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Framing as a Survival Strategy in Fragile Media Contexts: News Framing in Egyptian Hyperlocal Journalism

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ABSTRACT

Given the economic, professional, and political challenges that hyperlocal media organizations face in an increasingly globalized media landscape, current research suggests that hyperlocal media in constrained contexts employ adaptable editorial strategies. This research investigates the interaction between power, news practices, and editorial adaptation strategies in fragile media environments, focusing on the connections between news framing, hyperlocal journalism, elite representation, and the broader media landscape. We conducted a framing analysis on 770 news items from six Egyptian hyperlocal platforms. Results revealed that sociopolitical, institutional, and professional forces influence hyperlocal journalism. This influence is evident in the framing of news stories, which often tend to adopt episodic, elite-driven, advocacy, and positive frames that reflect local elite-driven content to adapt and survive within a challenging media landscape. The research argues that in fragile media ecosystems, journalists often tend to employ framing techniques as a survival strategy to balance diverse pressures and maintain viability. The study highlighted several academic and professional implications related to media framing strategies in local media that allow hyperlocal media to fulfill their designated role in society.

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Introduction

Small media organizations can continue to run and survive using various administrative, financial, and technological strategies. Given the financial, professional, and political challenges that hyperlocal media organizations face, current research suggests that hyperlocal media in restricted contexts utilize adaptable editorial strategies. Among these editorial strategies is framing. The current research investigates the interplay between power, news practices, and editorial adaptation strategies in fragile media environments, highlighting the connections between news framing practices, hyperlocal journalism, elite representation, and the broader media landscape.

The political system level (local-state-national) influences local coverage (Palmgreen and Clarke 1977). The local media ecosystem is defined as all media actors and institutions in a specific geographical area (Johansson and Wettergren Mörtenberg 2013; Lindén, Morlandstø, and Nygren 2021; Sjøvaag, Pedersen, and Læg Reid 2019). Power dynamics

influence the local media system in the community, the degree of political parallelism, and the level of professionalization of local journalism. In the “democratic corporatist” model, some countries have established subsidized media support systems at national and local levels without interfering with media institutions’ independence. Other countries have implemented public service for local journalism, while the local party press system no longer exists (Lindén, Morlandstø, and Nygren 2021). Hyperlocal outlets are typically small and independent, operating outside traditional media structures (Negreira-Rey, López-García, and Vázquez-Herrero 2020). They are classified and reclassified by quasi-institutionalized actors (Anderson 2010).

Recently, a few studies compared news frames and framing processes in local or hyperlocal media (Guo 2011; Lawlor 2015; Mourão, Brown, and Sylvie 2018; Nygren 2019) with little attention paid to societies in which journalists work under pressure and face several constraints including censorship and governmental high-handedness. Besides, extant research revealed that national and local newspapers frame an issue differently based on their concerns (Lawlor 2015). We conducted a framing analysis of 770 news items from six Egyptian hyperlocal media outlets to explore how journalists apply framing strategies in restricted media environments and under-researched regions. The findings offer an understanding of the framing strategies employed by hyperlocal journalism and help predict future trends in news framing in challenging contexts, restrictive environments, and fragile media landscapes. The research argues that in fragile media ecosystems, journalists often tend to employ framing techniques as a survival strategy to balance diverse pressures and maintain viability.

Literature Review

Extant research paid paltry attention to analyzing news framing in local or hyperlocal media (Harris, Gruenewald, and Tuttle 2021; Karlsson and Rowe 2019; Lawlor 2015; Mesmer, Frazier, and Burgess 2022; Mourão, Brown, and Sylvie 2018; Somerville and Ames 2020; Swafford 2012). Research reveals that local news frames frequently include consequences and responsibility frames and use substantive issue frames frequently (Mesmer, Frazier, and Burgess 2022; Swafford 2012). While some scholars found little impact of local news frames on residents’ opinions (Valeda 2002), others concluded that news frames shape residents’ attitudes (Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997). While national newspapers tend to be interpretative, local newspapers rely on traditional straight news (Framing the News 1998). Local news differed from non-local news in framing political officials, providing various perspectives, and blaming individuals or institutions (Guo 2011).

Researchers also examined the content of local media (Cook, Geels, and Bakker 2016; D’heer and Paulussen 2013; Guo 2011; Han, Shih, and Carroll 2014; Turner 2021). Hyperlocal content is usually formed around civic issues, often in opposition to local authorities (Turner 2021), focusing on local services, community events, and civic news (Cook, Geels, and Bakker 2016). Political accountability, attribution of blame, criminal reporting, social club activities, and local cultural events were prominent themes on hyperlocal news websites (D’heer and Paulussen 2013; Somerville and Ames 2020). While hyperlocal media relies on residents as primary sources (Han, Shih, and Carroll 2014), local television news frequently under-represents minorities (Poindexter, Smith, and Heider 2003).

Community newspapers have several issues with news content (Swafford 2012). While the local political elite's goal is to establish a peaceful image of the local community, a participatory news website could undermine this vision (Chen et al. 2015).

Studies investigated the impact of the political and media ecosystems on local media (Johansson and Wettergren Mörtenberg 2013; Lindén, Morlandstø, and Nygren 2021; Sjøvaag, Pedersen, and Læg Reid 2019). Other studies have examined the ecosystems, business models and factors affecting framing and editorial practices in local and hyperlocal media (Anderson 2010; Castelló 2010; Cook, Geels, and Bakker 2016; Dovbysh 2020; Han, Shih, and Carroll 2014; Harris, Gruenewald, and Tuttle 2021; Harte, Williams, and Turner 2016; Negreira-Rey and López-García 2021). Most local media outlets expanded in areas with established legacy media. This makes the hyperlocals play a more complementary role (Nygren 2019).

Recent research identified factors associated with news framing in local media (Harris, Gruenewald, and Tuttle 2021). The size of the publisher and the community were identified as the primary influencers on local news coverage. Local media's effectiveness depends on its infrastructure, output, and content quality (Napoli et al. 2017; Sjøvaag, Pedersen, and Læg Reid 2019). Relationships between traditional local media staff and hyperlocal media were observed to be collaborative rather than competitive (Dovbysh 2020). Studies investigated the impact of local media revenues on the content (Chadha and Harlow 2018; Cook, Geels, and Bakker 2016; Harlow and Chadha 2018; Khan 2020), highlighting a complex interaction between revenue and content production (Chadha and Harlow 2018; Harlow and Chadha 2018). Advertising was the most common source of revenue (Townend 2015). Audiences generate traffic for hyperlocal news websites, which are then sold to advertisers (Khan 2020).

Local and hyperlocal media have also played an important role in promoting civic engagement (Chatterjee and Pal 2021; Freeman 2020; Harlow and Chadha 2018). Local and hyperlocal media provided a platform for community conversations (Turner 2015), promoting neighborhood development and decentralization (Atta 2015) and revitalizing political participation (Thurman, Pascal, and Bradshaw 2012). The level of civic engagement was associated with ownership, revenue, financing mechanisms, and mission (Harlow and Chadha 2018). Education moderated the association between community involvement and disseminating hyperlocal news. The level of audience engagement with local websites showed a demand for more community-related content (Thurman, Pascal, and Bradshaw 2012).

There is a link between newsroom location and the socio-political value of local media in rural areas (Freeman 2020). Hyperlocal platforms play a crucial role in fostering civic involvement (Han, Shih, and Carroll 2014), facilitate reciprocal participatory exchange between journalists and audiences (Harte, Williams, and Turner 2016), and allow users of regional languages in countries with local languages to access news through hyperlocal platforms that also connected people who live far away with their communities (Chatterjee and Pal 2021). Readers' motivations for contributing to the creation of hyperlocal news content are for fun, financial gain, and informing others. Residents of local communities have acted as the primary news sources (Han, Shih, and Carroll 2014). Community service providers are becoming more adept at using social media and prefer it to traditional media (Carson et al. 2016). Many hyperlocal outlets were observed to uphold democratic accountability frequently (Cook, Geels, and Bakker 2016).

Professional practice in hyperlocal media was investigated (Dovbysh 2020; Karlsson and Rowe 2019; Khan 2020), revealing that the presence of a local news outlet can encourage citizen reporting. While professional local journalists frequently rely on institutional sources, citizen reporters commonly rely on first-hand experience. While citizen journalists cover “soft” and “small” news, professional journalists focus on “hard” and factual news (D’heer and Paulussen 2013; Thurman, Pascal, and Bradshaw 2012). When permanent journalists were absent, original reporting, local news, and quotations from institutional players decreased. Hyperlocal journalists cope with newsroom cutbacks by developing collaborative partnerships with news sources (Carson et al. 2016; Karlsson and Rowe 2019). Most local news creators work part-time (Townend 2015). Journalists who work for hyperlocal news organizations frequently present a more positive, composite professional image of themselves (Chadha 2015).

As Egyptian local journalism remained understudied, some studies exploring Egyptian local newspapers found that they lacked professionalism in editorial practices, produced weak content, relied heavily on news more than interpretation and analysis, presented problems without offering solutions, did not care about readers’ opinions, and employed editors who were not qualified enough (Abu Saada, Radwan, and El-Sayed 2018; El Nagy and Mustafa 2020; El-Sayed 2017).

Additional literature offers insights into the practice of journalism in restricted contexts, whether in Egypt or similar environments, as well as the strategies journalists employ to navigate such constraints, illustrating the multifaceted and adaptive nature of journalistic practices in restrictive contexts. Sakr (2016) identified three key approaches for achieving long-term sustainability among independent Egyptian news ventures operating in the repressive political climate of 2013 –2015: revenue streams and business models, management frameworks (particularly collaborative work environments), and audience engagement. Other studies examined tactics journalists use to circumvent restrictions while minimizing confrontation with the authorities. Ranji (2023) introduced the concept of the “double game,” where journalists circumvent constraints while avoiding confrontation with authorities. Moon (2022) emphasized self-censorship as a coping mechanism to avoid repercussions from powerful actors. Additional studies have shed light on coping strategies’ psychological and social dimensions. Chinweobo-Onuoha et al. (2022) found that journalists’ coping strategies to manage restrictive environments include seeking social support, selective appearance, self-censorship, and self-motivation. Ivask, Císařová, and Lon (2023) found that journalists manage their emotions to cope with hostility and harassment. Harlow, Wallace, and Cueva Chacón (2022) highlighted the significance of building and utilizing networks and alliances for support and information sharing.

Local and Hyperlocal Journalism in Egypt

John Pavlik coined the term “hyperlocal news” in the 1990s to describe locally produced TV news (Williams and Harte 2016, 285). Hyperlocal news organizations are locally focused, community-oriented, web-based news organizations that encourage civic engagement, usually pertinent to a town, village, or other small, geographically defined community (Metzgar, Kurpius, and Rowley 2011; Nygren, Leckner, and Tenor 2018). Hyperlocal media thrives primarily online. News outlets use websites, social

media, blogs, and dedicated apps to target particular geographic areas, often single neighborhoods, towns, or even streets. These projects include community-driven ownership and production, original news reporting, focusing on specific details relevant to the community, and encouraging audience engagement (Centre for Community Journalism 2020; Freeman 2020).

Hyperlocal journalism is characterized by its narrow geographic focus, reliance on citizen journalists, and digital delivery. Local journalism covers broader areas with professional reporting and a mix of traditional and digital platforms. Hyperlocal media has repeatedly been framed as a potential savior of local journalism (Harte 2023). We used the term *hyperlocal* because the media outlets prioritized highly localized, community-specific reporting, often covering issues relevant to specific villages, neighborhoods, and small towns—areas that broader regional or national media may overlook. In this study, we operationalized “*hyperlocal journalism*” as a digital news platform that primarily covers events, issues, or developments within a specific geographic locality, such as a city, town, or governorate.

Journalism in Egypt started in the early nineteenth century during the invasion of French troops (1798–1801). Following the departure of French troops from Egypt in 1801 and a period of instability, Muhammad Ali took over the rule of Egypt in 1805 and started a massive modernization project. He established the *Bulaq Press*, a publishing house, in 1821 and 1822. The first national Egyptian newspaper, *Al-Waqa'i al-Masriyya* (Egyptian Affairs), was published in 1828. (Chiba 2010, 3–4). Egyptian newspapers were only published in *Cairo* and *Alexandria* until 1886. *Al-Nuzha* emerged in 1886 and was the first local newspaper published outside Cairo and Alexandria in Upper Egypt. After 1886, several local newspapers started appearing in Upper and Lower Egypt. *Fayoum* became the third Egyptian city to have a local newspaper when the weekly “*Al-Fayoum*” was founded in 1894 (Atta 2015, 35). Egyptian local newspapers were still privately held. Local government publications started to appear after 1952. Until the end of the twentieth century, local newspapers were divided into *standalone* local newspapers and local *supplements* of national dailies (Fadel 2015, 10–11). According to the Supreme Council for Media Regulation in Egypt (2020), other Egyptian local newspapers belong to governorates, local councils, religious institutions or sects, associations, unions, clubs, international organizations, universities, judicial organizations, political parties, or private individuals and companies. While Egypt has a long history of national and local journalism, the contemporary state of local journalism has changed due to political and economic challenges. The contemporary landscape is markedly different. Local journalism faces significant challenges, including limited professionalism, financial instability, declining readership, and increasing state control (Fadel 2015; Tawfiq and Kodwani 2020). Political and regulatory constraints have weakened independent journalism, leaving local outlets with minimal presence or influence (Abdulla 2013; Badr 2021).

Since 1952, the media system has been subordinated to the political regime for most of Egypt’s history. After the 1952 revolution ended the monarchy and ushered in the Nasserite era, Egypt’s media landscape became heavily dominated by state control. This period saw the nationalization of media outlets disseminating state-approved narratives while suppressing dissenting voices (Khamis 2009). In the years leading up to the 2011 revolution, Egypt’s media system was marked by a complex and paradoxical communication

environment characterized by a delicate balance between state control and content diversity (Issawi 2020; Khamis 2013).

Digital media has been an engine of radical sociopolitical change since the Arab Spring 2011 (Abdulla 2013; Badr 2017; Badr 2021). The 2011 revolution marked a significant turning point for the Egyptian media. New media, mainly social media platforms, played a crucial role in mobilizing citizens, facilitating civic engagement, and providing a platform for citizen journalism (Khamis 2013). Following the 2011 revolution, there was a period of openness and diversity in the Egyptian media landscape. This era was brief, though, as the media quickly encountered other difficulties, such as heightened polarization and eventual restrictions under following governments (Elsheikh, Jebri, and Jackson 2023; Issawi 2020).

According to Williams and Harte (2016), local journalism in Egypt experienced vulnerability, threats, and fragility from 2013 to 2015 due to political events, restrictive policies, and state mobilization against independent-minded media outlets. By 2016, the industry had lost 80 percent of its readership. Government newspapers lost their credibility by adhering to the protocol-driven news framework. In contrast, newspapers under other types of ownership focused on negative and sensational coverage to attract larger audiences (Allam and El Gody 2021). Political challenges and digital disruption have impacted circulation rates and advertising revenues (Allam and Hollifield 2021). The centralized structure and government control promoted a top-down communication system (Medina and Allam 2023). Concentrated state ownership and a small number of private owners significantly impact content diversity and the democratic public sphere (Badr 2021). This concentration has led to a monopolization of media outlets, limiting the diversity of viewpoints and reinforcing state narratives (Badr 2024).

The Egyptian depoliticized public sphere weakens the media system (Badr 2021). Based on Rugh's (2004) analysis of Arab media systems, Richter and Kozman (2021) concluded that Egyptian media has been structured around the "loyalist press" model since 2013. Given the political and economic context, scholars classified Egypt as a transitional country between 2011 and 2013. However, since 2013, the Egyptian media has exhibited several authoritarian characteristics. Elements of government control persist, maintaining many features of a neo-authoritarian system. In such a system, states do not necessarily rely on pre-publication censorship. This context has led to significant fragmentation within the journalistic community, with deep divisions over the role of journalism in society and its relationship to politics. The regime's efforts to control both digital and traditional media have prompted a shift from digital to public spaces for expression (Allam 2019; Allam 2022; Allam and El Gody 2021; Badr 2024; Mirshak 2019; Pioppi et al. 2011). Egyptian hyperlocal media faces challenges such as limited professionalism, lack of financial independence, declining readership, unqualified editors, irregular publishing, and managerial influence (Fadel 2015; Tawfiq and Kodwani 2020).

Considering the discussion in the preceding paragraphs and looking at the under-researched Egyptian context, we propose the following research questions:

RQ 1: What are the main news themes, news frames, framing orientations, and framing techniques employed by Egyptian hyperlocal journalism when covering local community news?

RQ 2: To what extent do elite-driven advocacy frames displace or coexist with local community-driven frames within the Egyptian hyperlocal journalism landscape?

Materials and Methods

A quantitative content analysis was employed to examine news frames presented in a sample of Egyptian hyperlocal journalism. *Framing theory* was used as a theoretical framework. *Framing analysis* analyzes how the media build reality (Sadmeago and Nasucha 2019). *Media frames* persuade individuals and/or groups to consider, assess, and act regarding a subject by the contextual information stored in the frame (D'Angelo 2017). The study employed Iyengar's (2010) proposed framing analysis perspective, which classifies news frames as either *episodic* or *thematic*. While *episodic frames* are event-oriented, *thematic frames* present public issues in a broader, abstract context, referring to the background, broad outcomes, or conditions. A coding manual with clear and precise definitions was developed to ensure a systematic and replicable method for identifying and measuring frames and other related categories in the sample. It included operational definitions for various types of frames, framing indicators, framing techniques, elite-driven frames, and other news content characteristics.

Inductive and *deductive* approaches were used to examine news framing, with *inductive* techniques allowing frames to emerge and *deductive* techniques confirming specific frames' presence or absence. The categories were established before data collection via a priori coding of news frames. A pilot study using *inductive* framing (30 local news outlets) identified key categories. Then, a coding sheet containing a list of these categories was created. The predefined frames and related categories were then analyzed using the *deductive* framing approach.

The analysis was limited to local news. Other non-news forms of content were not included. A news item was used as a *unit of analysis*. The frame(s) that appear within each news item serve as the unit of analysis for some other categories. Words, phrases, source quotations, background information, context, and overall tone of the news were used to determine whether a specific frame was included in the news item (Sadmeago and Nasucha 2019).

The coding manual included other framing-related categories such as news themes, framing techniques, and framing orientation. The framing techniques provided by Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) were examined, including salience, tone, writing style, use of adjectives and nouns, metaphors, anecdotes or telling stories, referring to traditions, rituals, and ceremonies, using slogans, jargon, clichés, catchphrases, and contrast.

The *framing orientation* category was divided into four subcategories: positive, neutral, negative (criticizing, blaming, and focusing on negative traits, comments, or acts related to local elites), and balanced (highlighting positive and negative features). Using the theoretical framework of framing analysis, the authors operationalized the concept of *framing* as the presentation of news stories to emphasize certain aspects of an issue or event over others. *The framing* was defined as certain story elements' selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration. (Saperas and Carrasco-Campos 2015). Both episodic and thematic frames were operationalized. Single-event-personalized news items that focus on individual character(s) were coded as *episodic*, while contextualized news items with background, interpretation, reasons, or policy referrals were coded as thematic. *Elite-driven advocacy frames* were operationalized by employing language, imagery, information selection, quotes, evoking specific emotions, and promoting a particular elite person's, viewpoint, image, decision, behavior, or agenda. *Elites* have been referred to as

government officials, policymakers, politicians, those in military circles, religious leaders, corporate owners, corporate directors, or any other actor in any institutional position encompassing power.

Sample

Six hyperlocal Egyptian newspaper websites were chosen based on a set of criteria. Firstly, the primary focus of the news website must be a specific governorate or local community, with most of its coverage dedicated to local events or issues. Second, the media outlet must explicitly identify itself as a local news source through its title, statement, contents, or dedicated sections. Third, content focus: only local community-focused news items were included in the sample. Any broader national coverage was excluded. Fourth, they must be official, active websites updated regularly, with a presence on other platforms. Following the application of these criteria, six privately owned hyperlocal publications from Egypt's north and south were chosen (see Appendix 1), including *Soot Elshaab* (Damietta Governorate, established in 2014), *Sharkia Today* (Sharkia Governorate, established in 2009 as a news website), *Maa Alnas News* (Kafr El Sheikh Governorate, established in 2012 as a news website), *Qena News* (Qena Governorate, established in 1997 as a print newspaper, then a website), *Sada Portsaid* (Portsaid Governorate, established in 2013), and *Alsohagia* (Sohag Governorate, established in 2002 as a print newspaper, then a website). The sample included only individually owned hyperlocal sites. Others (operated by local governments, municipalities, councils, clubs, etc.) did not satisfy one or more selection criteria.

Every piece of local news published on these news websites was collected over four months, from September to December 2021. The analysis included only news stories related to local community events. As a result, 770 local news items were examined.

Intercoder reliability was calculated. A trained coder coded approximately 5% of the news items. Forty-two stories were re-examined, seven from each website. Holsti's reliability formula was used to calculate intercoder reliability: $\text{Intercoder reliability} = 2 * M / (N1 + N2)$. In this formula, M represents the total number of agreements between the two coders; $N1$ and $N2$ represent the number of decisions reached by coders 1 and 2 (Allen 2017, 742; Wang 2011, 14). The reliability test results were within acceptable limits (the percentage was between 86 and 90).

Results

To answer RQ 1, the news themes, frames, framing orientations, and techniques were examined. The analysis revealed 20 news themes; the most prominent were local crimes ($n = 186$, 24.2%), health ($n = 111$, 14.4%), local accidents ($n = 110$, 14.3%), and education ($n = 94$, 12.2%). Other themes obtained moderate attention, including social engagement and/or civil society ($n = 90$, 11.7%), local economics ($n = 76$, 9.9%), infrastructure and housing ($n = 72$, 9.4%), environment ($n = 63$, 8.2%), local politics ($n = 60$, 7.8%), and then sports ($n = 40$, 5.2%).

Services ($n = 34$, 4.4%), arts, culture, or entertainment ($n = 26$, 3.4%), lifestyle, such as fashion, folklore, food, etc. ($n = 22$, 2.9%), labor or employment ($n = 21$, 2.7%), transportation ($n = 19$, 2.5%), communication or media ($n = 19$, 2.5%), science or technology (n

= 15, 1.9%), tourism in the local community ($n = 14$, 1.8%), religion ($n = 13$, 1.7%), and energy ($n = 13$, 1.7%) all attracted the least attention.

Table 1 shows that 30 news frames represent local issues and events, comprising 2286 frequencies. Local elite-centered positive frames constituted the greatest proportion of frames (61.5%), with the majority being local government-focused frames. This result shows that elite-driven positive image frames outperform local community-driven frames (34.6%) and elite-driven negative image frames (3.9%). The analysis revealed that episodic frames ($n = 671$, 87.1%) were greater than thematic frames ($n = 99$, 12.9%). The data showed that elite-driven frames were slightly more prevalent ($n = 431$, 56%) than local community-driven frames ($n = 339$, 44%) (Table 2).

Tone, language, and writing style ranked first, accounting for 63.77% of the entire news sample, followed by relying on sources and then utilizing adjectives and nouns.

Table 1. News frames in hyperlocal newspapers.

Frames	Frequencies	Percent
Local Elites-focused Frames		
Local Elite-centered Positive Frames		
Emphasizing the positive contributions and achievements of local government	510	66.23*
Elite recognition\appreciation frame	172	22.34
Authority frame (highlighting government vigilance in maintaining order and enforcing the law)	163	21.17
Follow-up on government activities, decisions, and policies.	158	20.52
Demonstrate support and loyalty to local government or elites	146	18.96
Highlighting local government efficiency and success	131	17.01
Local government responsiveness frame	91	11.82
Downplaying\oversimplification\minimalization frames (minimizing problems and their impacts)	19	2.47
Elite engagement's effectiveness frame	16	2.08
Total of local elite-centered positive frames	1406	61.50**
Local Elite-centered Negative Framing		
Morality frame	30	3.90
Public calls for action frame (this implies the government's responsibility to address an issue).	17	2.21
Watchdog frame (corruption, misconduct, wrongdoing, and accountability-focused frames)	15	1.95
Harm\victimization frame (highlighting the plight of local individuals due to government policies or actions)	8	1.04
Attribution of responsibility, criticism and assessing actions (local elite-centered frames)	8	1.04
Conflict frame (highlighting the tension between citizens and the local government)	7	.91
Alarmist\fear-mongering frames (Exaggeration and amplification of risk frames)	4	.52
Total of local elite-centered negative frames	89	3.9
Local Community-focused Frames		
Accident- or crime-centered frame	242	31.43
Highlighting recognition for local community members' contributions	112	14.55
Problem identification frame	103	13.38
Emotional frames	96	12.47
Public service knowledge-focused frames	71	9.22
Local community portraying and identity frame	61	7.92
Local daily life-focused frame	57	7.40
Local community suffering	25	3.25
Attribution of responsibility, criticism, and assessing actions (local community-/citizen-centered frames)	24	3.12
Total of local community-focused frames	791	34.6
Total number of frames	2286	100

$N = 770$.

*The calculation of each frame's percentage is based on its proportion in the overall news sample.

**This percentage represents the proportion of frames in the total group that are local elite-centered positive, local elite-centered negative and local community-focused frames.

Table 2. Framing techniques in hyperlocal newspapers.

Framing techniques	Frequencies	Percent
Tone, language, and style of writing.	491	63.77
Rely on the sources	350	45.45
Using adjectives and nouns	261	33.90
Commenting and expressing viewpoints	74	9.61
Slogans, jargon, clichés, and catchphrases	53	6.88
Anecdotes and stories	53	6.88
Metaphors	28	3.64
Contrasts, contradictions, and paradoxes	23	2.99
Traditions, rituals, and ceremonies	15	1.95
Total	770	100.0%

N = 770.

Commenting, expressing viewpoints, using slogans, jargon, clichés, catchphrases, anecdotes, metaphors, and expressing points of view, contrasts, contradictions, paradoxes, traditions, rituals, and ceremonies were employed infrequently.

Analysis of the framing orientation revealed that more than half of the sample ($n = 426$, 55.3%) contained frames with positive views of the local elite (particularly local government). Most of the remaining half ($n = 310$, 40.3%) held a neutral position. Negative frames ($n = 19$, 2.5%) and news items with balanced frames ($n = 15$, 1.9%) both had very low percentages.

The Chi-square calculation revealed a significant relationship between news framing orientation toward local elites and news themes, with some of the themes including health $X^2(3, N = 770) = 23.321, p < .001$; local economics $X^2(3, N = 770) = 21.384, p < .001$; local accidents $X^2(3, N = 770) = 84.559, p < .001$; sports $X^2(3, N = 770) = 13.612, p = .003$; local politics $X^2(3, N = 770) = 25.818, p < .001$; transportation $X^2(3, N = 770) = 8.940, p = .030$; infrastructure and housing $X^2(3, N = 770) = 31.948, p < .001$; environment $X^2(3, N = 770) = 17.488, p < .001$; Courts $X^2(3, N = 770) = 22.676, p < .001$; communication and media $X^2(3, N = 770) = 12.256, p = .007$.

In all significant themes, the percentage of news items in which editors expressed a positive orientation toward local elites was higher than those in which they voiced criticism or a negative attitude. This indicates that certain news themes are likelier to include pro-local elite frames than others.

The chi-square test did not reveal a significant relationship in other themes, including education, arts, culture, entertainment, local crimes, social engagement, civil society, tourism, lifestyle, labor, employment, energy, science, technology, services, and religion.

As shown in Table 1, local elite-centered positive frames had the highest frequencies (61.5%), followed by local community-focused frames (34.6%) and local elite-centered negative frames (3.9%). This suggests a bias towards the positive framing of local elites in the news.

A new variable was created based on the calculation of framing descriptive data for each news story to understand better framing strategies that focus on local elite representation versus those that focus on local community representation. Every single frame was measured on a scale of 0–1. The frames were then classified into those focusing on positively representing the local government and those focusing on local community representation. The frames focused on positive local elite representation were built with addition, while the frames concentrate on local community representation were built

with subtraction. Each story was assigned a score, with high numbers indicating a propensity to generate frames that emphasize positive local elite representation. In contrast, low numbers suggest that the news emphasizes favorable local community representation and vice versa.

A one-way ANOVA analysis demonstrated that the effect of the framing orientation shown in the news towards the local elite was significant for framing strategies, $F(3, 769) = 286.51, p < .001$. Figure 1 illustrates that the positive perspectives of framers toward local elite\government had the highest mean ($M = 2.42, SD = 1.97$). The balanced perspective, showing both positive and negative perspectives ($M = .2, SD = 3.14$), followed by the neutral perspective ($M = -1.03, SD = 1.25$), and the negative perspective had the lowest mean ($M = -4.0, SD = 1.69$).

A simple linear regression was conducted to predict the framing of hyperlocal newspaper strategies (elite-driven vs. community-focused) based on news framing orientation toward local government. A significant regression equation was found $R^2 = .523, F(1, 768) = 842.358, p < .001, \beta = -.723, t(770) = 29.023, p < .001$. This implies that framing orientation towards local elites significantly predicted their framing strategy of focusing on the local elite (mainly the local government) vs. the local community.

Discussion

This research investigated the relationships between power, news framing, and editorial adaptation strategies in fragile media environments. According to the findings, 30 news frames are frequently used to represent local elites (mainly governmental elites) and local community issues, with a remarkable increase in the frequencies of local elite-centered driven positive frames: 61.5% of the frame frequencies in the sample had positive orientations towards the local elite, particularly the local government. These findings

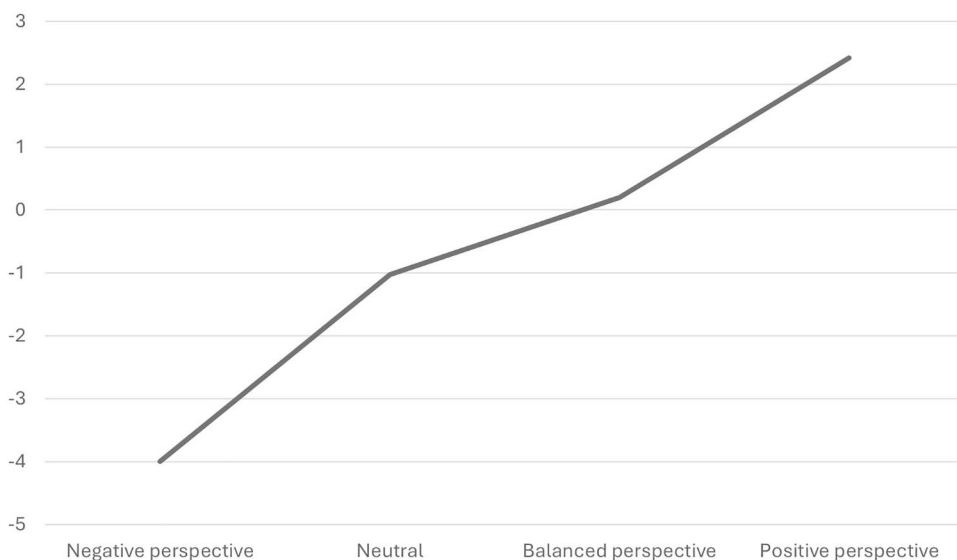


Figure 1. The mean score of the one-way ANOVA analysis of the effect of the framing orientation on framing strategies.

supported Mesmer, Frazier, and Burgess's (2022) conclusion that the city government was represented more than resident voices. Results also back up D'heer and Paulussen's (2013) findings, arguing that hyperlocal media's top-ranking themes and news frames were those related to criminal reporting. It can be concluded that, due to various institutional, communicative, or political contexts, hyperlocal journalists avoid criticizing local governments with a tendency to personalize news by emphasizing the role of government officials in events. On the other hand, journalists tend to focus on individuals' immoral or criminal behavior.

Certain news themes were more likely than others to be included in pro-local elite\government frames. Among hyperlocal newspaper framing techniques, tone, language, and writing style ranked highest.

Framing hyperlocal news in restricted media environments tends to re-present problems in a way that implies solutions, focusing on the moment the government takes action to address the issue. These results show that the news event is (re)presented differently, as media frames shift covertly from criticizing and blaming the local government to frames that show positive attitudes toward them. This technique enables hyperlocal journalism to appear professional and community-oriented while adhering to the loyalist press model. According to regression analysis, framing orientation toward local elite\government significantly predicted their framing strategy of using local elite\government or local community-focused frames. There was also a significant relationship between news framing orientations toward local elites and specific news frames.

The Egyptian media system is shaped by a repressive political climate characterized by severe restrictions, enabling government censorship and limiting press freedom (AlAshry 2022). Economic pressures also exacerbate the challenges, including local media's difficulties sustaining viable business models. Additional obstacles include content creation costs, questionable advertising practices, societal hostility, self-censorship, and the rise of "One Voice Journalism" (Elsheikh, Jackson, and Jebri 2024). Local journalism also confronts significant professional challenges, such as a lack of professionalism among staff, with amateur journalists working part-time. Financial constraints limit the capacity to attract skilled professionals. A shortage of technical resources, low readership rates, and the numerous difficulties journalists encounter in accessing information sources further strain the sustainability of local newspapers (Abu Saada, Radwan, and El-Sayed 2018). The sociopolitical environment and challenges surrounding hyperlocal journalism in Egypt influence the news-framing strategies employed. These strategies could serve as an adaptive mechanism in response to complex and stressful conditions, aiming to ensure survival and sustainability for local and hyperlocal media outlets.

This is consistent with Ihlen and Allern's (2008) argument that striving for just factual reporting represents a naive, unrealistic objectivity in news practice, used by media organizations to avoid political and ethical debates. These findings are also consistent with Sakr (2016), who noted that news ventures aspiring to high standards of reporting within challenging and restrictive contexts are forced to adopt innovative strategies to survive.

This finding raises concerns about the potential influence of political (macro), communicative (meso), and institutional-professional (micro) ecosystems on news framing in the local press, where smaller institutions may face pressure to conform to dominant narratives set by more prominent players (Allern 2014; de Vreese 2014; Ihlen and Allern

2008). This also seems consistent with a study that found that news is generated by choices made in the newsroom rather than outside events (Framing the News 1998).

After analysis, it was observed that while four news websites remain active, one (Alsohagia) has shifted to social media platforms, while another (Qena News) has ceased operations. These changes highlight the fragility and vulnerability of such outlets, driven by structural and contextual challenges, reinforcing our research's central argument that hyperlocal journalism constantly struggles for survival.

While it is difficult to generalize and confirm a decline in hyperlocal journalism across Egypt, the closure or transformation of several outlets likely reflects a broader trend affecting traditional standalone hyperlocal press. This shift appears driven by economic unsustainability, restrictive environments, and increasing competition from other digital platforms. Simultaneously, there is a shift towards a more informal, social media-centric model (Nygren 2019), which offers potential for community engagement and local information dissemination, while facing persistent financial viability and long-term sustainability challenges. However, this does not necessarily mean the end or disappearance of local news media, but rather a transformation in its form.

Egyptian hyperlocal journalism frames news by employing episodic, elite-driven advocacy and positive, supportive frames, adhering to the neo-authoritarian model dominating the Egyptian media system since 2013. It could be argued that hyperlocal journalism operating in restricted environments within the neo-authoritarian model tends to use three framing strategies: (1) *promoting the positive image of the elite*: According to this strategy, a high proportion of frames portray a positive image and express support for influential figures, especially local government officials; (2) *highlighting local problems*: These frames draw attention to adverse circumstances, criticize specific conditions, or draw attention to problems; and (3) *using professionally oriented frames*, demonstrating a commitment to journalistic standards while constructing news stories and presenting newsworthy events.

In other words, news editors in hyperlocal media perform multiple parallel processes, including (1) *seeking support*, which could be accomplished by demonstrating commitment and support to those local community powers that allow hyperlocal media to provide tangible or intangible support and, most importantly, allow these media to survive; (2) *seeking attractiveness* by attempting to present the materials that attract readers, such as news of accidents and crimes, in an appealing manner that compensates for hyperlocal media's avoidance of professionalism and the topics that should have been covered; and (3) *creating an impression of adhering to news professionalism* by upholding a certain level of professional standards in news handling.

While Egyptian hyperlocal journalism often emphasizes community proximity, our analysis revealed a tendency to replicate elite-driven advocacy frames observed in the national press. Such framing replication highlights significant contradictions that require contextualization and interpretation. This can be attributed to shared structural and political restrictions. Though hyperlocal media may offer different local perspectives, they operate within the broader Egyptian media ecosystem and systemic pressures that transcend geographical boundaries in Egypt's media landscape.

While national outlets face direct state and political restrictions, hyperlocal media navigate the same pressures compounded by fragile media ecosystems. This creates a paradox: despite lower political scrutiny, potentially offering some editorial freedom, economic

vulnerability often compels hyperlocal outlets to adopt elite-driven advocacy frames for survival. Due to this economic interdependence, even privately owned or independent outlets are vulnerable to pressure from local elites tied to national power structures.

Additionally, hyperlocal outlets often unconsciously replicate elite-driven advocacy frames from national media through several mechanisms, such as sourcing practices, risk-averse editorial decisions, shared professional socialization, and seeking legitimacy by emulating established national media's professional standards and approaches. Also, hyperlocal journalists may default to frames established by the national press when covering local aspects of national issues, inadvertently importing elite perspectives.

These practices solidify hyperlocal media's identity as a complement to, rather than an alternative to, the national press. Understanding all the previous dynamics is crucial for evaluating the potential of hyperlocal to promote more diverse and democratic public discourse in Egypt.

Conclusion

The research findings highlighted framing strategies, the dynamic tension between elite-driven advocacy frames and local community-driven ones, and how political, media, and institutional-professional ecosystems impact framing strategies in hyperlocal journalism. The research argues that in fragile media ecosystems, journalists often tend to employ framing techniques as a survival strategy to balance diverse pressures and maintain viability. News framing can be used unconsciously by journalists in small media institutions as an editorial strategy to support local governments or other sociopolitical powers while demonstrating professionalism. This strategy seeks to ensure the survival of small media businesses, including hyperlocal media, particularly during periods of restrictions on free expression and financial and economic weakness, fragility, and instability. As a result, news framing in hyperlocal media uses what D'Angelo (2017) refers to as "the language of benefits" (obtain a gain) and costs (avoid a loss) to frame local community and local elites/government in controlled public spheres.

The study recommends that hyperlocal media must prioritize professionalism. This necessitates the creation of an economic business model that allows these outlets to become financially self-sufficient and self-independent. It also necessitates greater freedom.

Future research could explore factors influencing hyperlocal news framing, compare media frames with those of audiences, and compare framing in democratic and non-democratic societies. Like all research studies in this area, our research is not free from limitations. One limitation is that the findings can only be generalized to specific sociopolitical contexts, such as the closed public sphere.

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Appendix

List of Hyperlocal News Websites Analyzed

Soot Elshaab

- <https://sootelshaab.com/>
- Geographic Focus: Damietta Governorate

Sharkia Today

- <https://sharkiatoday.com/>
- Geographic Focus: Sharkia Governorate

Sada Portsaid

- <https://sadaportsaid.com/>
- Geographic Focus: Portsaid Governorate

Maa Alnas News

- <https://www.m3alnasnews.com/>
- Geographic Focus: Kafr El Sheikh Governorate

Alsohagia (Sohag Governorate)

- <https://www.alsohagia.com/>
- Geographic Focus: Sohag Governorate

Qena News

- <https://qenanews.com/>
- Geographic Focus: Qena Governorate