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The Role of Local Online Journalism in Shaping Political Awareness among University Students: The Case of Echorouk Online

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of local online journalism in shaping political awareness among university students, using Echorouk Online as an applied case study. The research is grounded in the profound transformation that has reshaped the media landscape, particularly with the emergence of digital journalism as an interactive medium capable of transcending traditional constraints of censorship and geographical boundaries. Consequently, online journalism has become one of the most attractive and influential sources of information for young people, especially university students in Algeria.

The study aims to highlight how local online journalism has evolved from merely serving as a channel for breaking news into a "digital school of political education" that contributes to the development of mature political awareness. The findings indicate that Echorouk Online has succeeded in providing university students with in-depth perspectives on local and international events, relying on well-grounded persuasive approaches supported by the views and analyses of experts and specialists. This has helped students move beyond the stage of "superficial reception" of information toward a deeper level of "understanding and critical analysis" of the implications of political decisions, developments, and phenomena.

The findings also reveal the emergence of a "balanced" form of political awareness among university students, characterized by a growing interest in local political issues and support for the stability of state institutions, alongside notable openness to regional and global affairs. Despite the significant cognitive and awareness-raising role played by Echorouk Online, the study identifies a gap between "cognitive political awareness" and "practical political engagement." This highlights the need to strengthen and more effectively utilize the interactive tools offered by online journalism in order to encourage young people to engage in more active and meaningful political participation.

In conclusion, the study affirms that online journalism remains a key actor in the contemporary political landscape and represents a significant instrument for fostering mature, responsible, and informed political awareness.

1. Introduction:

The development of digital communication technologies has brought significant changes to the media landscape and to the way news is produced, distributed, and consumed. Journalism is no longer confined to traditional newspapers, radio, and television. Online journalism has introduced a more dynamic form of communication based on speed, accessibility, multimedia content, and interaction with audiences. Readers can now access news immediately, share content, express their opinions, and participate in discussions about public issues. As a result, journalism increasingly performs functions that go beyond reporting events to include explanation, interpretation, knowledge development, and participation in public debate.

These changes are particularly relevant to university students, who are an important part of the digital media audience. Online journalism provides students with regular access to information about political institutions, government decisions, public affairs, and national and international events. However, political awareness cannot be

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reduced to simply receiving or remembering political information. It also involves understanding events, interpreting their causes and consequences, developing informed views, and engaging with issues that affect society. Political awareness can therefore be understood as a process that includes cognitive, analytical, interactive, and behavioral dimensions.

In Algeria, the expansion of online journalism has provided young people with new opportunities to follow political developments and public affairs. Echorouk Online is an important example within this changing media environment because it provides political news as well as analyses, expert opinions, and coverage of national, regional, and international issues. Examining its content can therefore help explain how local online journalism contributes to political knowledge and understanding among university students.

Against this background, the present study examines the role of Echorouk Online in shaping political awareness among university students. It analyzes the political issues covered by the newspaper, its sources of information, target audiences, persuasive methods, orientation of coverage, and its contribution to political awareness. Particular attention is given to whether online journalism mainly strengthens political knowledge and understanding or whether this influence also extends to interaction and political participation. In doing so, the study seeks to provide a better understanding of how local online journalism contributes to political awareness and engagement among university students within Algeria's evolving digital media environment.

1. The Theoretical Framework of the Relationship Between Online Journalism and the Formation of Political Awareness Among University Students

Digital transformation has brought about a fundamental change in the structure of journalistic work and in the nature of the relationship between media institutions and the public. Online journalism is no longer merely a technological extension of print journalism; rather, it has become a communication environment characterized by the rapid updating of information, multimedia features, search and retrieval capabilities, as well as interactivity, which provides recipients with greater opportunities to select, comment on, and participate in the circulation of content. In this context, online journalism can be viewed as a form of journalistic practice that relies on the digital environment for the production, editing, and dissemination of news and information, while providing audiences with continuous access to and interaction with content. This has expanded the traditional functions of journalism from news reporting to interpretation, analysis, knowledge formation, and contribution to public debate (Abdel Hamid, 2007; Al-Labban, 2007). This is consistent with the conception adopted by the present study of online journalism as a medium that combines the transmission of political information with cognitive, interpretive, interactive, and guidance functions, thereby making it part of the process of shaping students' perceptions of political issues rather than merely a channel for reporting events.

This role acquires particular importance for **university students**, as they are among the groups most connected to the digital environment and most likely to use electronic sources to follow public affairs. Political awareness is not limited merely to possessing information about political institutions, actors, and events; rather, it includes the ability to understand such information, relate it to its contexts, analyze its implications, and form attitudes and positions regarding public issues. At the behavioral level, it may extend to various forms of political participation. Political awareness can therefore be analyzed through three interrelated dimensions: the **cognitive dimension**, which is related to the amount of political knowledge and information; the **analytical-attitudinal dimension**, which is associated with interpreting and evaluating events and forming attitudes; and the **behavioral dimension**, which is related to translating knowledge and attitudes into political interest, discussion, or participation. Studies examining young people and digital media environments have shown that the relationship between exposure to political information and participation is not automatic. Increased access to information may support political learning or political efficacy, while political knowledge does not necessarily translate into actual participation. This makes the distinction between knowledge, attitudes, and behavior essential when studying the impact of digital media (Edgerly et al., 2018; Tan, 2024).

From this perspective, online journalism functions as one of the channels of **informal political socialization and learning**. It enables university students to become acquainted with national, regional, and international issues and to follow decisions, policies, institutions, and political actors. Through news reports, analyses, and specialized opinions, it also provides elements that help students move beyond merely knowing about an event toward attempting to interpret its causes and understand its consequences. Some Arab studies have shown that digital media have become an important source of political information for young people and that their use is associated with the formation of political knowledge and attitudes, although the magnitude of this influence varies according to the nature of media use, content, and audience characteristics (El Gabry, 2020; El Yazidi, 2022). In the Arab context, field studies have also directly examined the role of online journalism in developing political awareness among university students, supporting the importance of studying the relationship between digital journalistic content and the political knowledge and attitudes of university youth (Othman, 2021).

The importance of online journalism in shaping political awareness is further enhanced by the possibilities offered by **digital interactivity**, which go beyond the traditional linear model of communication. Students are no longer merely

recipients of political content; they can comment on it, share it, discuss it, and recirculate it, thereby expanding the potential for moving from the consumption of information to interaction with public issues. However, this transition should not be assumed to occur inevitably. The literature indicates that the use of political information through digital media may be associated with political participation through mediating variables such as a sense of political efficacy, whereas political knowledge alone may not be sufficient to generate actual participation (Tan, 2024). Moreover, the abundance of information in the digital environment is accompanied by challenges related to misinformation, polarization, information bubbles, and trust in sources, making **media literacy and critical capacity** essential elements in transforming exposure to digital content into more mature political awareness (Sanusi et al., 2026).

This relationship can be interpreted within the framework of the **structural-functional approach**, which views society as a system within which a set of institutions interact and perform functions that contribute to its continuity and equilibrium. From this perspective, the media are understood as part of the social structure, performing multiple functions related to providing information, transmitting knowledge and values, and achieving forms of integration and adaptation within society (Merton, 1968). Functional analysis has also been extended to the study of media by examining the manifest and latent functions and consequences resulting from the activities of media institutions and their use by audiences. Accordingly, this approach can be employed in the study of **Echorouk Online** by analyzing the cognitive, interpretive, interactive, and guidance functions performed by its political content and the extent to which these functions contribute to meeting the political and cognitive needs of university students. This is consistent with the theoretical framework of the original study, which employed the functional approach to identify the functions of online journalism and understand how students use it to meet their cognitive and political needs.

Accordingly, the relationship between online journalism and political awareness should not be understood as a direct and unidirectional influence, but rather as a **cumulative, multilevel process** that begins with exposure to political information and the acquisition of knowledge, proceeds through interpretation, analysis, and the formation of attitudes, and may ultimately lead—depending on a range of individual, social, and media-related variables—to political participation or behavior. From this standpoint, the study of **Echorouk Online** gains significance as an applied case that makes it possible to examine the nature of political content, the mechanisms through which it is processed, and its functions, as well as to determine the extent of its ability to contribute to moving university students from the level of news reception to deeper levels of political understanding, analysis, and interaction. At the methodological level, it is necessary to distinguish between the **formation of political awareness** and **its transformation into actual political participation**; this distinction is also confirmed by the main finding of the present study concerning the existence of a gap between cognitive awareness and actual practice.

2. Political Content in Echorouk Online and the Mechanisms of Building Political Awareness

The analysis of political content published in **Echorouk Online** represents a fundamental entry point for understanding how online journalism performs its functions in building political awareness. Media influence is not merely associated with the intensity of exposure to content; it is also shaped by the nature of the issues selected, sources of information, frames of coverage, news values, methods of persuasion, and the audience to which the discourse is directed. Based on the content analysis adopted in the study, the findings reveal clear diversity in the newspaper's political agenda. **National issues ranked first at 23.24%**, followed by **global issues at 22.41%**, regional issues at 14.52%, government decisions at 13.69%, and Arab issues at 12.45%, while historical issues accounted for 7.88% and party activities for 5.81%. This distribution reflects a combination of attention to national affairs and openness to the international and regional political environment, which may broaden the recipient's sphere of knowledge and enable them to place national events within wider political contexts. This is consistent with the concept of **Agenda-Setting**, which assumes that the media influence the public's perception of the importance of issues through differences in their presence and prominence in coverage, rather than necessarily determining the position that should be taken toward them (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; McCombs, 2004).

The construction of political knowledge is not determined solely by the type of topics addressed; it is also influenced by **the sources of information and the actors upon whom journalistic coverage relies**. The study data show that political analysts ranked first among the sources of political content at 23.24%, followed by specialized journalists at 22.82%, news agencies at 14.93%, and correspondents at 13.69%, while the remaining percentages were distributed among diplomats, officials, party leaders, and religious figures. Political analysts and specialized journalists thus jointly account for approximately 46% of the sources used, which, within the study's coding scheme, indicates the presence of interpretive and analytical components alongside the direct news function. This issue is particularly important in political journalism because the selection of sources and the amount of space allocated to them within a media text contribute to constructing the interpretive frame of an issue. From the perspective of **Framing**, media coverage is not limited to selecting events but also involves highlighting certain aspects of reality and linking them to the definition of the problem, the interpretation of its causes, and the presentation of evaluations or treatments of it (Entman, 1993).

The nature of the **target audience** also confirms a direct connection with the subject of the study. The general public accounted for 53.11% of the classified content, while university students represented 24.07% and specific or specialized audiences 22.82%. This structure indicates that Echorouk Online's political discourse is not limited to a specialized audience but rather combines mass outreach with addressing segments possessing a more specialized level of knowledge or education, with university students alone representing nearly one quarter of the target audience according to the study's classification. This finding is particularly significant given that young people and university students constitute a group that uses digital media to obtain information and follow public issues. However, studies on digital media indicate the need to distinguish between mere exposure to political information and political learning and participation, because the effect is mediated by patterns of use, political interest, individual characteristics, and the individual's communication environment (Boulianne, 2015).

The findings also reveal that **political awareness is built through a combination of the informational and interpretive functions**. In measuring the newspaper's contribution to shaping awareness, the category of reporting political events recorded a frequency of 241, while developing political awareness recorded 122 occurrences, addressing political issues 110 occurrences, guiding public opinion 87 occurrences, and encouraging political participation 47 occurrences. According to the final percentages presented in the study's commentary, the function of reporting events accounted for approximately 39.70% of the total contributions, followed by developing political awareness at 20.10%, while encouraging political participation remained relatively limited. This finding appears important because it reveals a functional path that begins with **reporting and providing political information**, then moves toward **interpretation and the development of knowledge and awareness**, but becomes weaker at the level of encouraging the recipient toward behavior and participation. This variation is consistent with findings in some of the literature on digital media. Boulianne's (2015) review indicates a positive relationship in a substantial proportion of studies between social media use and participation, although the magnitude and direction of this relationship vary according to the type of use and context.

The **methods of persuasion** also reveal a clear presence of specialized expertise in political discourse. According to the study's classification, sources or methods of persuasion associated with individuals were distributed among experts at 29.79%, academics at 29.26%, politicians at 26.06%, and legal professionals at 14.89%. This can be interpreted as indicating that the use of experts and specialists provides journalistic content with interpretive elements and knowledge-based arguments that help recipients understand complex issues rather than merely presenting a descriptive account of an event. In the literature on persuasion, source characteristics, including expertise and perceived credibility, are considered variables that influence how a message is received and how the arguments it contains are evaluated (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Accordingly, the presence of experts and academics in the content under study can be viewed as one of the potential mechanisms employed by the newspaper in moving from **political reporting to explanation and interpretation**.

As for the **orientation of political coverage**, the study's analysis showed that 56.69% of the materials classified under this variable fell within the category of "supportive of government political decisions," compared with 43.31% in the category of "neutral on political issues," while the categories "supportive of political parties" and "opposed on political issues" recorded no presence within the sample according to the coding instrument used. From a methodological perspective, this finding should be treated as a description of the orientation of the content within **the sample studied and according to the analytical categories adopted by the researcher**, rather than as a general judgment on the newspaper's editorial line beyond the temporal and material boundaries of the study. The orientation of coverage is significant in shaping political awareness because media framing involves processes of selecting and emphasizing certain elements at the expense of others, thereby influencing the cognitive context that the public uses to understand a political issue (Entman, 1993).

The structure of journalistic presentation further reinforces this tendency toward detailed coverage. **87.65% of political topics were concentrated on the inside pages**, compared with 5.29% on the front page and 7.06% on the back page. The study also showed that the article was the most frequently used journalistic genre, accounting for 24.9%, whereas cartoons were the least frequent at 2%. Within the limits of the study design, this can be interpreted as an indication that considerable space was allocated to political content within the newspaper, alongside the presence of journalistic formats that allow for a greater degree of explanation and detail compared with brief news headlines.

Based on these indicators as a whole, it can be said that the mechanism through which political awareness is built in the Echorouk Online content under study is based on **an interconnected chain of functions**: selecting and highlighting issues, providing information about them, relying on specialized sources, presenting interpretive and persuasive elements, and then directing the discourse toward a general audience that includes a significant segment of university students. However, the findings of the content analysis themselves reveal that the strength of this mechanism is concentrated primarily at the **cognitive and interpretive levels** rather than at the behavioral level, as direct encouragement of political participation was limited compared with reporting events and developing awareness. This finding paves the way for the third theme of the study, through which the **gap between the acquisition of political**

knowledge and awareness, on the one hand, and their transformation into actual political participation and practice, on the other hand, can be discussed.

3. Echorouk Online's Contribution to Shaping Political Awareness Among University Students: Findings and Challenges

The findings of the study reveal that **Echorouk Online's** contribution to shaping political awareness can be interpreted through three interrelated levels: **the cognitive level, the analytical and critical level, and the interactive and behavioral level**. This classification makes it possible to move beyond merely describing the characteristics of political content toward interpreting the functions it performs in the process of building awareness. Political awareness is not achieved simply through exposure to news; rather, it develops gradually from acquiring information to understanding and interpreting it and forming attitudes toward it, and may then progress to political participation. In this context, the literature points to the need to distinguish between media use that leads to the acquisition of political knowledge and behavioral outcomes represented by participation, since increased exposure to information does not necessarily mean that it will automatically translate into political behavior (Boulianne, 2015; Eveland, 2001).

First, at the cognitive level, the findings show that the informational function represents the primary entry point upon which the newspaper relies in building political awareness. The frequency of "reporting political events" reached 241 cases, placing this function at the forefront of the contributions identified by the study, while "developing political awareness" ranked next at 20.10%. The analysis of the political objectives of the content also revealed that "reporting raw news" accounted for 39.42%, compared with 39% for "promoting political awareness" and 21.58% for "enlightening public opinion." Within the limits of the content analysis instrument used, these findings demonstrate a notable convergence between the informational and awareness-raising functions; that is, the newspaper does not present the political event merely as an end in itself, but rather combines the transmission of information with the provision of content that performs cognitive and awareness-raising functions. This is particularly important for university students because political knowledge constitutes one of the primary components of political awareness. Regular access to information concerning institutions, issues, decisions, and events provides a body of knowledge that can subsequently be used to interpret the political environment and form attitudes toward it. Political communication studies have shown that exposure to news content, when accompanied by attention and cognitive processing of information, can be associated with the process of political learning and the acquisition of general knowledge (Eveland, 2001).

This cognitive dimension is further deepened through **the geographical and thematic diversity of political content**. National issues ranked first at 23.24%, while global issues followed closely at 22.41%, followed by regional issues at 14.52%, government decisions at 13.69%, and Arab issues at 12.45%. In principle, this diversity enables students to move beyond following local affairs in isolation toward understanding the relationships between national developments and the regional and international environment. This can be interpreted in light of **Agenda-Setting Theory**, which emphasizes that the degree of prominence given to issues in the media contributes to shaping the relative importance that audiences assign to those issues (McCombs, 2004). Consequently, the nearly equal presence of national and global issues in the sample studied provides a knowledge agenda that combines local and international dimensions rather than restricting political knowledge to a single geographical scope.

Second, at the analytical and critical level, the findings indicate that the newspaper's potential role extends beyond merely providing information to offering elements that help interpret it. The analysis of information sources revealed a high presence of political analysts and specialized journalists, while methods of persuasion relied to a significant degree on experts and university academics. The study itself concludes that the use of experts and academics—who together accounted for more than 59% of the persuasion-method category—supports the interpretive and analytical function of the content. This finding has cognitive significance because integrating specialized expertise into journalistic discourse can provide recipients with contexts and interpretive information that go beyond the immediate journalistic question of "What happened?" toward more complex questions such as "Why did it happen?" and "What are the potential consequences?" In media framing theory, the importance of the media is not confined to selecting topics but extends to the manner in which problems are defined and their causes, dimensions, and associated considerations are highlighted (Entman, 1993).

The **news value of the content** further supports this interpretation. Topics classified as "most important" accounted for 25.73% and those classified as "more important" for 20.75%, while preventive and remedial topics each accounted for 23.65%, compared with only 6.22% for less important topics. According to the study's interpretation, the presence of preventive and remedial topics reflects an interest that does not stop at reporting the event but extends to anticipating certain issues or discussing their repercussions and addressing them. It is therefore possible to speak of a relative transition from **factual knowledge** to **interpretive knowledge**. This represents an important step in building political awareness because deeper political knowledge requires recipients to be able to place information in context, link causes to consequences, and compare different interpretations rather than merely memorize isolated facts.

However, this analytical dimension should also be considered in light of **the orientation of editorial coverage**. The study showed that 56.69% of the content classified under this variable was supportive of government political decisions, compared with 43.31% that was neutral, while the categories of support for political parties and opposition recorded no presence in the sample according to the coding scheme adopted. This finding represents one of the aspects that should be taken into consideration when evaluating the conditions for developing critical thinking, since building analytical awareness is related not only to the amount of interpretation provided but also **to the diversity of frames, viewpoints, and arguments available to the recipient**. Framing literature indicates that selecting and emphasizing certain elements of an issue at the expense of others can influence the way a political problem is understood and evaluated (Entman, 1993). Accordingly, expanding interpretive pluralism represents one of the important challenges if the objective is to support students' capacity for comparison and independent analysis.

Third, the interactive and behavioral level reveals the most prominent paradox in the study's findings. While the cognitive and awareness-raising functions appear clear, the transition toward political participation remains less evident. "Encouraging political participation" recorded only 47 occurrences, representing 7.75% in the table measuring the newspaper's contribution, and the study indicated that "guiding public opinion" and "encouraging political participation" together remained at a lower level than the informational and educational functions. When testing the hypothesis concerning interaction and engagement, the study also concluded that it was **partially** supported, explaining that interaction generally remains closer to "digital discussion" than to "field engagement," and that news consumption exceeds actual political participation.

In principle, this finding is consistent with a broad trend in digital media research that rejects the assumption of an automatic relationship between obtaining information and political participation. Boulianne's (2015) meta-analysis showed that a relationship between social media use and civic and political participation exists in a number of studies, but that its strength varies according to patterns of use and the contexts examined. The **O-S-R-O-R model** in political communication research also distinguishes between exposure to information, mental processing and discussion, and subsequent political outcomes, meaning that the transition from the media message to participation passes through multiple mediating variables rather than following a direct path (Cho et al., 2009). On this basis, the findings of the present study can be interpreted as an indicator of **a gap between cognitive awareness and political practice**, rather than as evidence of the absence of an effect of online journalism.

Consequently, the principal challenge facing **Echorouk Online**, within the framework of the findings reached by the study, lies in how to move from a model focused primarily on **reporting, awareness-raising, and interpretation** toward a model that also enhances informed political interaction, without conflating political participation with directing recipients toward a specific political position. From a journalistic perspective, this can be achieved by expanding the spaces allocated to structured discussion, presenting multiple viewpoints, providing interpretive materials that explain the mechanisms of civic and institutional participation, offering interactive opinion polls and digital dialogues with experts, and linking political issues to students' interests and public concerns. Genuine interactivity in digital journalism does not merely mean allowing comments or content sharing; rather, it involves creating communication spaces that enable recipients to become more capable of researching, comparing, discussing, and forming their own independent positions.

Accordingly, the findings of the study reveal **an uneven trajectory across the levels of political awareness formation**: a relatively strong presence at the cognitive level, a significant presence of interpretive and analytical components, and greater limitations at the behavioral level associated with encouraging participation. This finding does not diminish the political function of online journalism but rather defines its limits more precisely. Within the sample and analytical categories used in the study, **Echorouk Online** appears more capable of **providing students with political information and offering elements that help them understand and interpret it** than of transforming this body of knowledge into actual political participation. Hence, the gap between **"students knowing and understanding politics" and "students participating in politics"** emerges as one of the central findings that can enhance the explanatory value of the article and open the way for subsequent studies combining content analysis with research on university student audiences in order to measure the actual relationship between exposure to content, knowledge, critical thinking, and political participation.

Conclusion

This study explored the role of local online journalism in shaping political awareness among university students, with Echorouk Online as a case study. The results show that the role of online journalism is not limited to delivering political news. It also provides information, explanation, and analysis that can help young audiences develop a clearer understanding of political events and public issues. Echorouk Online therefore illustrates how digital journalism can contribute to political learning among university students.

The content analysis reveals that the newspaper covers political issues at several geographical levels. National issues received the greatest attention, closely followed by global issues, while regional, Arab, and government-related matters were also covered. This variety exposes students to a broad range of political information and may help them

understand national developments within wider regional and international contexts. The study also found that political analysts, specialized journalists, experts, and academics were frequently used as sources. Their presence adds an interpretive dimension to political coverage by offering explanations and informed perspectives rather than simply presenting events as isolated facts.

The findings also show that Echorouk Online contributes to different dimensions of political awareness, although not to the same degree. Its strongest contribution appears at the informational level, particularly through reporting political events. At the same time, the newspaper contributes to developing political awareness, explaining political issues, and informing public opinion. This suggests that its role is particularly important at the cognitive and analytical levels. However, the findings also point to the importance of providing a wider range of perspectives, which could give students more opportunities to compare arguments, question interpretations, and develop independent critical views.

One of the main findings of the study is the gap between political awareness and actual political participation. Encouraging participation was much less visible than providing information and developing awareness. This suggests that being politically informed does not necessarily lead students to become politically active. Knowledge, understanding, interaction, and participation should therefore be viewed as connected, but distinct, dimensions of political engagement.

Overall, Echorouk Online plays a meaningful role in developing political awareness among university students, mainly by providing political information and interpretation. Nevertheless, greater interactivity, more diverse viewpoints, and wider opportunities for constructive discussion could strengthen this role. Future research should combine content analysis with surveys, interviews, or focus groups to examine how students themselves use online political journalism and how this use relates to their knowledge, critical understanding, attitudes, and participation.

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