

MEDIA STRATEGIES FOR DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND THEIR ROLE IN PROMOTING PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY IN THE PALESTINIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM (2007–2025)

ENAS A H MADI , DR .AMINURRAASYID BIN YATIBAN

Alaqsapress2019@gmail.com

Aminurraasyid@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This article investigates how media strategies for digital transformation influence participatory democracy in the Palestinian political system during the period 2007–2025. The study adopts a mixed-methods-inspired quantitative design centered on a large-scale survey of 350 Palestinian media professionals, complemented by analytical interpretation of the unique political context shaped by political division, military occupation, and protracted armed conflict. The independent variable encompasses digital media strategies (including platform diversification, content digitization, algorithmic engagement, and artificial intelligence integration), while the dependent variable is operationalized as participatory democracy through indicators of civic engagement, institutional transparency, accountability mechanisms, and political deliberation quality. Trust in media institutions and information integrity function as critical mediating variables, and armed conflict intensity serves as a moderating condition that fundamentally alters the relationship between transformation strategies and democratic outcomes.

Findings reveal that digital transformation strategies significantly enhance political participation, institutional transparency, and accountability when robust institutional trust is present and when information integrity mechanisms are institutionalized. However, war and systematic communication disruption—particularly the targeting of journalists, destruction of media infrastructure, and internet blackouts—dramatically weaken these positive effects and can even reverse democratic gains. The role of artificial intelligence presents a paradox: while AI-driven verification tools enhance credibility and counter misinformation, they simultaneously introduce concerns regarding algorithmic bias, automated censorship, and the erosion of human editorial judgment.

This article contributes theoretically by integrating media transformation theory, institutional trust frameworks, and democratic participation models into a single analytical architecture specifically calibrated for protracted conflict settings. It extends existing scholarship by demonstrating that digital transformation in fragile and conflict-affected contexts cannot be understood through technological determinism alone, but rather requires analysis of how political fragmentation, military violence, and governance failure mediate and moderate transformation outcomes. Methodologically, the study provides a validated instrument for measuring digital transformation's democratic impact in non-

Western, conflict-affected societies. Empirically, it documents the unprecedented crisis facing Palestinian journalism during the 2023–2025 Gaza war, offering evidence of how extreme violence restructures the entire information ecosystem.

The research concludes that sustainable democratic transformation in Palestine requires not only technological innovation but fundamental governance reform, legal protection for journalists, international accountability for attacks on media workers, and the institutionalization of transparency and participation mechanisms that can withstand political pressure and armed conflict.

KEYWORDS

Digital Transformation; Participatory Democracy; Information Integrity; Trust in Media; Political Communication; Conflict and Media; Governance; Palestine; Artificial Intelligence; Journalism Under Siege

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Global Context: Digital Transformation and Democratic Crisis

Digital transformation has fundamentally restructured how politics functions in contemporary societies, reconfiguring the relationship between states, media institutions, and citizens. Traditional journalism institutions, which for more than a century served as the primary gatekeepers of political information and wielded considerable agenda-setting power, are no longer the sole arbiters of public discourse. Instead, digital platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter/X, and emerging artificial intelligence-driven content systems increasingly shape public attention, civic discourse patterns, and modes of political mobilization (Chadwick, 2022; Van Dijck et al., 2018). This shift from institutional mass media to algorithmically mediated platforms has altered not merely the technological infrastructure of communication, but the underlying structure and logic of political communication itself (Klinger & Svensson, 2021).

While the expansion of digital access has empowered citizens with unprecedented information availability, enabling grassroots organization, transnational solidarity networks, and new forms of political expression, it has simultaneously introduced severe challenges. These include the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation, the rise of sensationalist and emotionally polarizing content optimized for algorithmic engagement, echo chambers that reinforce ideological homogeneity, and the systematic erosion of trust in journalism and democratic institutions (Lewandowsky et al., 2020; Tucker et al., 2018). Globally, trust in news organizations remains at historically low levels, with less than 40% of audiences in many democracies expressing confidence in journalistic institutions (Newman et al., 2024). This decline in institutional trust directly threatens democratic legitimacy, reduces the quality of public deliberation, and weakens citizen willingness to participate in collective decision-making processes (Strömbäck et al., 2022).

1.2 The Palestinian Context: Digital Transformation Under Siege

The Palestinian political system represents one of the most complex, fragile, and contested environments in which processes of digital transformation unfold. Since the violent political division of 2007 between Fatah-controlled areas in the West Bank and Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip, Palestinians have lived under conditions of fragmented governance, interrupted elections (the last legislative elections took place in 2006), prolonged military occupation, economic siege, and recurrent episodes of armed conflict (Hilal, 2010; Tartir & Ejdeh, 2021). Media institutions in Palestine operate under multiple layers of constraint: Israeli military occupation and censorship, internal political repression by

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Palestinian authorities, severe resource scarcity, chronic insecurity, and the constant threat of physical violence against journalists (Najjar, 2021; Tawil-Souri, 2012).

During the Gaza war that began on October 7, 2023, Palestinian journalists were killed in unprecedented numbers—more than 180 journalists and media workers were killed in the first year of the conflict alone, making it the deadliest period for journalists in recorded history (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2024). Critical media infrastructure was systematically destroyed through targeted airstrikes on media offices, telecommunications towers, and internet service provider facilities. Internet services were repeatedly and deliberately disrupted, creating prolonged communication blackouts that severed Gaza from the outside world (Access Now, 2024). Journalists worked without electricity, clean water, or safe shelter, often reporting while displaced, injured, or mourning the loss of family members.

Accordingly, Palestinian society represents not merely a case study of digital transformation, but rather a case of digital transformation under siege—a condition in which technological change intersects with military violence, political fragmentation, and humanitarian catastrophe. This unique context challenges dominant narratives of digital empowerment and exposes the fragility of participatory democracy when information systems collapse under the weight of armed conflict.

1.3 Research Problem and Significance

Despite growing scholarly attention to digital media and democracy, most existing research focuses on stable democratic contexts in the Global North, leaving significant conceptual and empirical gaps regarding how digital transformation operates in fragile, conflict-affected, and colonized settings (Mazzarella, 2022; Abualroos, 2024). Existing studies tend to examine digital transformation, institutional trust, and citizen participation as separate phenomena, rarely integrating them into unified analytical frameworks. Moreover, the role of armed conflict as a structural condition that moderates and distorts transformation processes remains severely undertheorized.

This study addresses these gaps by asking the following core research question:

How do media strategies for digital transformation influence participatory democracy in Palestine through the mediation of trust and information integrity, and under the moderation of armed conflict?

The article seeks to fill conceptual, theoretical, and empirical gaps by:

1. Analyzing digital transformation not purely as technological change, but as an institutional process embedded within political struggle, power relations, and colonial structures.
2. Integrating trust and information integrity as mediating mechanisms that explain how digital strategies translate (or fail to translate) into democratic outcomes.
3. Theorizing armed conflict not as an external variable but as a moderating condition that fundamentally reshapes the relationships among technology, trust, and participation.
4. Providing original empirical evidence from a large-scale survey of Palestinian media professionals conducted during a period of extreme crisis.
5. Offering policy-relevant insights for strengthening democratic resilience in conflict-affected societies.

1.4 Article Structure

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews relevant literature on digital transformation, participatory democracy, trust and information integrity, media in conflict contexts, and the Palestinian political system. Section 3 presents the conceptual framework and derives testable hypotheses. Section 4 details the methodology, including research design, sampling

procedures, instrument development, and analytical techniques. Section 5 presents the empirical results. Section 6 discusses findings in relation to theory and context. Section 7 concludes with policy recommendations and directions for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Digital Transformation and Political Communication

2.1.1 Conceptualizing Digital Transformation

Digital transformation refers to the institutional incorporation and integration of digital technologies—including internet platforms, mobile communication devices, data analytics, artificial intelligence systems, and algorithmic content curation—into organizational structures, communication flows, production processes, and governance mechanisms (Vial, 2019). In the realm of political communication, digital transformation reshapes how citizens access information, how they interact with public authorities and with one another, how political elites communicate, and how collective identities and solidarities are formed and mobilized (Kreiss, 2016).

Chadwick (2022) conceptualizes this transformation as the emergence of a hybrid media system in which older forms of journalism and newer digital platforms do not simply replace one another but rather coexist, compete, and converge in complex patterns. Traditional news organizations adopt platform logics to gain visibility; platforms selectively amplify or suppress journalistic content; and citizens toggle between institutional journalism and peer-produced information depending on trust, relevance, and accessibility. This hybridity creates opportunities for increased pluralism and participation, but also generates instability, fragmentation, and coordination challenges (Klinger & Svensson, 2021).

2.1.2 The Dual Face of Digital Platforms

Digital platforms promise democratization through disintermediation, enabling marginalized voices to bypass traditional gatekeepers and directly reach audiences. Empirical evidence demonstrates that social media platforms have played significant roles in protest mobilization, transnational advocacy campaigns, and the documentation of human rights violations (Tufekci, 2017; Lynch, 2016). However, platform architectures are also designed to maximize user engagement through algorithmic curation that privileges emotionally arousing, sensationalist, and polarizing content (Vosoughi et al., 2018). This structural bias toward virality over veracity creates fertile ground for misinformation, conspiracy theories, and manipulative propaganda (Tucker et al., 2018).

Moreover, digital platforms are not neutral infrastructures but rather corporate entities with their own economic interests, political allegiances, and governance policies that are often opaque and unaccountable (Gillespie, 2018; Zuboff, 2019). Content moderation decisions, algorithmic recommendations, and data surveillance practices raise profound questions about power, autonomy, and democratic control (Noble, 2018).

2.2 Participatory Democracy in the Digital Age

2.2.1 Theories of Democratic Participation

Participatory democracy emphasizes active citizen involvement in political decision-making processes beyond the narrow act of voting in periodic elections. Drawing on deliberative democratic theory (Habermas, 1996; Dryzek, 2000), participatory approaches prioritize inclusive dialogue, reasoned argumentation, and the co-creation of public policies through sustained engagement between citizens and institutions. Democratic legitimacy, in this view, derives not merely from aggregated preferences but from the quality of deliberation and the inclusiveness of participation (Fishkin, 2018).

Digital technologies are often heralded as enablers of participatory democracy by lowering barriers to political engagement, providing new channels for consultation (e.g., digital town halls, online consultations, crowdsourcing platforms), facilitating horizontal organization and peer-to-peer mobilization, and increasing institutional transparency through open data initiatives (Smith, 2009; Fung, 2015). However, scholars caution against technological solutionism—the belief that technology alone can solve political problems (Morozov, 2013).

2.2.2 From Access to Institutionalization

Smith (2023) argues that democratic innovations risk becoming merely symbolic gestures unless they are institutionalized—embedded within formal governance structures with clear accountability mechanisms linking citizen input to decision-making outputs. Technological access alone does not guarantee substantive political empowerment; indeed, superficial participation (sometimes termed "clicktivism" or "slacktivism") may create the illusion of engagement while leaving power structures unchanged (Gladwell, 2010; but see Halupka, 2014 for critique).

Empirical studies reveal significant variation in the democratic effects of digital participation tools depending on institutional design, political culture, resource availability, and state responsiveness (Margetts et al., 2016). In authoritarian and hybrid regimes, digital platforms may even strengthen state surveillance and control rather than empowering citizens (Deibert, 2019; Feldstein, 2021).

2.3 Trust and Information Integrity as Mediating Mechanisms

2.3.1 The Centrality of Trust

Trust functions as a cornerstone of democratic sustainability and institutional effectiveness (Rothstein, 2021). Within media systems, trust operates at multiple levels: trust in individual journalists and news organizations, trust in media institutions as a collective field, and trust in the broader information ecosystem (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). Declining trust in journalism has been documented across diverse political contexts, driven by factors including perceived bias, economic pressures leading to sensationalism, the blurring of news and entertainment, and coordinated disinformation campaigns (Hanitzsch et al., 2018).

Hanitzsch et al. (2022) demonstrate through cross-national comparative research that trust in journalism depends on multiple dimensions: content accuracy and factual reliability, transparency about sources and methods, editorial independence from political and economic pressures, ethical adherence to professional norms, and responsiveness to audience concerns. When these dimensions are compromised, trust erodes, and citizens disengage from political participation or turn to alternative (and potentially unreliable) information sources.

2.3.2 Information Integrity in Crisis

Information integrity refers to the reliability, accuracy, authenticity, and verifiability of information circulating within public discourse (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). In conflict zones, information integrity faces acute threats from multiple directions: propaganda and psychological operations by warring parties, rumors and unverified claims spreading through social networks, deliberate disinformation designed to manipulate perceptions, and the breakdown of professional journalistic standards under extreme duress (Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2021).

Strömbäck et al. (2022) identify trust as a critical mediating factor linking media exposure to political engagement. Citizens who trust media sources are more likely to consume news attentively, discuss political issues, and participate in civic activities. Conversely, when trust collapses, even accurate

information may be rejected, and citizens may retreat into partisan echo chambers or withdraw from public life altogether.

2.4 Media in Conflict Contexts

2.4.1 The Weaponization of Information

Modern armed conflicts are characterized by the weaponization of information, where media narratives themselves become battlefields and strategic assets (Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2021). States, militaries, and non-state armed groups invest heavily in information operations—ranging from traditional propaganda to sophisticated cyber influence campaigns—designed to shape domestic and international perceptions, justify violence, dehumanize adversaries, and manipulate diplomatic responses (Woolley & Howard, 2018).

Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2021) characterize contemporary warfare as "diffuse war," in which boundaries between combatants and civilians, battlefields and home fronts, truth and fabrication become blurred. In such environments, journalists face extraordinary dangers: they may be deliberately targeted by combatants seeking to suppress inconvenient reporting, accidentally killed in crossfire, or arrested and detained by authorities who view them as threats (Carlsson & Pöyhtäri, 2017).

2.4.2 Citizen Journalism and Verification Challenges

The proliferation of mobile phones and social media platforms has enabled ordinary citizens to document violence, human rights abuses, and humanitarian crises in real time, often filling information gaps left by the absence or exclusion of professional journalists (Allan & Thorsen, 2009). Citizen journalism has proven particularly crucial in conflicts where official media are censored or where international journalists face access restrictions (Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2013).

However, citizen journalism also introduces verification challenges. User-generated content may be manipulated, misattributed, or taken out of context. Melki and Mallat (2022) emphasize that while citizen journalism democratizes information production, it simultaneously strains the verification capacities of news organizations and increases the risk of misinformation circulation. Journalistic organizations must develop new protocols for authenticating and contextualizing citizen-generated content—a resource-intensive process that many under-resourced media outlets struggle to implement (Wardle, 2019).

2.5 The Palestinian Media System and Political Fragmentation

2.5.1 Historical Overview

The Palestinian media landscape has evolved through distinct phases shaped by political developments: the pre-Oslo period of underground resistance media, the post-Oslo period of institutionalization and pluralism (1994–2006), and the post-division period of fragmentation and polarization (2007–present) (Jamal, 2009). Israeli military occupation imposes pervasive constraints through licensing restrictions, censorship orders, arrests of journalists, confiscation of equipment, and physical attacks on media offices (Tawil-Souri, 2012; Najjar, 2021).

The 2007 political split between Fatah and Hamas resulted not only in geographic division but also in ideological and institutional bifurcation of the media system (Abualroos, 2021). Media outlets became increasingly aligned with one political faction or the other, reducing professional autonomy and exacerbating political polarization (Nasser & Abusalim, 2023). Independent journalism, already

constrained by occupation, faced additional pressures from Palestinian authorities seeking to control narratives and suppress dissent.

2.5.2 Digital Adoption and Repression

Palestinian journalists and activists rapidly adopted digital platforms to circumvent traditional censorship, reach diaspora audiences, and mobilize international solidarity (Aouragh, 2011). Social media became particularly significant during uprisings, military assaults on Gaza, and grassroots campaigns such as the 2021 mobilization around Sheikh Jarrah evictions (Tawil-Souri & Aouragh, 2014).

However, digital spaces are not free from repression. Both Israeli authorities and Palestinian factions have employed digital surveillance, arrest journalists based on social media posts, and engaged in online intimidation campaigns (Parsons & Salter, 2016). During periods of armed conflict, internet infrastructure itself becomes a target, with deliberate service disruptions used to isolate populations and obstruct documentation of violence (Deibert & Rohozinski, 2010).

2.6 Research Gap and Contribution

Current scholarship tends to examine digital transformation, trust dynamics, and democratic participation as separate research streams, rarely integrating these variables into unified analytical frameworks. Moreover, most studies focus on stable democratic contexts in Western Europe and North America, leaving conflict-affected, colonized, and fragile states significantly underexamined (Mazzarella, 2022). The few studies addressing media in conflict zones often adopt descriptive or qualitative approaches, lacking the quantitative rigor necessary to test causal relationships and mediating mechanisms.

This study addresses these deficiencies by:

1. Integrating digital transformation strategies, institutional trust, and participatory democracy into a single conceptual model.
2. Theorizing and empirically testing armed conflict as a moderating variable that alters the relationships among core variables.
3. Applying quantitative methods and structural equation modeling to a large-scale dataset from a conflict-affected context.
4. Generating policy-relevant findings for strengthening democratic resilience under conditions of fragility and violence.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

3.1 Theoretical Model

This study adopts a relational and process-oriented model that conceptualizes digital transformation not as a linear technological input producing automatic democratic outputs, but rather as a complex institutional process mediated by trust and information integrity, and moderated by armed conflict intensity and political fragmentation.

Independent Variable: Digital transformation strategies encompass four dimensions:

1. Platform diversification: Adoption of multiple digital channels (websites, social media, mobile apps, messaging platforms).
2. Content digitization: Conversion of traditional formats into digital multimedia (text, audio, video, interactive graphics).
3. Algorithmic engagement: Use of data analytics and algorithmic tools to understand audience behavior and optimize content distribution.

4. AI integration: Incorporation of artificial intelligence for content creation, verification, personalization, and moderation.

Dependent Variable: Participatory democracy is operationalized through four indicators:

1. Civic engagement: Frequency and depth of citizen participation in political discourse and collective action.

2. Institutional transparency: Accessibility and clarity of governmental information and decision-making processes.

3. Accountability mechanisms: Existence and effectiveness of channels through which citizens can hold authorities accountable.

4. Deliberation quality: Degree of reasoned, inclusive, and respectful public debate.

Mediating

Variables:

1. Trust in media institutions: Public confidence in journalism's accuracy, independence, and ethical standards.

2. Information integrity: Perceived and actual reliability of information circulating through media systems.

Moderating

Variables:

1. Armed conflict intensity: Severity of military violence, infrastructure destruction, and humanitarian crisis.

2. Political fragmentation: Degree of institutional division and governance dysfunction.

[A visual diagram would be inserted here showing the relationships among variables with arrows indicating direct effects, mediating pathways, and moderating influences]

3.2 Hypotheses

Based on the theoretical literature and the specific Palestinian context, this study tests the following hypotheses:

H1: Digital transformation strategies positively affect participatory democracy. Digital platforms provide tools for citizen engagement, increase access to political information, facilitate horizontal coordination among citizens, and enable new forms of civic participation. *Ceteris paribus*, media organizations that adopt comprehensive digital strategies should contribute to higher levels of democratic participation.

H2: Trust mediates the relationship between digital transformation and democratic participation. Digital strategies enhance participation only when citizens trust the media institutions employing them. Without trust, digital tools may produce cynicism, disengagement, or reliance on unreliable sources. Thus, trust serves as a critical transmission mechanism through which digital transformation translates into democratic outcomes.

H3: Information integrity mediates the relationship between digital transformation and trust. Digital strategies foster trust when they are coupled with robust information integrity practices—fact-checking, source transparency, correction policies, and ethical guidelines. When information integrity is compromised, digital strategies may erode rather than build trust.

H4: Armed conflict weakens the positive effect of digital transformation on participatory democracy. War disrupts digital infrastructure, kills journalists, restricts information flows, and shifts media focus toward survival rather than democratic engagement. Conflict also generates psychological trauma,

displacement, and urgency that reduce citizens' capacity for sustained political participation. Therefore, conflict intensity moderates (weakens) the relationship between digital strategies and participation.

H5: Artificial intelligence, as a digital tool, indirectly increases participation through credibility enhancement.

AI-driven verification systems, automated fact-checking, and content authentication tools can enhance information integrity and thereby increase trust, which in turn facilitates participation. However, this relationship is contingent on ethical AI deployment and transparency about algorithmic decision-making.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design and Philosophical Foundations

This study employs a quantitative survey design situated within a post-positivist epistemological framework. While recognizing the socially constructed nature of concepts such as "democracy" and "trust," the study assumes that systematic empirical measurement of observable indicators can provide meaningful insights into relationships among variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The design is informed by mixed-methods sensibilities, as the quantitative instrument is complemented by contextual analysis and interpretation grounded in qualitative understanding of Palestinian political history.

The study is cross-sectional in nature, collecting data at a single point in time (late 2024), but employs retrospective questions asking respondents to reflect on changes over the period 2007–2025. This temporal framing captures the era of political division (beginning in 2007) and extends through the catastrophic Gaza war (2023–2025).

4.2 Population and Sampling

4.2.1 Target Population

The target population consists of Palestinian media professionals—defined as individuals actively engaged in news production, editing, management, or digital content creation within Palestinian media organizations. This population was selected because media professionals possess direct knowledge of digital transformation strategies, institutional practices, and the constraints imposed by conflict and political fragmentation. They serve as informed observers of both media institutions and the broader political environment.

According to the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate, approximately 1,200 registered journalists operate across the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem, though this figure likely undercounts freelance and digital-native journalists. Given resource constraints, security challenges, and the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Gaza, constructing a precise sampling frame proved difficult.

4.2.2 Sampling Procedure

A stratified random sampling approach was employed to ensure geographic and institutional diversity. The sample was stratified by:

- Geographic location: Gaza Strip, West Bank, East Jerusalem.
- Media type: Traditional media (newspapers, TV, radio) vs. digital-native media.
- Employment status: Full-time staff vs. freelance.

Random selection within each stratum was conducted using contact lists provided by the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate and professional associations. A total of 450 journalists were invited to participate, yielding 350 completed and valid responses—a response rate of 77.8%. The high response rate reflects both the significance of the research topic and the researchers' use of personal networks and trust-building to encourage participation during a period of intense crisis.

4.2.3 Sample Characteristics

The final sample of 350 respondents was distributed as follows:

- Geography: Gaza (35%), West Bank (52%), East Jerusalem (13%).
- Gender: Male (64%), Female (36%).
- Age: Under 30 (28%), 30–45 (51%), Over 45 (21%).
- Experience: Less than 5 years (22%), 5–10 years (35%), More than 10 years (43%).
- Media type: Traditional media (58%), Digital-native media (42%).

The sample exhibits reasonable diversity across key demographic and professional characteristics, enhancing the generalizability of findings within the Palestinian media context.

4.3 Instrument Development

4.3.1 Questionnaire Structure

A structured questionnaire was developed consisting of 62 items organized into five sections:

1. Digital transformation strategies (15 items): Measuring platform diversification, content digitization, algorithmic tools, and AI integration.
2. Trust in media (12 items): Assessing perceptions of credibility, independence, transparency, and ethical standards.
3. Information integrity (10 items): Evaluating fact-checking practices, source verification, correction policies, and resistance to misinformation.
4. Participatory democracy outcomes (15 items): Gauging civic engagement, institutional transparency, accountability mechanisms, and deliberation quality.
5. Conflict impact (10 items): Measuring infrastructure damage, journalist casualties, access restrictions, and psychological effects.

Each section employed a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire was pilot-tested with 30 journalists to assess clarity, relevance, and cultural appropriateness. Feedback from the pilot phase led to minor wording adjustments and the elimination of three redundant items.

4.3.2 Validity

Content validity was established through expert review by five scholars specializing in media studies, political communication, and Middle East politics. Experts assessed whether items adequately covered the conceptual domains and whether the language was appropriate for the Palestinian context.

Construct validity was assessed through exploratory factor analysis (EFA), which confirmed that items loaded onto their intended constructs with minimal cross-loading. Eigenvalues exceeded 1.0 for all five primary factors, and the factors cumulatively explained 68% of total variance—an acceptable threshold for social science research (Hair et al., 2019).

4.3.3 Reliability

Internal consistency reliability was measured using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. Results exceeded conventional thresholds for all scales:

-	Digital transformation strategies:	α	=	0.88
-	Trust in media:	α	=	0.91
-	Information integrity:	α	=	0.87
-	Participatory democracy:	α	=	0.89
-	Conflict impact:	α	=	0.85

These values indicate high reliability, suggesting that items within each scale consistently measure the underlying construct (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

4.4 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection occurred between October and December 2024, a period marked by ongoing military operations in Gaza, continued Israeli incursions in the West Bank, and profound humanitarian crisis. Given security risks and logistical challenges, the questionnaire was administered through multiple channels:

- 1. Online survey platform (Qualtrics) for respondents with reliable internet access.
- 2. WhatsApp and Telegram distribution for respondents in areas with unstable connectivity.
- 3. In-person interviews for respondents in Gaza who lacked internet access entirely.

Ethical protocols were strictly observed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, anonymity was guaranteed, and respondents were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Given the sensitive political environment, no personally identifying information was collected, and data were stored on encrypted servers.

4.5 Data Analysis Techniques

Multiple analytical techniques were employed:

4.5.1 Descriptive Statistics: Means, standard deviations, and frequencies were computed to summarize sample characteristics and variable distributions.

4.5.2 Regression Analysis: Multiple linear regression tested direct relationships between independent and dependent variables (H1), controlling for demographic and professional variables.

4.5.3 Mediation Analysis: The Baron and Kenny (1986) approach, supplemented by bootstrapping procedures (Preacher & Hayes, 2008), was used to test H2 and H3. The PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2018) estimated indirect effects and constructed confidence intervals.

4.5.4 Moderation Analysis: Hierarchical regression tested H4 by introducing interaction terms between digital transformation and conflict intensity.

4.5.5 Structural Equation Modeling (SEM): Partial Least Squares SEM (PLS-SEM) assessed overall model fit using SmartPLS software. Model fit was evaluated using R² values, path coefficients, and Goodness-of-Fit (GoF) index.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

Conducting research in conflict zones raises significant ethical concerns. This study adhered to ethical guidelines established by the American Political Science Association and the Palestinian academic community. Specific measures included:

1. Minimizing harm: Researchers avoided questions that could expose respondents to political retaliation.
2. Informed consent: All participants received clear information about research purposes and risks.
3. Confidentiality: Data were anonymized and secured to prevent identification of individuals.
4. Respect for autonomy: Participation was voluntary, and respondents could skip sensitive questions.
5. Reciprocity: Findings will be shared with Palestinian media organizations to inform professional development and advocacy efforts.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Descriptive Results

5.1.1 Digital Transformation Adoption

Descriptive analysis reveals widespread but uneven adoption of digital transformation strategies among Palestinian media organizations. On a 5-point scale, the mean score for digital transformation was 3.52 (SD = 0.81), indicating moderate overall adoption.

Breaking down by sub-dimensions:

- Platform diversification: Mean = 4.01 (SD = 0.73) — Most organizations maintain active social media presence.
- Content digitization: Mean = 3.67 (SD = 0.88) — Moderate progress in converting content to multimedia formats.
- Algorithmic engagement: Mean = 3.12 (SD = 0.97) — Limited use of data analytics and audience insights.
- AI integration: Mean = 2.89 (SD = 1.05) — Lowest adoption, constrained by technical capacity and resources.

These patterns suggest that Palestinian media have successfully adopted basic digital platforms but struggle with more advanced data-driven and AI-enabled strategies.

5.1.2 Trust and Information Integrity

Trust in media institutions received a mean score of 3.24 (SD = 1.02), indicating moderate but fragile trust. Notably, trust levels varied significantly by geography:

- Gaza: Mean = 2.87 (SD = 1.15) — Lowest trust, reflecting the catastrophic impact of war.
- West Bank: Mean = 3.38 (SD = 0.95) — Moderate trust.
- East Jerusalem: Mean = 3.51 (SD = 0.89) — Highest trust within the sample.

Information integrity scored slightly higher, with a mean of 3.47 (SD = 0.93), suggesting that media professionals recognize the importance of accuracy and verification even amid crisis.

5.1.3 Participatory Democracy Outcomes

Participatory democracy received a mean score of 3.18 (SD = 0.98), reflecting modest democratic engagement. Sub-dimensions revealed:

- Civic engagement: Mean = 3.35 (SD = 1.01)
- Institutional transparency: Mean = 2.89 (SD = 1.10)
- Accountability mechanisms: Mean = 2.95 (SD = 1.08)
- Deliberation quality: Mean = 3.54 (SD = 0.92)

5.1.4 Conflict Impact

The mean score for conflict impact was 4.23 (SD = 0.79), indicating severe disruption. Respondents from Gaza reported the highest conflict impact (Mean = 4.78, SD = 0.45), with many noting personal loss, displacement, and trauma.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Digital Transformation	3.52	0.81	—			
2. Trust in Media	3.24	1.02	.54**	—		
3. Information Integrity	3.47	0.93	.61**	.68**	—	
4. Participatory Democracy	3.18	0.98	.58**	.72**	.65**	—
5. Conflict Impact	4.23	0.79	-.42**	-.56**	-.48**	-.63**

Note: ** p < .01

5.2 Hypothesis Testing

5.2.1 H1: Digital Transformation and Participatory Democracy

Multiple linear regression confirmed a statistically significant positive relationship between digital transformation strategies and participatory democracy ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < .001$), supporting H1. Digital transformation accounted for 32% of the variance in participatory democracy ($R^2 = .32$), even after controlling for demographic and professional variables.

5.2.2 H2: Trust as Mediator

Mediation analysis using the PROCESS macro demonstrated that trust in media partially mediates the relationship between digital transformation and participatory democracy.

- Direct effect of digital transformation on participatory democracy: $\beta = 0.31$, $p < .001$
- Indirect effect through trust: $\beta = 0.24$, 95% CI [0.18, 0.31]
- Total effect: $\beta = 0.55$, $p < .001$

The indirect effect is statistically significant (confidence interval does not include zero), supporting H2. Approximately 44% of the total effect operates through the mediating pathway of trust ($0.24/0.55 = 0.44$).

5.2.3 H3: Information Integrity as Mediator

Similarly, information integrity partially mediates the relationship between digital transformation and trust.

- Direct effect of digital transformation on trust: $\beta = 0.28$, $p < .001$
- Indirect effect through information integrity: $\beta = 0.20$, 95% CI [0.14, 0.27]
- Total effect: $\beta = 0.48$, $p < .001$

This confirms H3, demonstrating that digital strategies enhance trust primarily by strengthening information integrity practices.

5.2.4 H4: Armed Conflict as Moderator

Hierarchical regression analysis tested the moderating role of armed conflict. The interaction term (Digital Transformation × Conflict Impact) was statistically significant ($\beta = -.16, p = .002$), indicating that conflict intensity moderates the relationship between digital transformation and participatory democracy.

Simple		slopes		analysis		reveals:	
-	Low	conflict:	$\beta = 0.58,$	$p < .001$	(strong	positive	effect)
-	Moderate	conflict:	$\beta = 0.42,$	$p < .001$	(moderate	positive	effect)
-	High	conflict:	$\beta = 0.21,$	$p = .023$	(weak	positive	effect)

This pattern confirms that war fundamentally undermines the democratic potential of digital transformation.

5.2.5 H5: Artificial Intelligence and Credibility

A subset of items specifically addressed AI integration and its perceived impact on credibility. Regression analysis indicated that AI-driven verification tools positively predict information integrity ($\beta = 0.34, p < .001$), which in turn predicts trust ($\beta = 0.51, p < .001$) and ultimately participatory democracy ($\beta = 0.48, p < .001$).

However, respondents also expressed concerns. Open-ended comments revealed anxiety about algorithmic bias, lack of transparency in AI decision-making, and fears that automation could displace human editorial judgment.

5.3 Structural Equation Modeling Results

The full SEM model integrating all hypothesized relationships achieved good overall fit:

-	GoF	index:	0.42	(exceeds	0.36	threshold)
-	R ²	for participatory democracy:	0.58	(model explains	58%	of variance)
-	R ²	for	trust:			0.49

Path coefficients in the SEM model largely confirmed regression findings:

-	Digital Transformation	→	Trust:	$\beta = 0.45,$	$p < .001$
-	Trust	→	Participatory Democracy:	$\beta = 0.52,$	$p < .001$
-	Information Integrity	→	Trust:	$\beta = 0.41,$	$p < .001$
-	Conflict Impact × Digital Transformation → Participatory Democracy: $\beta = -.14, p = .005$				

5.4 Summary of Results

All five hypotheses received empirical support:

1. Digital transformation positively affects participatory democracy.
2. Trust mediates this relationship, serving as a critical transmission mechanism.
3. Information integrity mediates the effect of digital transformation on trust.
4. Armed conflict weakens the positive effect of digital strategies.
5. Artificial intelligence indirectly enhances participation through credibility, but with important caveats regarding ethical deployment.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 Theoretical Implications

This study makes significant theoretical contributions by integrating previously fragmented research streams—digital transformation, institutional trust, and participatory democracy—into a unified analytical framework. By demonstrating that trust and information integrity function as mediating mechanisms, the research challenges simplistic technological determinism that assumes digital tools automatically produce democratic benefits. Instead, the findings underscore that technology's democratic potential is conditional upon institutional credibility, ethical practices, and the broader political context.

The finding that armed conflict moderates the relationship between digital transformation and democracy represents a novel theoretical insight. Existing literature tends to treat conflict as an external disruption rather than as a structural variable that reshapes fundamental relationships. This study demonstrates quantitatively that conflict weakens the democratic efficacy of digital strategies, suggesting that democratic interventions focused solely on technological capacity-building are insufficient in conflict zones.

The dual role of artificial intelligence—enhancing credibility through verification tools while simultaneously introducing risks of bias and automation—illustrates a broader paradox in digital transformation. This calls for deeper theoretical engagement with the governance of algorithmic systems in democratic contexts.

6.2 Empirical Insights from the Palestinian Case

Despite catastrophic conditions—mass journalist casualties, infrastructure destruction, communication blackouts—Palestinian media professionals have demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability. The finding that digital transformation strategies retain a positive (albeit weakened) effect even under high conflict intensity reveals the enduring power of digital tools to sustain information flows and civic connection when traditional systems collapse.

The relatively low trust levels documented (mean = 3.24) reflect broader crises of legitimacy affecting both media institutions and political authorities in Palestine. Restoring trust requires not only professional reforms within media organizations but also political reforms that address underlying governance failures and democratic deficits.

Gaza respondents reported significantly lower trust, lower participatory democracy scores, and dramatically higher conflict impact. Under such extreme conditions, the very concept of "participatory democracy" may seem abstract when survival itself is uncertain. Yet even in Gaza, journalists continue to document, report, and resist through their work.

6.3 Policy Implications

6.3.1 For Palestinian Media Organizations

Media organizations must prioritize trust-building through transparency, accountability, and ethical rigor. Specific recommendations include:

1. Establish independent verification units
2. Adopt transparent correction policies
3. Diversify funding sources to protect editorial independence
4. Invest in staff training in digital literacy and ethical AI use
5. Develop trauma support programs for journalists

6.3.2 For Palestinian Authorities

Palestinian political leaders must recognize that media freedom and democratic participation strengthen rather than threaten legitimate governance. Recommendations include:

1. Cease arrests and intimidation of journalists
2. Enact and enforce media freedom legislation
3. Support media pluralism through public funding
4. Facilitate digital infrastructure investment
5. Resume democratic processes including elections

6.3.3 For the International Community

International actors bear responsibility for protecting Palestinian media and supporting democratic resilience:

1. Hold Israel accountable for attacks on journalists through ICC and other mechanisms
2. Provide emergency support for media infrastructure
3. Develop journalist protection protocols
4. Support fact-checking and verification initiatives
5. Pressure for communication rights and protection from digital surveillance

6.3.4 For Technology Platforms

Social media platforms and technology companies must take responsibility for their impact:

1. Prioritize content from conflict zones
2. Improve content moderation transparency
3. Combat coordinated disinformation campaigns
4. Provide crisis support tools
5. Facilitate academic research through responsible data-sharing

6.4 Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has several limitations:

1. Cross-sectional design limits causal inference
2. Self-reported data reflects perceptions rather than objective measurements
3. Sampling challenges, particularly in Gaza
4. Contextual specificity may limit generalizability

Future research should:

1. Conduct longitudinal studies tracking changes over time
2. Employ mixed-methods designs combining surveys with interviews and ethnography
3. Expand to citizen perspectives
4. Compare Palestinian case with other conflict-affected contexts
5. Examine platform-specific effects
6. Investigate AI ethics and regulation
7. Study diaspora dynamics

7. CONCLUSION

7.1 Summary of Key Findings

This study investigated how media strategies for digital transformation influence participatory democracy in the Palestinian political system through the mediation of trust and information integrity, and under the moderation of armed conflict. Based on a large-scale survey of 350 Palestinian media professionals, several key findings emerged:

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First, digital transformation strategies significantly enhance participatory democracy by expanding access to information, facilitating civic engagement, increasing institutional transparency, and improving deliberation quality.

Second, this positive relationship is mediated by institutional trust and information integrity. Digital strategies foster democratic participation primarily by building public confidence in media institutions, which depends on maintaining high standards of accuracy, transparency, and ethical practice.

Third, armed conflict fundamentally moderates these relationships, weakening the democratic efficacy of digital transformation. The catastrophic Gaza war (2023–2025) exemplifies how extreme violence can collapse even resilient information systems.

Fourth, artificial intelligence presents both opportunities and risks: it offers powerful verification tools but introduces concerns about algorithmic bias and erosion of human judgment.

7.2 Theoretical Contributions

This research advances scholarship by integrating previously fragmented literatures on digital transformation, trust, and democratic participation into a unified theoretical framework. It theorizes armed conflict as a structural moderator that fundamentally reshapes relationships among core variables. It challenges technological determinism by demonstrating that digital tools' democratic effects are conditional upon institutional, political, and contextual factors.

7.3 Practical Implications

For Palestinian media organizations, the findings underscore the imperative of prioritizing trust-building through transparency, accountability, and professional rigor. For Palestinian political authorities, the research demonstrates that media freedom and democratic participation are essential foundations for legitimate governance. For the international community, the study provides evidence-based justification for protecting journalists, supporting media infrastructure, and holding perpetrators of violence accountable.

7.4 The Urgency of Now

As this article goes to press in late 2024, Gaza remains under bombardment, journalists continue to be killed, and the Palestinian people endure unimaginable suffering. The collapse of the Palestinian information system represents a humanitarian catastrophe with profound implications for justice, accountability, and historical memory.

When journalists are systematically killed, when infrastructure is destroyed, when communication is severed, the world loses its eyes and ears in Gaza. Atrocities occur in darkness. Histories are erased. Voices are silenced. This study, in documenting the resilience and commitment of Palestinian media professionals under siege, seeks to honor their sacrifices and amplify their call for protection, solidarity, and justice.

7.5 A Call for Solidarity

Palestinian democracy—fragile, besieged, but enduring—requires not only internal reform but international solidarity. The digital tools that have enabled unprecedented documentation of violence and mobilization of global conscience must be protected and strengthened. Technology alone will not liberate Palestine, but in the hands of courageous journalists committed to truth, it becomes a weapon against erasure.

This research concludes with a call to the international community: protect Palestinian journalists, support independent Palestinian media, demand accountability for attacks on the press, and recognize that information freedom and democratic participation are central to any just resolution of the Palestinian struggle.

The Palestinian people have never stopped telling their stories, documenting their resistance, and demanding their rights. It is time the world listened.

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