

Algorithmic Visibility and the Evolution of Political Communication: An Evolutionary Framing Perspective on the Post-Arab Spring

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Abstract

The Arab Spring uprisings (2010-2012) represented a turning point in both Middle Eastern politics and global media communication. While extensive research has examined how institutional news agencies framed these events – particularly the 2011 Egyptian Revolution – the subsequent transformation of media framing processes has received less attention. This article proposes an Evolutionary Framing Model that distinguishes three interconnected phases: institutional framing (newsroom-centered gatekeeping), participatory framing (citizen and activist-driven narratives on social media), and algorithmic framing (platform-driven visibility shaped by recommendation systems and engagement metrics). Drawing on classical framing theory (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974), hybrid media systems scholarship (Chadwick, 2017), and recent research on digital activism and algorithmic governance (Gillespie, 2018; Tufekci, 2017), the article argues that political communication in the post-Arab Spring Middle East has shifted from centralized journalistic authority toward distributed, contested, and increasingly platform-mediated visibility regimes. The model offers a conceptual framework for analyzing contemporary political narratives in the region and suggests empirical research directions.

Keywords: Arab Spring, framing theory, algorithmic framing, participatory framing, hybrid media systems, digital activism, Middle East, political communication Concise and accurate summary of the research.

Introduction

The Arab world witnessed a wave of uprisings that challenged authoritarian regimes between 2010 and 2012, attracting unprecedented global media attention. The Egyptian Revolution of 2011 became a milestone case for political communication research. Earlier content analytic studies (Hamdy & Gomaa, 2012; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000), comprising a comparative analysis of three online news outlets; Reuters (Western news agency), Maan (Palestinian independent News Agency), and BERNAMA (Malaysian state-controlled News Agency) demonstrated that institutional news organizations framed the revolution predominantly through conflict, attribution of responsibility, and human-interest frames (Alloh, 2014). International news outlets and satellite broadcasters employed substantial gatekeeping power, while social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter performed a secondary but mounting role in mobilization and visibility (Tufekci, 2017).

With technological and digital development over the past decade, the media environment in the Middle

East has undergone radical transformations. Digital platforms have become central arenas for political dialogue, but their management is no longer based solely on participation. Algorithmic recommendation systems, content moderation, engagement metrics, and platform-specific affordances shape which political narratives become visible, suppressed or amplified (Gillespie, 2018; van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018). Citizens, activists and state actors have adapted to these algorithmic constructions, generating a hybrid communication landscape that combines institutional journalism, platform-driven visibility and user-generated content (Chadwick, 2017).

However, this study addresses the conceptual gap between the focus of current studies on framing the Arab Spring events on how traditional media framed the uprisings during the revolutionary moment (e.g., Al-Malki et al., 2012; El-Nawawy & Elmasry, 2021), and the lack of attention given to how the framing process itself evolved—from centralized gatekeeping in newsrooms participatory, and now to algorithmically mediated systems of visibility (Koziner, 2021; Garcia-Perdomo, 2024). Therefore, the current research addresses this conceptual gap by proposing an Evolutionary Framing Model that distinguishes three phases: institutional framing, participatory framing, and algorithmic framing. This article adopts a conceptual and theoretical approach rather than presenting new empirical data. The proposed evolutionary framing model was developed through three integrated methodological strategies. (i) First, a theoretical synthesis integrates classical framing theory (Goffman, 1974; Entman, 1993), hybrid media systems scholarship (Chadwick, 2017), and recent work on platform studies and algorithmic governance (Gillespie, 2018; van Dijck et al., 2018). (ii) Second, a secondary analysis re-examines empirical findings from Alloh, (2014), unpublished master's dissertation (a comparative content analysis of Reuters, Maan, and BERNAMA during the 2011 Egyptian Revolution), formerly coded using Semetko and Valkenburg's (2000) generic news frames. These results function as the anchor for the institutional framing phase of the model. (iv) Third, explanatory case-based reasoning draws on publicly documented episodes of digital activism and platform dynamics across multiple Middle Eastern contexts after 2011, including Egypt (2013), Sudan (2019), Lebanon (2019), and the 7th October 2023 Gaza war. These events are not proposed to provide generalizable empirical evidence but to demonstrate the model's analytical utility and heuristic value (Yin, 2018; Flyvbjerg, 2006). By blending these strategies, the paper suggests a replicable conceptual framework for future empirical testing. The article proceeds as follows. The next part analyses classical framing theory and its adaptation to digital environments. The subsequent offerings the Evolutionary Framing Model with concrete examples from the Middle East after 2011. The following part discusses the political implications of algorithmic framing, including misinformation, polarization, and digital authoritarianism. The article concludes with limitations and avenues for empirical research.

Framing Theory: From Newsrooms to Platforms: In political communication research, framing theory is one of the most influential and widely used models by researchers and those interested in this field. According to Erving Goffman (1974), the concept of frames is based on: "schemata of interpretation" that enable individuals to organize and make sense of social experience. However, the most common definition in the media studies was provided by Robert Entman (1993, p. 52): "to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text". Frames perform four primary functions: defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgments, and suggesting remedies (Entman, 1993). The five general news frames: conflict, human interest, attribution of responsibility, economic consequences, and morality developed by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), are among the most influential and widely used in framing research and have been extensively employed in studies of wars, crises, and protests coverage due to their applicability across diverse political contexts. (Camaj, 2010; Dimitrova & Strömbäck, 2012). Their generic nature allows cross-national and cross-temporal comparisons. Research on the Arab Spring applied these frames systematically. For example, a content analysis of 150 news stories from Reuters, Maan, and BERNAMA during the 2011 Egyptian Revolution (Alloh, 2014) found that the conflict frame appeared in 94.7% of all stories, while attribution of responsibility (73.3%) and human interest (16.7%) were also common. Importantly, significant differences emerged between agencies: Reuters relied heavily on party operatives as sources ($M = 0.72$), BERNAMA on domestic officials ($M = 0.60$), and Maan balanced multiple sources. These findings confirmed that even within institutional journalism, framing is shaped by organizational orientation and source selection (Bennett, 1990; Reich, 2009).

The participatory communication facilitated by social media since 2011 is considered one of the two most

significant developments in the media landscape, representing a radical transformation and a qualitative leap in content creation processes. This development has enabled citizens and activists to produce their own frames, often visual, emotional, and personalized, that could bypass traditional gatekeepers (Papacharissi, 2015). Hashtags such as #Jan25, #SudanUprising, and #BlueForSudan became powerful framing devices capable of mobilizing transnational solidarity (Kligler-Vilenchik & Thorson, 2016). The second major development coincided with the use of platform algorithms (on Facebook, TikTok, X/Twitter, and YouTube) introduced automated visibility mechanisms. Content that generates high engagement (likes, shares, comments, watch time) is amplified, while low-engagement content becomes invisible (Gillespie, 2018; Rieder, 2020). Consequently, contemporary framing theory must expand its focus from journalistic decisions to platform infrastructures. Frames are no longer solely constructed by editors and reporters; they emerge from interactions among users, algorithms, and institutional media within hybrid systems (Chadwick, 2017). Recent meta-analyses confirm that framing effects remain robust across digital environments, but the mechanisms of frame construction and distribution have changed significantly (Amsalem & Zoizner, 2022; Lecheler & De Vreese, 2019).

Materials and Methods

An Evolutionary Framing Model for the Post-Arab Spring Era: The proposed model distinguishes three phases that overlap and interact, but each reflects a dominant logic of framing power.

Institutional Framing (pre-2011 and during the Arab Spring): Dominant logic: Newsroom gatekeeping, professional journalism norms, editorial hierarchy (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Key actors: International news agencies (Reuters, AP, AFP), satellite broadcasters (Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya), and state-controlled agencies (BERNAMA, MENA, Maan).

Participatory Framing (2012-2018): Dominant logic: Networked communication, user-generated content, emotional and visual storytelling (Papacharissi, 2015). Key actors: Activists, citizen journalists, hashtag publics, bloggers, online communities. Visibility determinants: Virality, sharing, network size, emotional resonance, hashtag coordination (Kligler-Vilenchik & Thorson, 2016). Example: During the 2013-2014 protests in Egypt and the 2019 Sudanese revolution, activists used Twitter and Facebook to disseminate images of martyrs, violence and mass gatherings. Hashtags such as #BlueForSudan and #SudanRevolution created global solidarity campaigns (Lynch et al., 2014). Frames were often personalized (“my brother was killed”, “I was shot”) and moralized (“justice”, “freedom”). Institutional media later amplified these frames, but their initial visibility came from participatory networks.

Limitations: Participatory framing also enabled rumors, misinformation, and polarized echo chambers (Tufekci, 2017). Not all voices gained equal visibility; attention concentrated on emotionally intense and dramatic content.

Algorithmic Framing (2018-present): Dominant logic: Platform optimization, engagement-based ranking, personalized recommendation (Rieder, 2020; van Dijck et al., 2018). Key actors: Platform algorithms (TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, X), users adapting to algorithmic logic, state actors (troll armies, pro-government bots, surveillance agencies), commercial content creators. Visibility determinants: Watch time, completion rate, likes, shares, comment intensity, behavioral prediction (Gillespie, 2018). Definition: Algorithmic framing is not a single process but two interconnected yet analytically distinct mechanisms that together shape political narratives on platform environments.

First, algorithmic selection refers to the platform-driven, automated ranking and personalization of content based on engagement metrics (watch time, likes, shares, comments) and user behavioral data. Here, the algorithm acts as a gatekeeper, determining which frames become visible to which users (Gillespie, 2018; Rieder, 2020).

Second, algorithmic adaptation refers to the strategic practices of content creators – activists, journalists, state actors, or commercial entities – who tailor their messages to align with platform-specific algorithmic preferences (e.g., short video formats, trending audio, emotionally provocative captions, controversy, or coordinated engagement bait). Responding to algorithmic logic (Tufekci, 2017; van Dijck et al., 2018).

The key difference between algorithmic framing and both institutional gatekeeping (static editorial criteria) and participatory framing (networked sharing without automated ranking) is that algorithmic framing is not simply the sum of the two levels, rather, it is the dynamic feedback loop between them. As creators adapt, platform algorithms learn and adjust their ranking models, which in turn reshape future adaptation strategies.

Table 1: Two Levels of Algorithmic Framing Selection vs. Adaptation

Level	Primary Agent	Mechanism	Example from Middle East
Algorithmic selection	Platform algorithms (TikTok, X, YouTube)	Engagement-based ranking, personalization, content moderation	TikTok's "For You" algorithm amplifying graphic war videos from Gaza (2023–2024)
Algorithmic adaptation	Content creators (activists, states, influencers)	Format tailoring, emotional hooks, trending sounds, bot coordination	Pro-government troll armies in Egypt producing short, divisive memes optimized for quick sharing

Classical framing theory, following Entman (1993), defines framing as "making some aspects of reality more salient more noticeable and memorable to audiences". This definition thus distinguishes between salience and engagement, as Institutional framing achieved salience through source authority and editorial placement. Participatory framing achieved it through emotional resonance and network cascades. Algorithmic framing, however, optimizes primarily for engagement (clicks, watch time, shares, comments), not salience in the traditional sense. A highly salient frame that does not generate immediate interaction may be algorithmically demoted. Conversely, an emotionally provocative or misleading frame that generates intense engagement may become highly visible even if it lacks factual accuracy or social importance (Vosoughi et al., 2018). This decoupling of salience from engagement represents a fundamental shift in how political narratives gain public attention.

Although platform algorithms are often discussed from a commercial logic, the role of the state in shaping algorithmic content has been evident, particularly in the Middle East states have actively integrated themselves into algorithmic framing processes. Three modalities are particularly salient. First, surveillance and content moderation: states such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE deploy algorithmic systems to detect, demote, or remove oppositional frames (King, 2023; Al-Rawi & Iskandar, 2022). Second, state-sponsored algorithmic amplification: automated "troll armies" and bot networks produce pro-government content optimized for engagement, artificially boosting regime-friendly frames (Badr, 2021). Third, strategic adaptation by state media: official outlets (e.g., Egyptian state TV, Saudi Al Ekhbariya) now produce short, emotionally charged videos tailored to TikTok and YouTube algorithms, effectively blending institutional authority with algorithmic logic. Thus, the state is not merely a target or regulator of algorithmic framing but an active participant.

In Lebanon's 2019 protest movement (Thawra), activists used Instagram and Twitter, but algorithmic deprioritization of political content (triggered by changes to news feed algorithms in 2018) reduced organic reach. Activists had to pay for promotion or create highly shareable visual memes. Thus, framing power became partially commercialized (Harb, 2021). But the 2023 Gaza War was a unique case in the Middle East, where TikTok became a central arena for political influence. Short videos depicting destruction, civilian suffering, and hostage situations circulated widely. The platform's "For You" algorithm amplified highly emotional content regardless of its factual accuracy or source credibility (Ismail, 2025). Pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian advocates both optimized their content for engagement: dramatic captions, trending sounds, and quick cuts. This algorithmic logic produced fragmented, emotionally charged public discourse, often bypassing traditional journalistic verification (Al-Rawi & Iskandar, 2022).

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the three phases and their temporal overlap.

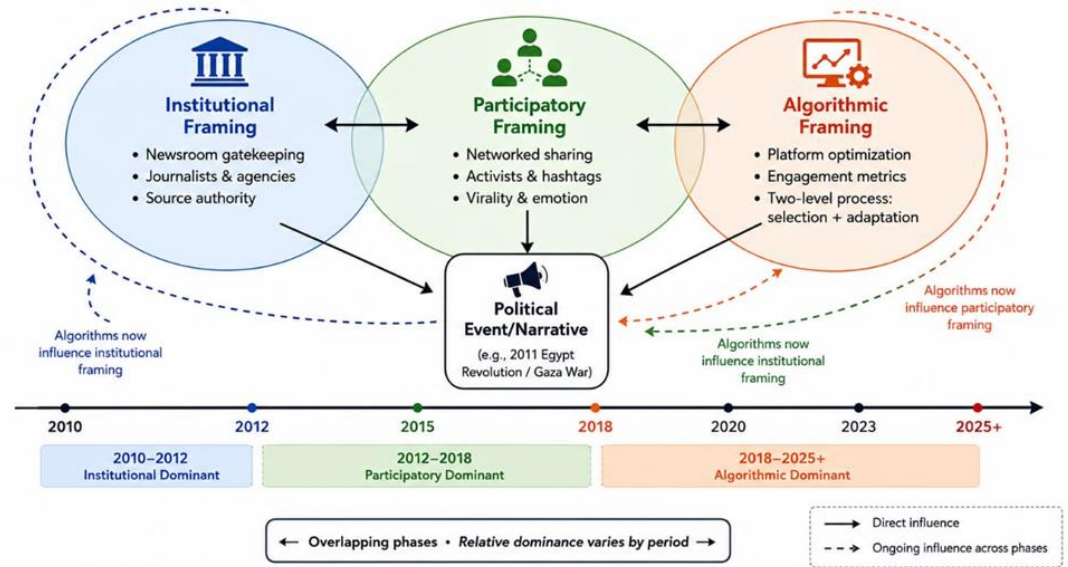


Figure 1 Caption: The Evolutionary Framing Model. Three framing phases – institutional, participatory, and algorithmic – overlap temporally but exhibit shifting dominance from 2010 to the present.

The model emphasizes the transition from centralized newsroom gatekeeping to distributed participatory networks and, more recently, to platform-driven algorithmic visibility regimes that operate through engagement optimization and strategic content adaptation. State actors increasingly participate in the algorithmic phase via bots, surveillance, and adaptation. Adapted from the conceptual framework proposed by the authors.

Table 1: Comparing Institutional, Participatory, and Algorithmic Framing Phases

Phase	Logic	Key Actors	Visibility Drivers	Middle East Example
Institutional	Gatekeeping / Professional norms	Journalists, editors, news agencies (Reuters, AP, AFP, BERNAMA)	Newsworthiness, source authority, editorial hierarchy	Reuters framing of 2011 Egyptian Revolution (conflict & responsibility frames)
Participatory	Networked sharing / Emotional storytelling	Activists, citizen journalists, hashtag publics, bloggers	Virality, sharing, emotional resonance, hashtag coordination	#SudanRevolution (2019) – citizen images & solidarity campaigns
Algorithmic	Engagement optimization / Personalization	Platform algorithms (TikTok, X, YouTube), content creators, state actors (troll armies, pro-government bots)	"Watch time, completion rate, engagement metrics (Level 1: algorithmic selection) + strategic tailoring, trending formats, emotional hooks (Level 2: algorithmic adaptation)"	TikTok framing of Gaza war (2023–2024) – emotional short videos optimized for engagement; pro-Israeli & pro-Palestinian actors gaming the algorithm

While the coexistence of these three phases is a defining characteristic of our time, their importance is shifting. Institutional media still matter, but they increasingly compete with algorithmic visibility. Participatory communication remains vibrant, but its reach is mediated by platform logic. Algorithmic

framing introduces new forms of power that are opaque, commercially driven, and often difficult for activists to control (Gillespie, 2018).

Discussion

Political Consequences of Algorithmic Framing in the Middle East: The shift toward algorithmic framing carries several political consequences that require scholarly attention. Drawing on recent research from the region, this section examines four interrelated effects: polarization, misinformation and disinformation, surveillance and digital authoritarianism, and fragmented public spheres. While these consequences are not exhaustive, they illustrate how algorithmic visibility reshapes political discourse in ways that diverge from earlier optimism about digital democratization (Zuboff, 2019; Tufekci, 2017).

Polarization: Engagement-based algorithms favor divisive, outrageous, and conflict-oriented content because such content generates more comments, shares, and emotional reactions (Rathje et al., 2021). In the Middle East, this has intensified sectarian and political polarization – for example, in the algorithmic amplification of anti-refugee or anti-migrant narratives on Twitter and TikTok in Egypt and Lebanon (Badr, 2021).

Misinformation and disinformation: False or misleading content often outperforms factual content on algorithmic platforms because it provokes stronger emotional reactions (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). During the 2023 Sudan war and the Gaza conflict, fabricated videos, AI-generated images, and recycled old footage circulated widely, sometimes outperforming verified news reports (Ismail, 2025).

Surveillance and digital authoritarianism: Algorithms also enable control. Middle Eastern governments (e.g., Egypt, Saudi Arabia, UAE) have developed sophisticated online surveillance and content moderation systems (King, 2023). They also deploy automated “troll armies” or algorithmic amplification of pro-government narratives. Thus, algorithmic framing is not only a commercial logic but also a site of state power (Al-Rawi & Iskandar, 2022).

Fragmented public spheres: Personalized recommendation systems create filter bubbles and echo chambers (Pariser, 2011). Different users receive different versions of political reality, undermining shared national or regional political discourse. What one Egyptian sees on Facebook about economic policy may be completely different from what another sees – based on their prior engagement (Bozdog & van den Hoven, 2015).

These consequences suggest that the initial optimism about digital democratization after the Arab Spring needs revision (Tufekci, 2017). While participatory framing expanded political expression, algorithmic framing has recentralized power – not in newsrooms, but in platform infrastructures (van Dijck et al., 2018).

Conclusion

This article has argued that political media framing in the Middle East has evolved from institutional gatekeeping to participatory networking and finally to algorithmic visibility. Drawing on empirical findings from earlier research on the 2011 Egyptian Revolution as evidence of the institutional phase, and on more recent examples from regional digital activism and platform dynamics, the proposed Evolutionary Framing Model offers a conceptual tool for analyzing contemporary political communication.

The model contributes to framing theory by extending its application beyond journalism to include platform-driven visibility mechanisms. It also contributes to Arab Spring scholarship by shifting the focus from how specific events were framed in 2011-2012 to how the process of framing itself has changed (Koziner, 2021). The rise of algorithmic framing means that understanding political conflict in the post-Arab Spring era requires attention not only to media content but also to the technological infrastructures that govern visibility (Gillespie, 2018).

Limitations and future research. This article is conceptual. Future empirical research should test the model

using specific, replicable methods. Three avenues are proposed. First, comparative algorithmic audits across platforms (TikTok vs. X vs. YouTube) could examine how different recommendation architectures frame the same political event (e.g., a protest movement or election). Researchers can use sock-puppet accounts or API-based systematic observation to document which frames are amplified or suppressed (Rieder, 2020). Second, longitudinal network analysis of hashtag publics (e.g., #SudanRevolution or #Gaza) could track how framing power shifts from participatory networks to algorithmically curated feeds over time (Kligler-Vilenchik & Thorson, 2016). Third, experimental studies that manipulate engagement metrics (e.g., showing participants algorithmically ranked vs. reverse-chronological feeds) could isolate the causal effects of algorithmic selection on frame salience and audience perceptions (Amsalem & Zoizner, 2022). Additionally, cross-regional comparisons (Middle East vs. Latin America or Southeast Asia) would test the model's generalizability.

Practical implications. For journalists: adapt to algorithmic environments without abandoning verification ethics (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021). For activists: understand that algorithmic visibility is contingent on engagement metrics and platform governance (Tufekci, 2017). For educators: teach media literacy that includes algorithmic literacy – how platforms shape what we see and how we think about political issues (Bozdog & van den Hoven, 2015).

Ultimately, the post-Arab Spring media landscape is neither fully democratized nor simply authoritarian. It is a hybrid, contested, and rapidly evolving space where institutional, participatory, and algorithmic framing logics compete, coexist, and transform one another. Understanding this evolution is essential for scholars, journalists, activists, and citizens who seek to navigate and shape political communication in the contemporary Middle East.

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