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WHO GETS TO APPEAR? ALGORITHMIC PUBLICITY AND THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRATIC VISIBILITY

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Digital platforms transform public visibility through algorithmic systems that sort and prioritise content according to engagement logics. This article introduces the concept of "algorithmic publicity" to analyse how platform infrastructures reshape the conditions of public appearance—a central concern for debates on publicness (Öffentlichkeit). Rather than treating visibility as discursive competition, the concept foregrounds the infrastructural mechanisms governing the distribution of attention. The argument unfolds in three movements. First, it shows how platform capitalism operates through infrastructuralisation, as platforms evolve from discrete services into foundational systems that organise social coordination while capturing attention and extracting value. Second, it develops algorithmic publicity as an analytical category and distinguishes it from adjacent concepts, including regimes of visibility as well as approaches to algorithmic governance and surveillance capitalism. Third, it examines how the feed operationalises these dynamics, producing measurable inequalities of visibility and pre-structuring public experience. By focusing on the infrastructural production of visibility, algorithmic publicity helps explain how platform environments reconfigure democratic publicity. The article concludes that the crisis of the public sphere stems not from communicative dysfunctions alone, but from the infrastructural transformation of visibility conditions, requiring a shift beyond better discourse toward different architectures of public appearance. The article makes a primarily conceptual contribution, illustrating the framework through selected empirical cases and opening a comparative research agenda.

Keywords Algorithmic publicity; platform capitalism; social media; public visibility; public sphere; platform governance

Introduction

Why, in an era of unprecedented communicative expansion, does the experience of appearing publicly feel simultaneously more ubiquitous and more structurally unequal? Digital platforms promise universal access to visibility, yet the conditions under which that visibility is produced remain opaque and privately controlled, shaping its distribution in systematically uneven ways. This article argues that the contemporary crisis of the public sphere is not primarily a crisis of discourse—polarisation,

misinformation, deliberative inequality—but a crisis of the material infrastructures that organise visibility before any communicative encounter takes place (Splichal 2022; Gripsrud 2009).

To theorise this transformation, this article introduces the concept of algorithmic publicity. Algorithmic publicity designates the specific regime through which platform capitalism organises public visibility—the dimension of platform infrastructures that determines what can appear, with what salience, and for whom, according to imperatives of accumulation. Unlike the discursive public sphere, which depends on intersubjective practices, algorithmic publicity functions infrastructurally, reorganising public experience according to criteria of optimisation and predictability, oriented toward profitability.

The argument unfolds in three movements. First, I show how platform capitalism operates through infrastructuralisation—the transformation of digital services into foundational systems that organise social coordination while capturing attention and extracting value (Plantin et al. 2018; van Dijck et al. 2018). Second, I develop algorithmic publicity as an analytical category, distinguishing it from adjacent concepts in order to isolate the specific mechanism through which visibility is produced as an economic resource. Third, I examine how the feed operationalises these dynamics, producing measurable inequalities of visibility and pre-structuring the horizon of public experience (Gillespie 2018; Bucher 2018).

The concept of algorithmic publicity is distinguished from several adjacent frameworks by the specificity of its object. Regimes of visibility approaches (Brighenti 2007) theorise visibility as a social relationship involving attention and power, but do not account for how algorithmic systems constitute visibility as an economic resource. Algorithmic governance frameworks (Yeung 2017) explain how platforms shape behaviour through nudges and automated decisions, but address the regulation of conduct rather than the conditions of public appearance. Accounts of networked publics (boyd 2010; Papacharissi 2014) illuminate participation and inclusion, but remain at the normative-descriptive level without interrogating who controls the infrastructural conditions of visibility. Surveillance capitalism and data colonialism frameworks (Zuboff 2019; Couldry & Mejias 2019) powerfully analyse extraction processes, yet do not systematically address how those processes reconfigure democratic publicity as such. Algorithmic publicity occupies the gap: it brings the critique of political economy into dialogue with critical public sphere theory, demonstrating how extraction processes reshape the conditions under which a democratic public can appear to itself—a connection still insufficiently developed in existing frameworks.

Primarily conceptual in orientation, the article proposes algorithmic publicity as an analytical framework and illustrates its explanatory value through selected empirical cases, without claiming to provide systematic empirical validation—a task the framework is designed to support. Algorithmic publicity not only restructures visibility but also transforms the very conditions under which a public can emerge as a collective subject. Whereas the classical public sphere presupposed a collectivity capable of appearing to itself and deliberating about its common affairs, algorithmic publicity reveals a capacity that is now infrastructurally conditioned and pre-formatted by technical architectures preceding any form of collective self-understanding. Under such conditions, the question of who gets to appear becomes inseparable from the question of whether a public, in the full political sense, can form at all under platform capitalism.

The Infrastructural Turn in Public Sphere Theory

Digital infrastructures have become structural components of contemporary capitalism: they organise social life while structuring public attention and the circulation of symbols. But what exactly does "infrastructure" mean in this context?

This article does not treat infrastructure as mere technical support. Drawing on Star and Ruhleder (1996) and Bowker and Star (2000), it understands infrastructure as organised systems of classification and standardisation that coordinate and constrain social action while remaining partially invisible in routine use. Infrastructure is characterised by its embeddedness within social contexts and its apparent transparency in use, a condition that allows economic logics to be inscribed into seemingly neutral arrangements (Plantin et al. 2018). This property makes algorithmic systems particularly powerful: they structure public visibility most effectively precisely when their operations recede from conscious attention.

By platform capitalism, this article refers to a configuration in which digital platforms function as central infrastructures of economic and social coordination. Unlike earlier forms of capitalism, platform capitalism is characterised by infrastructuralisation: platforms evolve from discrete services into foundational systems that organise markets while structuring practices and forms of governance (Plantin et al. 2018; van Dijck et al. 2018). Such a configuration constitutes a form of infrastructural domination distinct both from the market concentration of industrial capitalism and from the state-centred coordination characteristic of welfare capitalism (Andrejevic 2013).

Far-reaching implications follow for debates on publicness and the public sphere (*publicness/Öffentlichkeit*). As Slavko Splichal (2021) argues, the concept of the public has historically been tied to the idea of people's self-organisation and self-government—an ideal now challenged by infrastructures that organise visibility through automated and privately governed systems. An analytically crucial distinction emerges between "the public" as a self-organising collective and "the public sphere" as a discursive space. Algorithmic publicity reconfigures both dimensions: it reshapes the conditions of the public sphere and transforms the experience of being a public through infrastructurally aggregated attention. Under such conditions, platforms are far from mere technical supports, and public visibility ceases to be an emergent effect of deliberation, becoming instead a strategically exploited resource structured by platform infrastructures. As Jostein Gripsrud (2009: 6) observed, "the public sphere is not only a matter of discourse but also of infrastructure"—a claim that acquires renewed urgency under platform capitalism.

Algorithmic relevance depends on invisible digital labour—precarious content moderation and users' unpaid activity that feeds recommendation systems (Roberts 2019; Gray & Suri 2019; Casilli 2019). These infrastructures connect value extraction to class inequality and labour precarity, integrating everyday communicative labour into circuits of accumulation across global asymmetries (Fuchs 2020; Couldry & Mejias 2019). Workers engaged in content moderation, micro-task platforms, and the gig economy—often located in the Global South—experience forms of infrastructural subordination that precede their participation in digital publics (Gray & Suri 2019; Casilli 2019; Fuchs 2014).

This transformation challenges approaches that conceive publicity primarily as a discursive phenomenon. The Habermasian tradition understands public visibility as resulting from communicative interactions oriented by normative justification. It rests on a model in which publicity emerges from deliberation mediated by human institutions (Habermas 1962/1989; 1992). However, digital infrastructures introduce a structural mutation that this model did not anticipate.

Even before communication occurs, these systems filter and prioritise what can appear, conditioning the horizon of public experience. This precedence is logical and temporal, not a static predetermination: algorithms continuously update their operations in response to data and behaviour (Beer 2017; Bucher 2018). The pre-formatting of publicity occurs through recursive adjustments: each interaction refines algorithmic models and reshapes future visibility—although the architecture remains oriented toward accumulation rather than deliberation (Zuboff 2019; Fourcade & Healy 2017).

It is important to emphasise that modern publicity has always been traversed by exclusions, as feminist and postcolonial critiques underline (Fraser 1990). Nevertheless, algorithmic mediation introduces a qualitatively distinct conditioning, as it integrates the distribution of visibility into technical systems oriented by economic objectives. Such a characterisation nonetheless requires qualification. Platform algorithms are not solely governed by economic imperatives but are also shaped by political objectives, ranging from state-mandated moderation to corporate responses to external pressure (Gillespie 2018). Within platform capitalism, political interventions tend to operate through economic architectures rather than outside them. Even when addressing political demands, platforms act within business models oriented toward accumulation, seeking arrangements that accommodate regulatory expectations without undermining profitability (van Dijck et al. 2018; Napoli 2019).

Contemporary critical theory has responded to the crisis of publicity primarily in communicative terms—polarisation, deliberative inequality. While relevant, these diagnoses prove insufficient when confronted with sociotechnical infrastructures that organise visibility upstream of communication. The predictive logic of platform capitalism reorganises social action before interaction occurs, converting behaviour into anticipable and calculable patterns (Amoore 2020; Fourcade & Healy 2017).

Platform Capitalism and the Infrastructural Production of Visibility

Understanding algorithmic publicity requires specifying the conditions under which visibility is constituted as an infrastructural and economic resource. Under platform capitalism, digital platforms come to function as indispensable intermediaries in the organisation of expanding social practices, a position sustained through the extraction and commodification of user data and the mediation of multi-sided markets (Srnicek 2017; Zuboff 2019).

This infrastructural power operates across three interconnected dimensions. Technically, platforms organise interaction through proprietary protocols that enable and constrain social action opaquely (Gillespie 2018; Bucher 2018). Economically, they capture and monetise user data, converting interaction into behavioural surplus for predictive models and advertising auctions (Zuboff 2019; Pasquale 2015), commodifying visibility through engagement-biased ranking systems (Wu 2016; Couldry & Mejias 2019). Institutionally, platforms assume functions once performed by public authorities—content moderation, dispute resolution, even determining legitimate speech—without accountability mechanisms (Gillespie 2018; Poell et al. 2019). This constitutes infrastructural domination, distinct from industrial capitalism's market concentration or welfare capitalism's state coordination (Andrejevic 2013).

Control over visibility architectures remains concentrated among dominant economic actors, while most depend on these infrastructures to participate in the public sphere under unequal conditions (Srnicek 2017; van Dijck et al. 2018). Unlike mass media inequalities—largely about access and ownership—algorithmic inequalities operate

through differential visibility produced by automated systems that systematically reward certain content, behaviours, and identities while penalising others (Noble 2018; Benjamin 2021). These asymmetries are sustained by an international division of digital labour: peripheral work (content moderation, data labelling) is outsourced to precarious workers, often in the Global South, while engineers operate at the centres (Gray & Suri 2019; Casilli 2019).

Algorithms function as functional institutions of platform capitalism: technical devices that incorporate economic objectives (Morozov 2013; Fuchs 2014), structuring patterns of interaction and visibility (Beer 2017). Their institutional efficacy derives not from democratic legitimacy but from structural integration within concentrated economic ecologies (Srnicek 2017; Pasquale 2015). Unlike traditional institutions, algorithmic institutions operate without public mandate, transparency obligations, or accountability (Napoli 2019; Helberger 2020). Such institutional character becomes legible through a set of operative mechanisms. Algorithmic systems standardise social expectations by translating differential visibility into signals of what "works" within the public sphere, thereby orienting users toward specific forms of content and affective expression (Bucher 2018; Gillespie 2018). At the same time, they enact non-juridical sanctions: diminished reach—often described as "shadow banning"—produces tangible consequences for public recognition in the absence of procedural safeguards (Roberts 2019). Coordination, in turn, unfolds through metricised feedback, where clicks, likes, shares, and watch time guide behaviour without explicit prescription, gradually becoming internalised as the practical conditions of visibility itself (Zuboff 2019; Bucher 2018).

Users learn to perform for algorithms, transforming communicative action into calculable behaviour (Beer 2017; Couldry & Hepp 2016). This resonates with Splichal's (2021) "institutionalisation of publicness": the public is always institutionally mediated—by press, broadcasting, now digital platforms. Algorithmic publicity extends this insight: algorithmic systems do not merely mediate but constitutively pre-format the visible. Unlike traditional media, however, algorithmic institutions lack public accountability and operate through proprietary, opaque logics, challenging inherited media governance models (Napoli 2019; Helberger 2020).

The question of accountability becomes pressing with the Digital Services Act (DSA). Transparency alone is insufficient: democratic governance requires the capacity to influence the criteria that organise visibility (Helberger 2020).

Algorithmic Publicity: A Concept for a New Regime

Algorithmic publicity is here proposed as a category for understanding the infrastructural organisation of public visibility under platform capitalism. Drawing on critical political economy and the sociology of digital infrastructures, the concept interprets platforms as infrastructures of accumulation and governance in which social coordination becomes inseparable from value production.

Rather than emerging in isolation, the concept builds upon a broad constellation of theoretical traditions. The literatures on platform capitalism (Srnicek 2017; van Dijck et al. 2018), media infrastructures (Star & Ruhleder 1996; Plantin et al. 2018), visibility regimes (Brighenti 2007), algorithmic governance (Yeung 2017), and surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019) have each made indispensable contributions to understanding how digital platforms reorganise social life. The concept proposed here draws directly on these traditions, as its claim to analytical distinctiveness lies not in novelty of materials but in their specific articulation: algorithmic publicity brings the critique of political economy into dialogue

with critical theories of the public sphere in order to theorise visibility as a site of democratic contestation—a connection that remains insufficiently developed when these traditions are pursued separately.

At the analytical level, algorithmic publicity unfolds across three distinct yet interrelated registers. First, as an infrastructural condition, it refers to the technical arrangements that pre-structure public appearance prior to communicative encounter—the feed, the ranking system, the recommendation architecture. Second, as a regime of visibility, it captures the historically produced patterns through which platform capitalism organises the distribution of attention, generating unequal conditions of appearance across social and territorial contexts. Third, as a form of power, it identifies the political-economic configuration through which control over infrastructures of visibility becomes a site of capitalist domination, distinct from both state censorship and traditional forms of market concentration. These registers should not be understood as competing definitions, but as complementary dimensions of the same phenomenon, each foregrounding a different analytical emphasis: the infrastructural register is most useful for platform analysis, the regime register for comparative and empirical research, and the power register for normative and political critique.

Across these three registers, the concept has a single core mechanism: the infrastructural pre-formatting of public appearance according to imperatives of accumulation. This mechanism operates under specific conditions—platform architectures, regulatory contexts, and the political economies that shape them—and produces observable effects, including inequalities of visibility, fragmentation of shared experience, and the racialised and classed distribution of public appearance. The breadth of phenomena to which algorithmic publicity speaks reflects not conceptual inflation but the reach of this single mechanism: because infrastructural pre-formatting operates upstream of communication, its consequences extend across the full range of democratic publicity—from labour exploitation to content moderation to regulatory reform. The concept does not claim to explain each of these phenomena independently; it claims that each can be illuminated by tracing it back to the same infrastructural logic.

In recent critical sociology, digital platforms are analysed as central infrastructures of contemporary capitalism, organising markets while shaping practices and forms of governance rather than functioning merely as technical intermediaries (Srnicek 2017; van Dijck et al. 2018). Algorithmic publicity contributes by foregrounding the infrastructural conditions of democratic publicity in contexts where economic concentration, coupled with automation, sustains the systematic extraction of value from visibility. Splichal (2022) grounds this approach: if the crisis of the public sphere concerns the material conditions under which discourse can appear, then analysing those conditions requires moving beyond frameworks that treat visibility as a cultural or discursive outcome.

Algorithmic publicity differs from "regimes of visibility" approaches (Brighenti 2007), which theorise visibility as a social relationship involving attention and power but do not address how algorithmic systems produce visibility as an economic resource. Under platform capitalism, visibility becomes a productive resource monetised through three interrelated mechanisms: the commodification of attention (user attention converted into advertising revenue), data generation (engagement producing behavioural data that refine predictive models), and ranking as rent extraction (platforms charging for enhanced visibility) (Zuboff 2019; Wu 2016; Couldry & Mejias 2019). Discursive practices persist, but they unfold within environments whose conditions are infrastructurally pre-structured (Beer 2017; Bucher 2018). This is not deterministic: users retain some

degree of agency, but feedback loops are designed to optimise accumulation rather than deliberative quality (Zuboff 2019; Napoli 2019). Agency therefore persists as a constitutive dimension of platform interaction, even under asymmetrical conditions of infrastructural power. Creators may engage recommendation logics through a continuous process of optimisation directed at visibility, audience reach, and platform circulation; activist communities exploit trending mechanisms to amplify counter-narratives; and subaltern publics develop vernacular practices of visibility that selectively appropriate and redirect algorithmic systems toward ends their designers did not anticipate (Treré 2016; Jackson, Bailey & Welles 2020). These practices of adaptation and subversion do not dissolve the structural character of algorithmic publicity—the infrastructure remains oriented toward accumulation, and the conditions of visibility remain unequally distributed. But they demonstrate that the regime is contested and the relationship between infrastructure and agency is recursive: users shape algorithmic outputs even as algorithms shape user behaviour. The feed nonetheless reconfigures the public sphere by embedding discourse within architectures of relevance operating according to non-discursive logics; if Habermas theorised discourse as constituting the public, algorithmic publicity theorises discourse as contained within infrastructural conditions that precede and shape it.

The concept differs from "algorithmic governance" approaches (Yeung 2017), which focus on regulation and behavioural control. Algorithmic governance explains how platforms shape behaviour through mechanisms such as nudges and default settings, often embedded in automated decision-making processes. Algorithmic publicity addresses a different object: the conditions of possibility of public appearance—what becomes visible prior to decision-making. Its focus is infrastructural pre-configuration, closer to analyses of platforms as "curatorial architectures" operating upstream of deliberation (Gillespie 2014; Bucher 2018). Algorithmic governance explains how platforms control behaviour; algorithmic publicity explains how they constitute the visible world within which behaviour acquires meaning. This distinction resonates with Gripsrud's (2009: 11) call to examine "the material frameworks for public communication", rather than focusing exclusively on content.

Algorithmic publicity also departs from approaches that evaluate platform-mediated publicness in terms of openness and participation (boyd 2010; Papacharissi 2014). These approaches remain at the normative-descriptive level of inclusion, asking whether platforms enable broader participation. Algorithmic publicity shifts the question: it analyses visibility as an economic and political resource structured by technical architectures, independently of the intensity of participation. The central issue concerns who infrastructurally controls the conditions of visibility and according to which economic logics—rather than simply who participates. Such a shift moves attention from user-centred analyses of "networked publics" toward platform-centred analyses of visibility production, recognising that participation without infrastructural power may constitute a form of subordinated inclusion (Couldry & Mejias 2019).

Finally, although the concept engages with frameworks such as surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019) and data colonialism (Couldry & Mejias 2019), algorithmic publicity is not limited to describing processes of data extraction. Its specific contribution lies in demonstrating how these extraction processes reconfigure democratic publicity, displacing it from a discursive horizon toward an infrastructural regime governed by economic valorisation. Algorithmic publicity thus articulates the critique of political economy with the critical theory of the public sphere—a connection still insufficiently developed in frameworks that focus primarily on extraction.

The analytical value of algorithmic publicity therefore lies in theorising the infrastructure of visibility as a site of capitalist domination that cannot be reduced to labour exploitation or behavioural modification, nor confined to cultural representation. It is this infrastructural power that pre-formats the horizon of the visible—determining not what subjects say, but what can appear, with what salience, and for whom—and that algorithmic publicity seeks to theorise by bringing critical public sphere theory into dialogue with platform and infrastructure studies.

The Feed as Infrastructure of Publicness

If algorithmic publicity designates the specific regime through which platform capitalism organises public visibility, the question becomes: through which concrete mechanisms does this regime operate? This section argues that the feed functions as the central infrastructure through which algorithmic publicity organises public appearance. The feed, however, is not architecturally uniform across platforms. A consequential distinction separates follower-based systems—such as X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram, where content circulation depends primarily on prior social ties and subscription choices—from recommendation-first systems such as TikTok and YouTube, where algorithmic inference largely displaces social graphs as the organising principle of visibility. In follower-based systems, the infrastructure amplifies or suppresses what social networks have already selected; in recommendation-first systems, the infrastructure constitutes the visible world more directly, making the pre-formatting of public experience structurally more pronounced. The discussion that follows focuses primarily on recommendation-first architectures, where the mechanisms of algorithmic publicity are most legible, while acknowledging that follower-based systems produce their own forms of infrastructural conditioning through engagement-ranked timelines and algorithmic amplification of trending content.

The Habermasian public sphere is treated here as a historical horizon to be explained, not a timeless model to be defended. Digitalisation marks a profound transformation in the production of democratic publicity—a process captured through the concept of platformisation (van Dijck, Poell & de Waal 2018). Consider first the Facebook News Feed algorithm, where content ranking is structured through thousands of signals calibrated by predictive engagement models (Meta: n.d.). Such an arrangement preconfigures the horizon of public experience prior to any communicative encounter: as Bakshy, Messing and Adamic (2015) suggest, exposure to cross-cutting content tends to be reduced, not through editorial intervention but through the automated optimisation of engagement metrics. In this sense, the infrastructure operates upstream of discourse, delimiting what enters the field of attention before deliberation can take place. What emerges is a hierarchical public sphere in which appearance is governed by the capacity to generate engagement rather than by the quality of argument, with structurally adverse consequences for marginalised voices (Noble 2018).

A second illustration comes from YouTube's recommendation algorithm. Tufekci (2018) and Ribeiro et al. (2020) documented pathways toward increasingly extreme content produced by watch-time optimisation. These findings have been contested: large-scale audits suggest that recommendation systems more frequently amplify moderate and mainstream content, with extreme material constituting a small fraction of total exposure (Hosseinmardi et al. 2021). However, the analytical point does not depend on the strongest version of the radicalisation thesis. What both findings share—and what matters for algorithmic publicity—is that the infrastructure pre-structures the visible according to

engagement criteria rather than deliberative quality. Whether the outcome is radicalisation or mainstreaming, the mechanism is the same: content is ranked by its capacity to retain attention, not by its contribution to public reasoning. The contingency of outcomes does not dissolve the structural character of the regime; as Volčič and Andrejevic (2016) argue, digital transformation involves not only new forms of visibility but also new forms of invisibility—the systematic exclusion of certain voices from algorithmically curated publics. Their analysis of post-Yugoslav public spheres demonstrates that algorithmic regimes operate differently across cultural contexts, a sensitivity that is crucial for understanding algorithmic publicity beyond Western ecosystems.

Although algorithmic fragmentation corrodes shared experience, it also produces distinctive collective phenomena: synthetic collective experiences. These emerge through trending topics and algorithmically surfaced "moments"—collective focal points generated by the algorithmic detection of aggregated engagement patterns (Gillespie 2012; Papacharissi 2014). They are synthetic in two senses: computationally assembled from behavioural data and commercially inflected, privileging engagement over mutual understanding (Gillespie 2018; Napoli 2019).

The 2020 Black Lives Matter protests illustrate this duality with particular clarity. Jackson, Bailey & Welles (2020) show that algorithmic amplification during the protests was structurally asymmetric: content featuring spectacular imagery and emotionally intense formats circulated widely, while organisational communication, legal information, and substantive political analysis remained comparatively invisible. The infrastructure did not suppress the movement—it amplified its most engagement-optimised elements while deprioritising communication relevant to deliberation and coordination. Algorithmic publicity thus enables new forms of collective attention while distorting their democratic potential. In this context, visibility functions as a selective mechanism that reinforces structural inequalities. Groups positioned at the intersection of racialisation and economic precarity, often within the working class, face systematic penalties—not as a result of discursive deficits but because of their structural location within the chains of attention monetisation (Noble 2018; Couldry & Mejias 2019). Such structural disadvantage is supported by empirical evidence. Audits of Meta's ad delivery systems reveal racialised pricing differentials, whereby visibility incurs higher costs for audiences in predominantly Black neighbourhoods than for comparable white audiences, even under conditions of explicitly inclusive targeting (Noble 2018; Benjamin 2021).

This pattern can be accounted for through two underlying mechanisms. First, advertising value is stratified: attention from groups with greater purchasing power commands higher prices, incentivising platforms to prioritise content appealing to those groups (Noble 2018; Couldry & Mejias 2019). Second, content by or about marginalised groups often fails algorithmic optimisation criteria—generating slower engagement or being incorrectly flagged by moderation systems that disproportionately target non-normative expression (Roberts 2019; Gillespie 2018). From a sociological perspective, users progressively learn to adjust their practices to the logics of the feed. This adaptation, however, is socially unequal: it favours actors endowed with technical capital and organisational resources while penalising precarious subjects whose visibility remains structurally limited (Bucher 2018; Gillespie 2018).

Profound implications follow for the constitution of the public as a political subject—an issue central to this investigation of publicness/Öffentlichkeit. If understood as a body capable of collective judgement, the public becomes difficult to sustain under conditions where algorithmic systems produce personalised micro-public spheres. Splichal (2021)

captures this tension by asking whether a public can exist without a shared world. From this perspective, algorithmic publicity points to a systematic erosion of common worldhood under platform capitalism, even as it generates simulacra of collective attention that obscure such fragmentation.

As the cases discussed above illustrate, empirical findings on algorithmic effects are not univocal. While studies of YouTube have documented radicalisation pathways (Tufekci 2018; Ribeiro et al. 2020), other large-scale audits have found that recommendation systems often amplify moderate or mainstream content, with extreme material constituting a small fraction of user exposure (Hosseinmardi et al. 2021). Similarly, Facebook's News Feed algorithm has been shown to reduce rather than increase exposure to cross-cutting content in some contexts (Bakshy, Messing & Adamic 2015), while other research indicates that engagement-based ranking can depolarise discourse under certain conditions (Bail et al. 2018). These contradictions do not invalidate the concept of algorithmic publicity but complicate it: algorithmic effects are contingent on platform design, user behaviour, temporal dynamics, and political context. The concept is best understood as identifying a regime of infrastructural power whose concrete outcomes remain empirically contested and context-dependent—an agenda for research rather than a settled set of conclusions.

Identifying the conditions under which algorithmic publicity produces distinct outcomes is therefore a central task for the research agenda this concept opens. At least three sets of variables appear analytically decisive. First, platform architecture: the distinction between follower-based systems (X, Instagram) and recommendation-first systems (TikTok, YouTube) produces structurally different visibility regimes, with the latter generating stronger infrastructural pre-formatting of public experience independent of prior social ties. Within recommendation-first systems, the weight assigned to watch time, shares, or emotional valence in ranking models shapes whether fragmentation or synthetic collectivity predominates. Second, user and collective behaviour: algorithmic effects are not unidirectional impositions but emerge through recursive interaction between platform design and user practice. Activist communities, creator networks, and counter-publics develop tactical repertoires—hashtag mobilisation, coordinated engagement, strategic timing—that exploit or redirect algorithmic logics, producing outcomes that diverge from platform objectives. The structural character of algorithmic publicity remains intact, though its directionality becomes less linear: the infrastructure conditions agency without fully determining it. Third, regulatory and political context: the Digital Services Act imposes transparency and risk-assessment obligations that alter the conditions under which visibility is produced in European jurisdictions, while authoritarian contexts produce state-platform symbioses that redirect algorithmic curation toward surveillance and censorship rather than purely commercial engagement optimisation. These variables do not operate independently: a recommendation-first platform in a high-regulation democracy produces a different algorithmic publicity than the same architecture operating under authoritarian conditions or in contexts of infrastructural inequality. Empirical research on algorithmic publicity must be context-sensitive and comparative, tracing how these conditions interact to produce distinct visibility regimes in particular settings.

Beyond Discursive Models: Rethinking Publicity under Platform Capitalism

Although the critical theory of publicity offers decisive tools for understanding the transformation of public communication (Habermas 1989; Fraser 1990; Zuboff 2019), these tools reveal analytical limits when confronted with regimes of algorithmic visibility under

platform capitalism (Srnicek 2017; van Dijck, Poell & de Waal 2018; Dean 2009). The central problem lies in the analytical horizon itself: publicity was conceived on the basis of discursive interaction, whereas contemporary visibility is organised by technical infrastructures that operate prior to communication according to imperatives of value accumulation (Fuchs 2020; Beer 2017).

As Slavko Splichal (2022) argues, the Habermasian model presupposed a public that constitutes itself through communication. Platform capitalism, by contrast, produces a public that is constituted through infrastructure even before any communication occurs. This inversion is fundamental: the public no longer precedes its mediation but is instead produced through technical architectures. Algorithmic publicity renders this historical mismatch intelligible by shifting critique toward the infrastructural conditions of visibility production. The article thus advances a post-Habermasian inflection: an approach that analyses how predictive architectures—through recommendation systems and attention metrics—define in advance the horizon within which deliberation may occur (Beer 2017; Gillespie 2018). "Inflection" here denotes not rejection but analytical displacement, shifting attention from discourse toward the material infrastructures that condition it, in continuity with Habermas's own critical project. Contemporary publicity is governed by an architecture of relevance that precedes communication, such that public visibility depends on technical operations integrated into attention markets and oriented toward value extraction (Zuboff 2019).

Nancy Fraser's critique of the unitary public sphere gains renewed relevance here. Fraser (1990) argued that the bourgeois public sphere was constituted through exclusions structured along axes such as gender, class, and race, and that democratic publicity requires recognising multiple, contesting publics. Under platform capitalism, technical segmentation produces micro-public spheres positioned unequally within social space—now according to algorithmic rather than solely social criteria (Poell et al. 2019). Algorithmic publicity thus converts social inequalities into infrastructural inequalities of public appearance: invisibility becomes systematically patterned across class positions and racial hierarchies, while also shaped by geography, not as an accidental outcome but as a structural feature of platform architectures (Treré 2016; Noble 2018).

This phenomenon can be understood through Zuboff's (2019) theorisation of platform power: algorithmic publicity operates through structural curation of attention oriented toward engagement maximisation rather than explicit censorship. Where mass media exercised gatekeeping through editorial judgment, platforms exercise infrastructural curation through automated systems that continuously optimise for profitability, reconfiguring the public sphere without normative justification (Fuchs 2017). Jodi Dean's (2009) concept of "communicative capitalism" extends this insight: it is not merely that communication proliferates without political effect, but that the very conditions of communicability are pre-structured by infrastructures designed to capture attention and extract value—converting the promise of democratic voice into behavioural data that refines predictive models.

A post-Habermasian critical theory recognises the viability of communicative rationality as a normative ideal while acknowledging its limits when mediation becomes infrastructurally integrated into capitalism (Habermas 1987; Splichal 2022). This is not to abandon the normative horizon of democratic publicity but to recognise that its realisation requires engaging with the material conditions that enable or constrain it. Democracy must therefore be analysed as a sociotechnical architecture of visibility, in which deliberation is conditioned by technical and economic structures that precede public interaction (van Dijck et al. 2018). Algorithmic publicity is a diagnostic concept: it names a historically

produced and contingent regime that remains politically contestable (Srnicek 2017). Unlike accounts that treat algorithmic mediation as an inevitable technical development, the concept insists on the institutional choices and political-economic imperatives that have produced this specific configuration.

Normative Implications: Democratising Algorithmic Publicity

As Slavko Splichal (2021) observes, the question of the public is ultimately the question of the conditions under which a collectivity can appear to itself and deliberate about its common affairs. Algorithmic publicity reveals that these conditions are now infrastructurally produced—through recommendation systems and engagement metrics embedded in predictive architectures that pre-format public appearance before any deliberative encounter. The argument developed here proposes that the crisis of the public sphere lies not only in communicative dysfunctions—polarisation, disinformation, deliberative inequality—but in the infrastructural transformation of the conditions of visibility. Publicity must therefore be analysed as a sociotechnical regime in which systemic rationality reorganises the horizon of deliberation.

Although primarily conceptual—and still lacking fully developed empirical validation—the idea of algorithmic publicity generates empirically researchable questions. How do platform architectures produce measurable inequalities of visibility? What metrics best capture the transformation of public discourse under algorithmic curation? How do users navigate infrastructural constraints in their everyday practices? In what ways do different regulatory regimes—the European Union's Digital Services Act, authoritarian contexts, or regulatory frameworks in the Global South—shape algorithmic publicity in distinct ways? As Dahlberg (2001) anticipated, a critical theory of the digital public sphere must move beyond critique and articulate alternative institutional arrangements.

These questions invite comparative and context-sensitive research. They recognise that algorithmic regimes operate differently across contexts, a point well established in scholarship on digital publics beyond Western centres (Volčič & Andrejevic 2016; Milan & Treré 2019). Mixed-methods research combining computational analysis and ethnography, alongside approaches grounded in political economy, can deepen this framework and test its propositions across diverse empirical settings. Such research would need to attend to how algorithmic architectures interact with local political economies, cultural formations, and histories of media development—attending, for instance, to China's state-platform symbiosis, India's mobile-first and linguistically diverse publics, or Latin America's informal economies and activist counter-publics, where algorithmic publicity takes locally articulated forms shaped by distinct configurations of state power, market structures, and civil society.

Specifying these contextual variations requires identifying which assumptions of the concept travel and which require modification. Algorithmic publicity as developed here presupposes three conditions that do not hold universally: that platforms operate primarily according to commercial accumulation logics; that the state functions as an external regulator rather than a direct participant in visibility production; and that infrastructural access, while unequal, is sufficiently widespread to constitute a public. Where these conditions are absent or inverted—as in state-platform symbioses where algorithmic curation serves political surveillance (Poell et al. 2019), or in contexts of severe infrastructural inequality where platform access itself remains the primary axis of exclusion (Milan & Treré 2019; Couldry & Mejias 2019)—the concept requires modification rather than simple

application. In such contexts, algorithmic publicity names a horizon of transformation: the direction toward which visibility is being reorganised, at varying speeds and under varying configurations of power (Volčič & Andrejevic 2016). Comparative research must therefore approach these contextual conditions as analytically significant variables instead of taking them as background assumptions, attending to how the core mechanism of infrastructural pre-formatting operates differently when the imperatives driving it are political rather than commercial, or when the publics it addresses are constituted through exclusion from infrastructure rather than through differential visibility within it (Treré 2016; Milan & Treré 2019).

The naturalisation of digital infrastructures obscures a crucial point: algorithmic publicity emerges from institutional choices rather than from any autonomous trajectory of technological development. Acknowledging such contingency reopens the horizon of democratic contestation. So long as visibility remains subordinated to imperatives of accumulation, the public sphere continues to be structurally conditioned by material arrangements that elude democratic oversight. Under these conditions, the task of critical theory extends beyond the diagnosis of domination to the identification of sites and strategies through which it may be transformed.

Recent regulatory developments, particularly the Digital Services Act (DSA), impose transparency requirements on algorithmic systems (European Commission 2022). While the DSA represents progress, its focus remains on content moderation rather than on the infrastructural production of visibility. As Helberger (2020) argues, transparency alone is insufficient: democratic governance requires the capacity to influence the criteria that organise visibility. Transparency without the power to contest or reshape algorithmic criteria—what Pasquale (2015) calls the "black box society"—leaves the fundamental architecture of visibility untouched. Algorithmic publicity suggests that democratic regulation must address the architectures of relevance that pre-structure public appearance, not merely the content that circulates within them.

Democratisation requires moving beyond a sole reliance on better discourse toward transformed infrastructures. This implies public control over architectures of visibility and collective governance of recommendation systems, together with criteria of relevance defined democratically instead of being captured through engagement metrics. If algorithmic publicity concerns the infrastructural organisation of visibility, then its democratisation requires interventions at the level of those infrastructures. First, public-interest algorithms are subject to democratic oversight and designed to promote deliberative quality rather than engagement maximisation. Such systems would require rethinking the objectives that guide algorithmic optimisation, shifting from profitability to public value (Helberger 2020; Napoli 2019). Second, platform cooperatives owned and governed by users, which would invert the relationship between infrastructure and public by placing control in the hands of those who depend on it for visibility (Scholz 2016; Couldry & Mejias 2019). Third, independent auditing mechanisms with enforcement powers, capable of investigating algorithmic outcomes and mandating structural changes when discrimination or distortion is detected (Pasquale 2015; Yeung 2017). A democratic infrastructure of visibility might combine public oversight of commercial platforms, the development of cooperative alternatives, and robust auditing mechanisms that apply across both public and private systems.

Such proposals are not without tensions that any serious democratisation agenda must confront. The notion of public-interest algorithms presupposes a definition of public value that is itself contested: what counts as deliberative quality, and who has the authority to determine it, are questions that admit no neutral answer. Algorithmic systems

designed to promote pluralism may themselves encode particular conceptions of the public good, risking the marginalisation of minority voices or non-normative expression in the name of democratic legitimacy. The spectre of state capture is equally real: democratic oversight mechanisms can be instrumentalised by governments to suppress dissent or entrench incumbents, as authoritarian and illiberal democratic contexts already demonstrate. Platform cooperatives, while institutionally promising, face structural constraints—including capital requirements, network effects, and the difficulty of scaling governance—that limit their viability as systemic alternatives rather than niche experiments. Independent auditing mechanisms depend on the technical capacity and political independence of regulatory bodies that are themselves unevenly distributed across jurisdictions. Deliberative democratic theory offers some guidance here. Legitimate governance of algorithmic systems would require, at minimum, three conditions drawn from this tradition: publicity, in the sense that the criteria governing visibility must be open to public scrutiny and contestation; inclusivity, ensuring that those most affected by algorithmic inequalities have meaningful voice in the processes that govern them; and accountability, such that decisions about visibility architectures are revisable in response to democratic deliberation rather than insulated within proprietary systems (Helberger 2020; Napoli 2019).

These conditions do not fully resolve the institutional question but reframe it: the legitimacy of algorithmic governance is not a technical problem to be optimised but a political problem to be negotiated, and its resolution depends on the construction of institutional arenas that do not yet exist at the necessary scale. Acknowledging these tensions is a condition of analytical honesty rather than a counsel of resignation: the democratisation of algorithmic publicity is a political project rather than a technical fix, since its realisation depends on contestation over the criteria through which visibility is governed—a contestation that no institutional design can pre-empt or resolve in advance.

Conclusion

This article has proposed the concept of algorithmic publicity as a critical grammar for understanding the transformation of democratic visibility under platform capitalism. The central argument is that the contemporary crisis of the public sphere stems not from communicative dysfunctions alone, but from the infrastructural transformation of visibility conditions.

Three interrelated claims have structured this analysis. First, platform capitalism operates through infrastructuralisation: digital platforms have evolved from discrete services into foundational systems that organise social coordination while capturing attention and extracting value (Plantin et al. 2018; van Dijck et al. 2018). Second, algorithmic systems function as institutions of this new regime, exercising power through the infrastructural pre-formatting of what can appear, with what salience, and for whom (Beer 2017; Bucher 2018; Gillespie 2018). Third, the feed operationalises these dynamics, producing measurable inequalities of visibility while optimising for engagement and accumulation (Noble 2018; Roberts 2019).

Where existing frameworks illuminate cultural recognition, behavioural control, or extraction processes, algorithmic publicity demonstrates how these dimensions converge in the infrastructural constitution of democratic visibility itself. If the crisis of publicity is infrastructural, then democratising visibility requires not only better discourse but transformed architectures of public appearance—a task that involves rethinking regulatory frameworks, developing alternative institutional forms, and subjecting algorithmic

systems to democratic oversight. These analytical resources open a research agenda: comparative, context-sensitive investigation that combines computational analysis and ethnography with political economy, attending to how algorithmic publicity operates across different regulatory regimes and cultural formations (Volčič & Andrejevic 2016; Milan & Treré 2019).

Analytical distinctiveness emerges precisely from this articulation with adjacent frameworks. Whereas visibility regimes illuminate the social stakes of recognition, algorithmic governance explains the mechanisms of behavioural control, and surveillance capitalism maps the architecture of data extraction, none systematically addresses how such dimensions converge in the infrastructural constitution of democratic publicity itself. The concept here proposed names that convergence: it explains how the crisis of the public sphere cannot be understood solely through frameworks of cultural misrecognition or through accounts centred on behavioural modulation and data extraction, but instead consists in the transformation of the conditions under which a public, in the full political sense, can form at all.

Algorithmic publicity names a regime of visibility that is historically produced and politically contestable. The infrastructures that govern public appearance are not technical necessities but outcomes of institutional choices and economic imperatives. If visibility has become a central resource of social domination under platform capitalism, then the struggle for democratic publicity must become a struggle over the infrastructures that produce it.

This returns us to the question with which we began: who gets to appear? Under algorithmic publicity, the answer is determined not by deliberative merit but by infrastructural architectures optimised for accumulation. Yet contingency offers grounds for hope: if algorithmic publicity is a regime, it can be contested; if visibility is infrastructurally produced, it can be infrastructurally democratised. Algorithmic publicity is thus proposed not as a diagnosis of closure but as a critical grammar for democratic struggle—over the infrastructures that produce visibility, and over the architectures that will determine who gets to appear.

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