figure 2: Monthly moving average for conspiracy theory paragraphs that mention four foreign entities (America; Iran, Qatar, and Turkey; Israel; and the West/Intervention), two domestic entities (Muslim Brotherhood and regime-associated), and terrorism. Each row represents a single entity, and the three columns separate our three time periods of interest. Solid lines represent the moving average, whereas dotted lines represent the overall average for the time period.
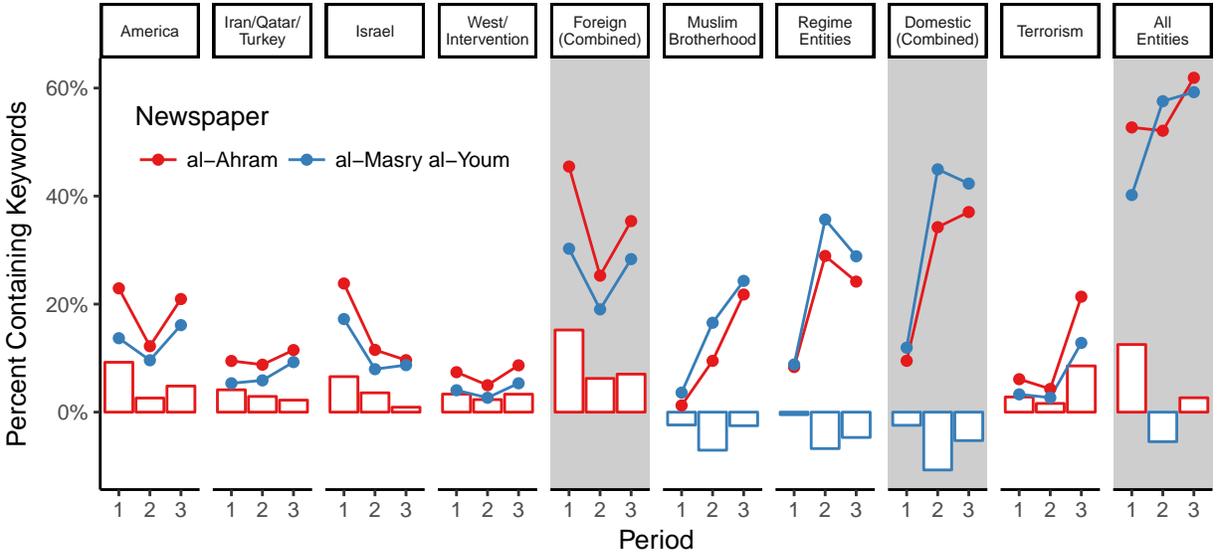
Figure 3: Percentage of conspiracy theory paragraphs containing entity keywords, by period and newspaper. Lines indicate the percentage by period and newspaper. Bars represent the difference between newspapers within a period (red = more common in al-Ahram, blue = more common in al-Masry al-Youm). Periods are 1 = Pre-Revolution, 2 = Revolution to Coup, and 3 = Post-Coup.

results by the number of total conspiracy theory paragraphs in each period and newspaper. The y-axis is in percentage terms, the x-axis specifies periods, and different colors represent the two newspapers. The lines show the changes in the percentage of conspiracy theory paragraphs that contain each keyword (specified in the labels at the top of the graph), whereas the bars show the percentage point difference between the two newspapers.

A number of descriptive patterns emerge in the figures. The differences between the second and third periods in Figure 2 demonstrate that conspiracy theory paragraphs mentioning domestic entities peak in the second period (but continue at a high volume into the third period), whereas foreign entities peak in the third period. Additionally, Figure 2 demonstrates that mentions of entities are spikey and event-driven, as with total conspiracy theory paragraphs. Sometimes, these spikes for separate entities coincide. This seems particularly true for traffic in *al-Ahram* in the third period, where spikes in conspiracy theory paragraphs about "America," for instance, often correspond with spikes for "Muslim Brotherhood" or "Terrorism." Moving to Figure 3, we also note that over our time periods of interest, between 40 and 60% of all conspiracy theory paragraphs

contain one of our entity keywords, supporting our belief that our entities have been and continue to be salient in the production of conspiracy theories. Lastly, Figure 3 shows a stark difference between the frequency at which newspapers mention foreign and domestic entities in conspiracy theory paragraphs. Within each time period, *al-Ahram* is much more likely to mention foreign entities in these paragraphs, whereas *al-Masry al-Youm* is much more likely to mention domestic ones.

We next explore patterns in the co-occurrence of entities in conspiracy theories in Figure 4. The grey 2x3 grid in Figure 4 shows the number of coincidences separately for these time periods and newspapers. Thicker edge widths indicate a greater number of co-occurrences, and larger labels indicate a larger number of mentions, overall, for each entity in the given time period and newspaper.[13] To visually demonstrate the differences in these networks across newspapers and time, we also show "marginal" network graphs on the bottom and right margins of Figure 4. The marginal graphs on the right side indicate the differences between the networks from the second to the third time periods, with red indicating a greater number of co-occurrences in the third period. The marginal graphs on the bottom, on the other hand, indicate the differences between the networks going from *al-Masry al-Youm* to *al-Ahram*, with red indicating a greater number of co-occurrences in *al-Ahram*.

This figure demonstrates that, within our set of conspiracy theory paragraphs, changes in entity networks over time are much stronger than those across newspapers. In particular, our network of entities becomes much more dense moving from the second to the third period, meaning that it becomes more common to mention entities together as we move from the "Revolution to Coup" period to the "Post-Coup" period. In the second period, 18.9% of conspiracy theory paragraphs in *al-Masry al-Youm* and 20.4% of them in *al-Ahram* mentioned at least two of our seven total entities; in the third period, this increased to 30.7% in *al-Masry al-Youm* and 35.4% in *al-Ahram*. The most noticeable source of this increased density is the fact that many of our entities (e.g. America, the Muslim Brotherhood, and regime entities) are more often associated with terrorism

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[13]To be more precise, the edge weight used is the number of coincidences for the two entities divided by the total number of conspiracy theory paragraphs, within a given time period and newspaper. This weight is then scaled by a constant as necessary to produce the edge widths.
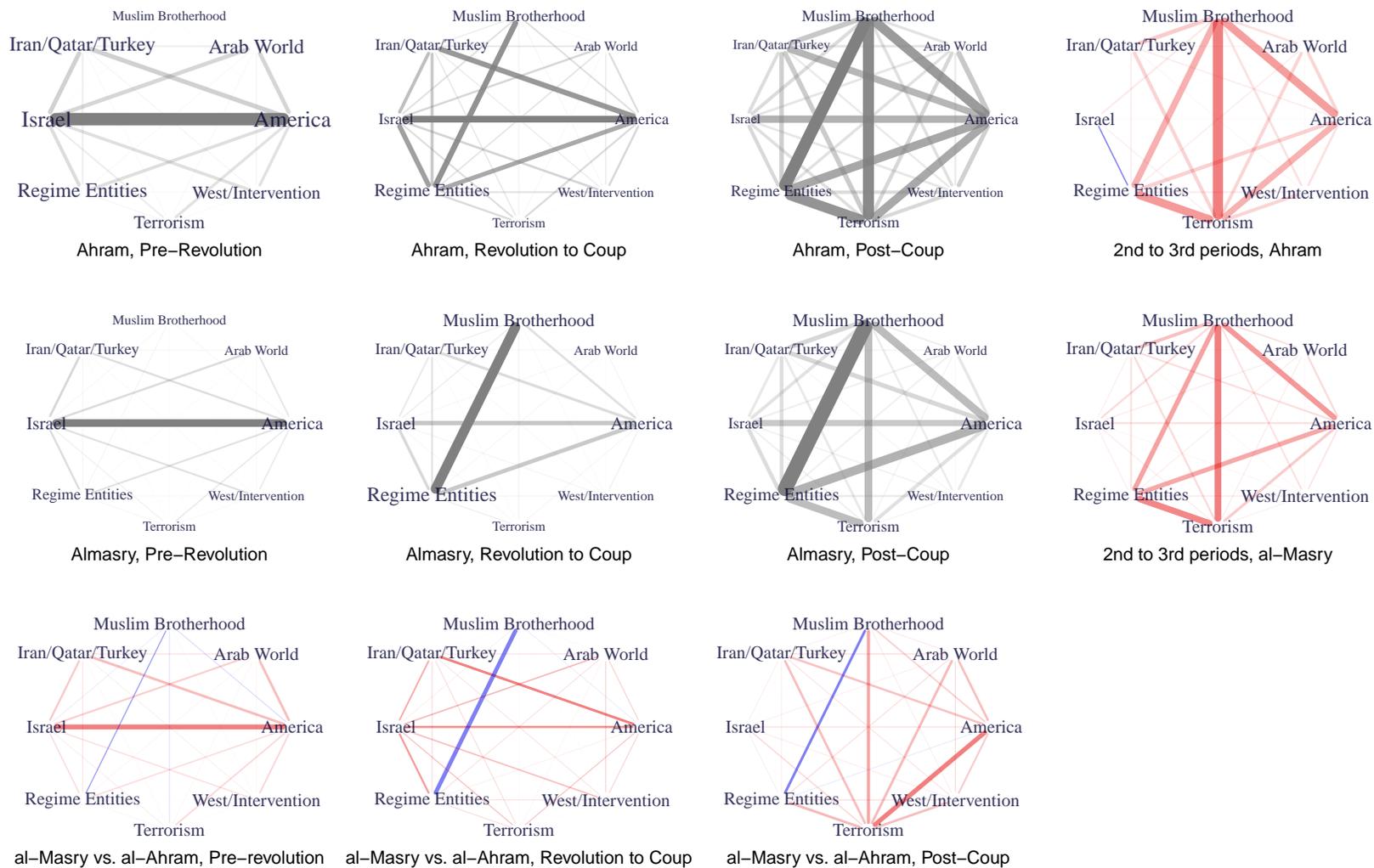
Figure 4: Network graphs of entity co-occurrence within conspiracy theory paragraphs. The grey 2x3 grid shows networks by newspaper and period; edge width = co-occurrences, label size = overall occurrences. The marginal network graphs display differences in the 2x3 grid, the right margin for differences 2nd to 3rd period and the bottom *al-Masry al-Youm* to *al-Ahram*. Edge width = difference in co-occurrences, color = direction of this difference (red for *al-Ahram*/3rd period, blue for *al-Masry*/2nd period).

in the third period than in the second. For example, the percentage of conspiracy theory paragraphs mentioning America and terrorism went from 0.6% to 2.7% in *al-Masry al-Youm* and from 1.4% to 6.4% in *al-Ahram*. However, as these numbers indicate, this increase between periods in density, and particularly in tying entities like America and the Muslim Brotherhood to terrorism, was stronger in *al-Ahram* than it was in *al-Masry al-Youm*. This is indicated graphically in bottom-right marginal network in Figure 4 by the thicker and redder lines between these nodes.

Conclusions from Quantitative Approach

From these quantitative results, we draw several conclusions. The first is that there is interesting variation in the use of conspiracy theories in media that is not explained by regime type or culture. There is noticeable variation in the use of conspiracy theories across time and this variation, while spikey and event-driven, also exhibits structural shifts over time that correspond to critical points in Egyptian politics. Our second period—a period of strong domestic uncertainty—is marked by a higher number of conspiracy theory paragraphs in both newspapers, but with less comparatively from the regime newspaper. On the other hand, our third period—characterized by increased restrictions on freedom and institutional independence under a new authoritarian regime—is marked by yet another increase in the number of conspiracy theory paragraphs, but with *more* comparatively from the regime newspaper. Some might argue that this variation is explained by individual level factors—although a bit of an extrapolation, one could argue that the individual-level relationship between levels of uncertainty and believing in conspiracy theories posited in this literature explains the results we see in these newspapers, such that increased uncertainty after the revolution provoked either authors or readers to demand more conspiracy theories. However, this theory does not explain the differences *between* the newspapers in Figure 1; nor does it explain why conspiracy theory paragraphs in the regime newspaper continue to increase after the coup, whereas they remain effectively the same in the independent newspaper.

Additionally, we conclude that the difference in mentions of foreign and domestic entities between the newspapers noted in Figures 2 and 3 is strong observational evidence in favor of the distraction hypothesis. However, we want to emphasize that these findings do *not* support the distraction hypothesis as it is often outlined—as a knee-jerk, highly localized reaction to important

27

incidents that might embarrass or threaten the legitimacy of the regime. Several such events during our time period did not spur an immediate spike in conspiracy theory paragraphs. The most obvious of these is the January 25 Revolution; there is little evidence of a sudden spike in conspiracy theories around this incident in Figure 1, nor is there evidence of an increase in mentioning foreign entities in Figure 2. Also, even when we do see a spike in traffic in response to such events, often the content of those conspiracy theories is not what you would expect given a naïve conception of the distraction hypothesis. For example, foreshadowing our results in the qualitative section, conspiracy theory paragraphs around the Port Said incident do not contain inordinate references to foreign boogeymen. Thus, we see these results as supporting a distraction hypothesis that posits a greater *proclivity* by the regime to implicate foreign entities in its conspiracy theories—such a hypothesis is supported by the remarkably consistent results in Figure 3.

Lastly, we conclude that the distraction and messaging hypotheses are not mutually exclusive, and that there is significant evidence for the messaging hypothesis in these quantitative results as well. Particularly, Figures 2 and 3 show a consistent difference between the newspapers in the extent to which they mention terrorism in conspiracy theories, one that becomes particularly pronounced during the third period where *al-Ahram* mentions terrorism with great frequency. We also find corresponding evidence in Figure 4, where *al-Ahram* is more likely to associate entities like America and the Muslim Brotherhood with terrorism. Associating terrorism and foreign entities with disliked domestic groups fits well with a messaging hypothesis, where the regime is concerned with the de-legitimization of its domestic enemies.

Case Studies

One of the preliminary descriptive findings from our analysis is that the presence of conspiracy content in both newspapers is "spikey," resulting in sharp peaks in conspiracy content at specific moments in our time series. Closer investigation revealed that these spikes coincided with major events, both international and domestic. There are clear surges in conspiracy content which mention the United States in *al-Ahram* which coincide with the US invasion of Iraq in 2004 and increases in conspiracy paragraphs mentioning Israel in both *al-Ahram* and *al-Masry al-Youm* starting in July 2014 around the time of an escalation between Israel and the Hamas government in Gaza. We

see similar spikes that coincide with the 2013 massacre of 76 fans at a soccer match in Port Said as well as in the aftermath of the coup which displaced former President Muhammed Morsi from power, in July 2013. This would seem to be at least preliminary evidence for the hypothesis that the Egyptian government increases the "supply" of conspiracy theories in response to events.

Another descriptive finding from our analysis is that there are significant variation in the baseline of conspiracies across time periods between newspapers. Figure 4 demonstrates this with respect to paragraphs mentioning the Muslim Brotherhood. Prior to 2011 there was relatively limited conspiracy content which mentioned this entity in either paper. After the revolution, conspiracy content mentioning the Muslim Brotherhood begins to increase and becomes especially pronounced in *al-Masry al-Youm*, the independent newspaper, after the election of Muhammed Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood candidate. The increase in conspiracy content in the official media, is much more muted during the same period. However, the two newspapers ultimately reverse in the period after the coup. While initially both newspapers include a large number of conspiracy theories about the Muslim Brotherhood, the overall number of conspiracy paragraphs begins to steadily decrease in *al-Masry al-Youm*, but remains much more significant in *al-Ahram*. We view this trend as consistent with the institutional hypothesis for the supply of conspiracy content.

These broad trends tell us little about the contents of these paragraphs. To better explore how well our rival hypotheses perform we would like to know something about the contents of the conspiracy paragraphs associated with a major domestic event as well as a single entity over time. We take an inductive approach and focus on the Port Said massacre, the event associated with the single largest spike in conspiratorial content in both newspapers and the Muslim Brotherhood, the domestic entity with the largest number of overall paragraphs across all three time periods.

We focus on these two distinct cases based on our familiarity with Egyptian politics during this period. Between February 1st and March 1st, 1,392 paragraphs in *al-Ahram* included the phrase "Port Said" as compared to 1,588 in *al-Masry al-Youm*. Of these 59 in *al-Ahram* and 66 in *al-Masry al-Youm* included at least one of our conspiracy keywords. This is the single sharpest "spike" in conspiracy content in our data, and a natural test for the distraction hypothesis because the massacre, outlined below, is precisely the kind of event that should have led the regime to distract

attention away from the shortcomings of its own security forces, if this hypothesis is correct.

Similarly, the Muslim Brotherhood, is the domestic entity with the largest monthly moving average of conspiracy content across all three of our time periods. As noted above, the monthly moving average of conspiracy content mentioning the Muslim Brotherhood differs dramatically between the two papers, and changes dramatically after the coup. This provides us with a natural test for the institutional hypothesis to determine if content differs dramatically across time periods and between newspapers or both.

The Port Said Soccer Riot

On February 1st 2012, Egypt experienced the worst stadium riot in its history. As the game between *al-Ahly*, Egypt's most popular club, based in Cairo, and *al-Masry*, Port Said's team, drew to a close, total chaos erupted in the stadium as fans of *al-Masry*, some armed with knives and other weapons descended on the field and attacked *al-Ahly* fans. The horrific violence, captured live and broadcast to the entire country, epitomized the worst excesses of the post-revolutionary period, as chaos spread throughout the stadium and even to the locker room, where the visiting team, including some of the most prominent players from Egypt's national team had to barricade themselves as violence raged in the stands above them. By the time the fighting stopped 72 fans had lost their lives, mostly *al-Ahly* supporters.[14]

As in previous soccer disasters a combination of factors undoubtedly contributed to the high death toll: some fans were trampled to death, others stabbed to death in the stands or on the field. A subsequent parliamentary inquiry alleged outright negligence of the local security forces and noted serious allegations of complicity on the part of at least some local security forces with *al-Masry* fans.[15] However in the aftermath of this terrible calamity, the resonance of the Port Said massacre was increased not solely based on the shocking death toll, but the highly politicized atmosphere which dominated Egyptian politics in the lead up to the 2012 Presidential elections. Many of the victims, were *Ahly* "ultras," organized supporter groups who repeatedly confronted

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[14]See David Kirkpatrick's February 1, 2012 article in the *New York Times* titled "Egyptian Soccer Riot Kills More Than 70" (http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/02/world/middleeast/scores-killed-in-egyptian-soccer-mayhem.html).

[15]See Tamim Elyan's article in *Reuters* titled "Egypt Inquiry Blames Fans, Police for Stadium Riot" (http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-egypt-violence-inquiry-idUKTRE81B0R520120212).
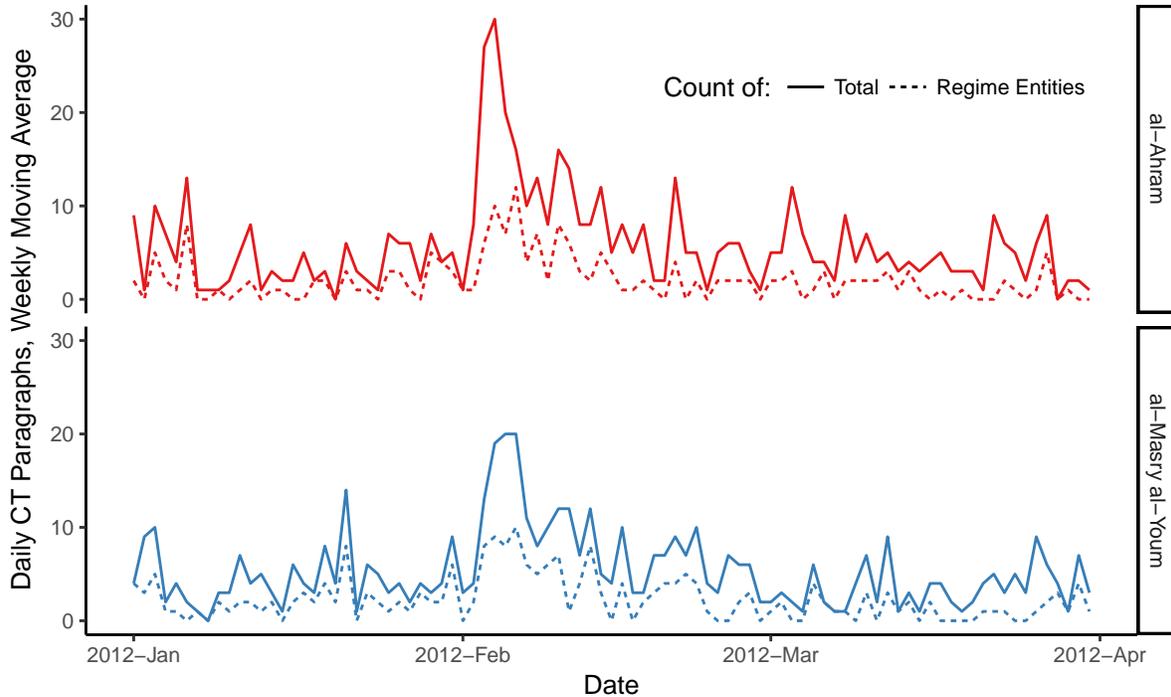
Figure 5: Weekly moving average for the number of conspiracy theory paragraphs (solid line) and the number of conspiracy theory paragraphs containing references to regime-associated entities (dotted line) in *al-Ahram* and *al-Masry al-Youm*. Looking at the three-month window (January to March 2012) surrounding the Port Said incident.

security forces, and played a particularly important role in some of the key altercations with the police during the January 2011 revolution,[16] giving the massacre additional political resonance and undoubtedly contributing to the huge surge in conspiracy theories which began to emerge in the print media the day after the match.

Analysis of 152 paragraphs, beginning with the first discussion of the incident on Friday, February 3rd and concluding on March 3rd one month after the tragedy, provides preliminary evidence against the distraction hypothesis and preliminary evidence in favor of the institutional hypothesis.

Seventy-one paragraphs from this period allege that a conspiracy has occurred but do not attribute responsibility to any particular entity. While some of these entries mention shadowy or

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[16]For more background on the Ultras see David Kirkpatrick's February 2nd 2012 article in the *New York Times* titled "In Clashes With Police, Egyptians Unleash Fury Over Soccer Riot Deaths" (http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/03/world/middleeast/egypt-mourns-lethal-soccer-riot-and-many-blame-military.html).

hidden forces, by far the most common reaction to Port Said massacre is to label it a conspiracy against Egypt, but not to specifically identify a responsible party. This is broadly consistent with the finding in political psychology that conspiracy theories can be a way to give meaning to events that would otherwise be senseless or incomprehensible. More damaging for the "distraction" hypothesis is that there is only one direct reference to the United States, and a single mention of "foreign fingers" which could be an oblique reference to the United States among all 152 paragraphs. Given the prominent role, played by the security forces in this incident, it seems probable that Port Said was precisely the kind of incident that would inspire allegations of a conspiracy by Israel or the United States against Egypt. The absence of any consistent mention of either entity is notable.

Surprisingly the overall number of conspiracy theories mentioning the Port Said tragedy are remarkably consistent between the two newspapers. This suggests an initial strike against the hypothesis that we should consistently observe significant differences between the two newspapers in terms of both volume and content. However, a closer examination further reveals that of the paragraphs where the author identified an identity as responsible for the events in Port Said, there is a significant difference between the two papers. Of the 35 paragraphs which attributed responsibility to the Ministry of Interior or the police, 12 were in *al-Ahram*, compared to 23 in *al-Masry al-Youm* and only one paragraph in *al-Ahram*, an interview with the actor Muhammed Ramadan, attributed responsibility to the SCAF, compared to five in *al-Masry al-Youm*. While far from decisive, we consider this variation in content to provide some preliminary evidence for the institutional hypothesis. In the more uncertain environment which characterized Egyptian institutions writ large after the revolution, *al-Masry al-Youm* was clearly far more willing to implicate the security forces in the massacre than *al-Ahram*. The absence of paragraphs in *al-Ahram* attributing responsibility for the events to outside entities, suggests preliminary evidence against the "distraction" hypothesis.

The Muslim Brotherhood

Founded in 1928 in Port Said,the Muslim Brotherhood remains the most durable and influential Islamist movement in Egypt. The subject of dozens of scholarly inquiries (Brown, 2012; Masoud, 2014; Mitchell, 1993; Rosefsky Wickham, 2003), it is beyond the scope of the paper to provide a summary of the organization's evolution in this brief case study. Most relevant for our study is

the fact that after a long period of internal repression and exile, under the rule of former President Anwar Sadat pressures against the Muslim Brotherhood were gradually reduced, a policy that was continued, in fits and starts by former President Hosni Mubarak. Starting in the 1980s and continuing through 2010 Muslim Brotherhood members were regularly allowed to contest elections (El-Ghobashy, 2005). Starting with important syndicates and later local elections, including parliament. In 2005 the group won approximately 25 percent of the seats in the *Maglis al-Sha'ab* Egypt's parliament, an impressive achievement considering that the group was still technically illegal and its members and candidates were routinely subjected to harassment or repression by security forces and the judiciary.

Although the Muslim Brotherhood played little initial role in the demonstrations and spontaneous resistance to the regime which culminated in former President Mubarak's abdication of power in February 2011, the group was particularly well positioned for the formal politics that dominated Egypt from Mubarak's resignation until the Presidential elections of June 2012. Over the course of this period, the Muslim Brotherhood, trounced its rivals electorally, winning approval of a revised constitution, taking a plurality of seats in parliamentary elections, and winning the Presidential elections albeit by a very slim margin, despite the group's initial claim that they would not nominate a candidate (Masoud, 2014).

While there is still significant debate about the tenure of former president, Muhammed Morsi, there can be little doubt that the Muslim Brotherhood overestimated the benefits of these electoral victories. Egypt's highest court dissolved parliament on a technicality, and Morsi in a bid to increase his powers, made an ill-fated attempt to increase his own powers at the expense of the judiciary. This resulted in a full-blown crisis, that rapidly spiraled out of control. By the spring of 2014 the *tamarod* (rebel) movement had begun collecting signatures for Morsi's resignation, and clashes between Muslim Brotherhood supporters and their rivals occurred throughout the country. On July 2rd, 2014 the army stepped in forcing Morsi from power, and setting up a massive confrontation with the Muslim Brotherhood's supporters who rapidly occupied major public squares in Cairo in an attempt to pressure the military to release and reinstate Morsi. On August 14th the military and police moved in, crushing Morsi supporters gathered in *Raba'a* square in Cairo, and resulting

in the single bloodiest day of political violence in Egypt's modern history. After Raba'a the regime of General Abdel Fatah al-Sisi initiated one of the harshest crackdowns of civil liberties since the Nasser era, and drove thousands of Muslim Brotherhood supporters either into exile or hiding.

As is clear from this brief summary, the vast shifts in the fortunes of the Muslim Brotherhood provide us with an opportunity to examine conspiracy theories about the group during at least three different institutional arrangements. As with Port Said, we are primarily interested in qualitative differences between the two papers, but because of the Muslim Brotherhood's prominent role in domestic politics we can examine this content over years as opposed to within a single month as was the case with the Port Said massacre.

We begin by examining the 84 paragraphs which mention the Muslim Brotherhood in the two year period prior to the January 2011 revolution. It is intriguing to note that as in the post-revolutionary period, most of these paragraphs appear in *al-Masry al-Youm* (63) not in *al-Ahram* (21). While 1/3rd of the paragraphs in *al-Ahram* are accusations that the Brotherhood is engaged in some kind of conspiracy, this lack of attention to the Muslim Brotherhood in the official paper is surprising given their prominent status as the best organized and most capable opposition group in the country.

In sharp contrast to *al-Ahram* conspiracy content about the Brotherhood is far more common in *al-Masry al-Youm*, although the nature of the content is also more varied. While *al-Masry al-Youm* contains 6 paragraphs accusing the MB of some kind of plot, far more common are interviews, direct quotes or 3rd person accounts in which Muslim Brotherhood members allege some sort of conspiracy or plot either against the group, or against the Palestinian people (12). Even more common (14 paragraphs) are direct criticisms of the Muslim Brotherhood's "paranoid style" in which the authors attack conspiracy theories attributed to the group or advanced by its members. We can even find paragraphs referring to the "moderate Muslim Brotherhood" or and op-ed noting that there are "honorable" members of the organization.

With the resignation of former President Hosni Mubarak on February 11th 2011, it seemed as if significant change to Egypt's moribund state institutions might be possible. Everywhere symbols of the old order were under attack. Demonstrators burnt the headquarters of the National

Democratic Party which had sailed to victory in parliamentary elections widely viewed as the most fraudulent and corrupt in over a decade. Constant demonstrations, protests and pressure strained the resources of the police and the Ministry of Interior, and while Egypt was still in the hands of the military, it seemed that even Egypt's most powerful institution was not entirely in control of the situation.

There is some evidence of this uncertainty and incoherence in the conspiracy content of *al-Ahram*. Again the discrepancies between the two papers are remarkable. In a random selection of 100 conspiracy paragraphs from after the revolution and before the coup that mention the Muslim Brotherhood, 70 are from *al-Masry al-Youm* while only 30 are from *al-Ahram*. 7 of these paragraphs continue the previously noted trend of criticizing the Muslim Brotherhood for their "paranoid style" and promotion of conspiracies, but 4 paragraphs argue that the Muslim Brotherhood *is* the victim of a conspiracy of some sort, and 2 go so far as to allege collusion between the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) and the Muslim Brotherhood, in clear defiance of editorial "red line" that appeared to be so effective during the Mubarak era.

In *al-Masry al-Youm* in contrast we see a much starker willingness to confront power. 16 paragraphs criticize the Muslim Brotherhood for employing conspiracy theories as compared to only 6 claiming that the group is the victim of a conspiracy of one sort or another. More noticeable still, is *al-Masry al-Youm's* willingness to defy both the most powerful domestic institution (the army) and the most powerful domestic political party (the Muslim Brotherhood) by alleging in 20 distinct paragraphs that the two groups were colluding with one another against the Egyptian people or the revolution. We view this as a strong indicator of the disarray and confusion that characterized this period, as the old rules which had governed the press for more than 20 years were systematically challenged by *al-Masry al-Youm*. Additionally, *al-Masry al-Youm* regularly deployed an interesting tool in which they would include often quite inflammatory quotes or slogans from demonstrators in otherwise neutral 3rd person reporting. By using "man on the scene" quotes or inviting prominent individuals to express their views through interviews the paper regularly featured polemical voices, without actually endorsing or advocating these positions.

The contrast between conspiracy content post-coup and the previous two periods is stark. A

random selection of 100 paragraphs after the military forced former President Morsi from power, demonstrate a sea change in how the group is discussed in conspiracy content. Notably, there are an almost equal number of paragraphs between the two newspapers: 44 in *al-Ahram* and 66 in *al-Masry al-Youm*. There are no sympathetic paragraphs about the conspiracies facing the group in either paper. Instead 9 paragraphs of which 8 are in *al-Masry al-Youm* use the group's "paranoid style" as justification or explanation for the group's removal from power. Similarly, there is a significant decrease in the use of direct quotes or interviews (13) in both papers as outright allegations of the group's conspiracies dominate (14 in *al-Ahram* and 17 in *al-Masry al-Youm*. Another interesting development is the emergence of conspiracy theories alleging a US role in the plot to destabilize Egypt, in conjunction with the Muslim Brotherhood, although this is far more common in *al-Ahram* (8 paragraphs) than *al-Masry al-Youm* (4 paragraphs).

While some might argue that this surge in anti-American conspiracies is an indication of the "distraction" hypothesis at work, it is worth noting that this is used far less commonly than direct allegations of an MB led conspiracy, in either paper. Nor is it clear why these conspiracies linking the Muslim Brotherhood and the United States emerge only in the aftermath of the coup and not before. This absence is particularly puzzling in the immediate aftermath of the revolution or following Port Said, incidents, as previously noted, that would seem ripe opportunities for deflecting attention away from domestic institutions towards shadowy interests and foreign powers.

Instead this preliminary evidence seems much more indicative of a distinct approach or strategy in each time period. During the end of the Mubarak era, the Muslim Brotherhood appears almost to be an afterthought in the official paper and we find widely varying portrayals of the group in the independent press. This disparity shifts with the collapse of the Mubarak government, as the Muslim Brotherhood's power increases, and the willingness or the power of the government to police red lines decreases, *al-Masry al-Youm* takes a far more strident editorial line against the group and even going so far as to regularly allege that a conspiracy exists between the military and the Brotherhood. This trend comes to a screeching halt with the 2013 coup. In both papers, there is a concerted effort to accuse the Muslim Brotherhood of a plot to destabilize or overthrow the state and its institutions. Gone are any sympathetic or sympathetic portrayals highlighting the plots

against the group, replaced instead in *al-Ahram* with direct accusations of Muslim Brotherhood complicity with the United States to divide the region and sacrifice Egypt's interests for their own advancement and gain.

7   Conclusion

Conspiracies have long interested political scientists, but much of this research agenda focused on individual receptivity to conspiracy theories or their political effects in democracies. Conspiracy theories in authoritarian contexts have received far less scholarly attention, and are often attributed of the local culture. Given the growing empirical evidence of the importance that authoritarian regimes attribute to control of the media and anecdotal evidence that authoritarian regimes in a wide range of contexts actively promote or encourage the diffusion of conspiracy theories, it is imperative that we understand why and when authoritarian governments produce conspiracy theories.

In this paper we provide preliminary descriptive evidence that questions the notion that political culture or regime type are plausible explanations for the supply of conspiracy theories in the most important media market in the Arab World: Egypt. We demonstrate dramatic variation in the monthly moving average of conspiracy theories across relatively short time periods in an official and independent newspaper. This variation is inconsistent with explanations which attribute significant explanatory power to Arab culture as an explanation for the promotion of conspiracy theories. Because this variation occurs in newspapers that were edited and produced under the same authoritarian regime, variation in the production or content of conspiracies cannot simply be explained by regime type.

We also provide preliminary evidence that there are significant differences in content between the newspapers over time periods. While our findings here are more tentative, we note that while the independent and official newspapers look similar in some time periods with respect to some entities, the "Arab World" for example in the period prior to the January 2011 revolution, there are significant differences in conspiracy content which references other entities, the United States and Israel for example, across time periods between our independent and official papers.

37

We hypothesized that these differences may be driven by shifts in domestic institutions or by cynical leaders attempting to district their citizenry in the aftermath of events that might embarrass the regime. To test these competing explanations we focus on quantitative and qualitative variation between the newspapers with particular attention to three distinct time periods which coincide with major shifts in Egypt's domestic political institutions. We further analyze in detail a major event, the Port Said soccer massacre, that is precisely the kind of incident that should lead the regime to focus attention away from its own agents and towards shadowy foreign interests. We find little support for this hypothesis, although subsequent research will look more closely at conspiracy content in the aftermath of the 2013 coup to test this claim more definitively.

We also look at conspiracy content about a single entity, the Muslim Brotherhood, the most durable opposition party and a major player in domestic politics for close to a century, to qualitatively test our theory about the importance of variation in institutions influencing conspiracy content. Our examination of the quantitative and qualitative variation in conspiracy content that mentions this important domestic entity in both newspapers, provides us with preliminary support for our hypothesis that at least in the Egyptian context, changes in domestic institutions appear to be the most salient and consistent drivers of the supply of conspiracy theories. While far from definitive, because the variation in conspiracy content coincides with one of the most dramatic and polemical periods in the group's history, we view the reversal between the two papers in the monthly moving average of conspiracy content mentioning the Muslim Brotherhood, as a strong indicator of the plausibility of our hypothesis. The large quantitative gap between the two papers in the period following the 2013 coup, is also consistent with our explanation, especially because the independent newspaper *al-Masry al-Youm* was previously consistently more willing to either criticize the Muslim Brotherhood for its promotion of conspiracy theories, or to allege that the group was conspiring against the interests of Egypt.

While preliminary, these findings are important. Theoretically we view this paper as the first step towards a generalized theory for the promotion of conspiracy theories in authoritarian contexts. Much more work needs to be done before achieving this ambitious goal. In the future we hope to improve our analysis through two main lines of effort: an "events" based approach to analyzing

conspiracy theories, allowing us to discern who is doing the conspiring and against whom, as well as a more robust classifier that will distinguish between paragraphs where the author is criticizing conspiracy theories or 3rd person reporting in which the author includes a quote promoting a conspiracy theory. Qualitative research suggests the importance of being able to discern between conspirator and victim, and there are clear differences between a paragraph that attacks conspiratorial thinking versus one that promotes it versus a neutral quote from an individual advocating for a conspiracy theory. We have strong reason to suspect that there will be significant differences between newspapers in both the structure and substance of conspiratorial content.

Despite the fact that more work is needed, this paper has taken some important steps towards addressing a major gap in the literature on authoritarian control of the media. First, we have demonstrated a methodology for identifying conspiracy content in Arabic language newspapers, an innovation that allows us to systematically test hypotheses largely generated and tested by anecdote until now. Second, we have demonstrated the utility of this more systematic approach, providing preliminary evidence against one the most popular explanations for conspiracy theories: political culture, in a region regularly characterized as being predisposed towards the promotion of conspiracies. Finally, we have provided some preliminary evidence that "institutions matter" in the promotion of conspiracy theories. While we are not the first to suggest this explanation, we are the first to test and provide systematic evidence for its validity. Given the increasingly authoritarian turn in Egypt, and throughout much of the Middle East and North Africa, we believe that our approach has potential to shed considerable light on variation in the supply of conspiracy theories across the region.

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