

# Algorithms, disinformation and the future of the public sphere

## Abstract

The rapid expansion of digital communication has transformed how information circulates and how public opinion is formed. While the internet has expanded access to information and created new opportunities for participation, it has also opened the door to large-scale manipulation of communication. This article examines how digital platforms, algorithms, and the so-called “attention economy” are reshaping the functioning of the public sphere. Drawing on concepts developed by Jürgen Habermas, the paper argues that the architecture of digital communication weakens traditional forms of public mediation that historically connected everyday social life with democratic debate. In environments structured by algorithms and engagement-driven platforms, misinformation, disinformation, and emotionally charged content spread more easily than reasoned argumentation. As a result, public debate becomes increasingly fragmented and vulnerable to strategic manipulation. The article also discusses the limits of regulatory responses and suggests that strengthening the public sphere within digital environments is essential for preserving democratic deliberation in contemporary societies.

**Keywords:** fake news, misinformation, disinformation

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## Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital communication has profoundly transformed the ways in which information circulates and public opinion is formed. The consolidation of large-scale digital platforms over the past two decades has reconfigured not only the infrastructure of communication but also the normative conditions under which public debate unfolds. While the internet has expanded access to information and enabled new forms of participation, it has simultaneously intensified processes of communicative distortion, manipulation, and fragmentation.

This transformation reveals a central paradox of contemporary democracies: never before has access to information been so widespread, immediate, and inexpensive, yet never has the circulation of disinformation been so pervasive and structurally embedded within communication systems. Phenomena such as fake news, misinformation, and disinformation are no longer peripheral anomalies but have become integral to the dynamics of digital communication environments, influencing electoral processes, public policy debates, and the very constitution of social reality<sup>1-3</sup>

Recent scholarship has emphasized that these developments cannot be understood merely as epistemic failures or deficits in individual media literacy. Instead, they reflect deeper transformations in the political economy of communication. The emergence of what has been described as the “platform society” reorients communicative processes around data extraction, algorithmic curation, and the commodification of attention.<sup>4-7</sup> In such environments, visibility is no longer governed primarily by editorial judgment or institutional mediation but by opaque algorithmic systems optimized for engagement, often privileging emotionally charged, polarizing, or misleading content<sup>8-10</sup>

This shift has significant implications for the structure of the public sphere. Classical accounts presupposed the existence of mediating institutions capable of filtering, organizing, and thematizing public discourse. However, contemporary digital environments are characterized by processes of disintermediation and re-intermediation,

in which platforms assume a central role in structuring communicative flows according to economic and technical logics distinct from democratic deliberation.<sup>5,4,11</sup> As a result, communication becomes increasingly fragmented, segmented, and personalized, giving rise to networked publics marked by weak shared reference frames and reduced capacities for collective reasoning.<sup>12,13</sup> These dynamics resonate with concerns about filter bubbles and echo chambers.”<sup>14</sup>

Within this context, the concept of an “attention economy” becomes central. Digital platforms compete for user engagement by maximizing the time and intensity of interaction, transforming attention into a scarce and monetizable resource. This economic logic structurally incentivizes the amplification of content that generates emotional responses, outrage, and polarization, thereby reinforcing dynamics of disinformation and communicative distortion<sup>15-17</sup> The result is a communicative environment in which strategic action—aimed at influencing behavior rather than reaching mutual understanding—tends to dominate over communicative action.

This article approaches these transformations from a theoretical perspective grounded in the work of Jürgen Habermas. Rather than treating disinformation as an isolated phenomenon, we interpret it as a symptom of broader structural changes in the relationship between system and lifeworld, as well as in the mechanisms of communicative mediation that sustain democratic legitimacy. In particular, we draw on the distinction between communicative and strategic action and the analysis of the public sphere as a space of rational-critical debate.<sup>18,19</sup>

Previous studies have explored these conceptual foundations in relation to modern social coordination and the tensions between communicative rationality and systemic imperatives.<sup>20,21</sup> Building on this literature, the present article argues that the architecture of digital communication—structured by algorithms, data extraction, and engagement-driven platforms—reconfigures the conditions under which public deliberation becomes possible. Recent contributions have further highlighted how these transformations reshape democratic legitimacy by weakening the epistemic conditions necessary for public reasoning.<sup>22,23</sup>

We contend that the proliferation of disinformation should not be understood merely as a communicational deviation but as part of a structural transformation of the digital public sphere. In environments where communicative mediation is weakened and visibility is governed by algorithmic logics, strategic forms of communication gain prominence, undermining the deliberative foundations of democratic life.

The article is structured as follows. First, we examine the transformations of digital communication and their implications for information circulation. Next, we analyze the role of algorithms and engagement-driven platforms in shaping communicative dynamics. Finally, we discuss the consequences of these processes for the functioning of the public sphere and the challenges they pose for contemporary democracies.

### Impacts on the public sphere: algorithms and the systemic capture of communication

The public sphere, as conceived in Habermasian theory, appears increasingly weakened within the contemporary landscape of digital communication. The communicational architecture of digital platforms operates according to a logic that differs significantly from the one that historically structured the formation of public opinion in modern democracies. The multiplication of communication channels and the speed of information circulation complicate the possibility of institutional regulation over the production and dissemination of manipulated content.

Even in pre-digital contexts, when media manipulation and corporate influence were already present, such interventions operated within clearer institutional limits. The public sphere functioned, at least partially, as a mediating space between everyday social experiences and institutional decision-making processes. Through this mediation, emerging social demands could be articulated, debated, and incorporated into public discussion.

With the expansion of the internet and the consolidation of digital platforms, this balance has become increasingly unstable. The massive growth of information flows, combined with the privatization of communication infrastructures by large technology companies, has weakened traditional mechanisms of public mediation. In this environment, the organization of collective action also changes. Phenomena such as swarm behavior,<sup>24</sup> cancel culture, automated bots, fake accounts, and algorithmic amplification strategies have become central elements in the dynamics of digital communication.

Understanding this transformation requires examining the role of the system in structuring contemporary communication. In Habermasian theory, the tension between system and lifeworld is central to understanding how modern societies organize coordination mechanisms beyond everyday communication. Previous analyses have shown how this conceptual framework helps explain the emergence of strategic forms of action in institutional and economic contexts.<sup>25</sup>

Digital engagement itself becomes a strategic resource for individuals, political actors, and economic interests. Platforms privilege content capable of generating strong emotional reactions, conflict, and polarization, since such elements increase user attention and extend the circulation of messages across networks.

Algorithms can therefore be understood as mechanisms through which economic systems increasingly shape everyday communication. By structuring the visibility of information according to engagement and profitability, digital platforms intervene directly in the formation

of public opinion and redefine the conditions under which public debate unfolds.

### Transformations of the public sphere and the risks of authoritarian regulatory responses

The informational overload characteristic of digital environments already creates significant difficulties in how individuals process information in everyday social life. Yet the issue is not limited to the quantity of available information. Digital communication also transforms the quality and reliability of information itself. Distinguishing between truthful, manipulated, and fabricated content becomes a central challenge of contemporary communication.

At the same time, states face important limitations when attempting to regulate these processes. Many forms of misinformation cannot easily be classified as criminal acts because they often appear as interpretations, opinions, or narratives rather than clearly verifiable factual claims.

This situation raises an important question: how can the lifeworld cope with communicational environments that allow strategic manipulation by economic and political actors? The economic model of digital platforms, based on data extraction and engagement maximization, enables companies to know users with increasing precision, thereby expanding their capacity to direct content and influence behavior.

Education, particularly digital literacy, is often presented as a possible response to these challenges. Higher levels of media literacy may indeed reduce the vulnerability of users to manipulation. However, this solution operates mainly in the long term and depends on complex educational processes. From a Habermasian perspective, such initiatives can be understood as responses generated within the lifeworld itself.

In everyday social interactions, experiences of the lifeworld are frequently mediated by the public sphere, which historically functioned as a relatively autonomous space protected from direct state control and economic domination. In digital environments, however, this mediating function becomes weaker. As a result, communication increasingly takes place within informational bubbles, closed communities, and self-reinforcing networks of belief.

Under these conditions, exaggeration, irony, and absurdity often become common features of online communication. These phenomena can be interpreted as symptoms of the absence of effective communicative mediation connecting digital information flows with broader processes of social reflection.

It is therefore important to distinguish between mediation and regulation. Mediation is a function of the public sphere, responsible for filtering, organizing, and thematizing demands emerging from the lifeworld. Regulation, by contrast, is a function of the political system.

### Conclusion

The dynamics of contemporary digital communication significantly expand the possibilities for strategic action within communicative processes. As Habermas has argued, language can be instrumentalized in order to influence behavior and shape collective decisions. The distinction between communicative and strategic action remains central for understanding these transformations.<sup>20,26</sup>

Algorithmic communication intensifies these dynamics by structuring the visibility and circulation of information according to

economic criteria such as engagement and profitability. In this context, processes traditionally associated with communicative rationality increasingly coexist with strategic forms of communication shaped by the logic of digital platforms.

These transformations reflect broader shifts in the relationship between communication, economic power, and democratic institutions. Without effective mechanisms of mediation, public debate becomes increasingly fragmented and vulnerable to strategic manipulation.

The challenge facing contemporary democracies is therefore not limited to regulating digital platforms. It also involves reconstructing communicative conditions capable of sustaining a functioning public sphere within digital environments. As previous studies on communicative rationality and social coordination have suggested, strengthening the mediating role of the public sphere remains essential for preserving the deliberative foundations upon which democratic legitimacy depends.<sup>27</sup>

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## Conflicts of interest

The authors declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

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