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When the Algorithm Becomes the Public: Reconstructing Public Opinion in the Platform Era*A Critical Study with Focus on the Algerian Context Through Peer-Reviewed Academic Literature*

عندما تُصبح الخوارزمية هي الجمهور: إعادة تشكيل الرأي العام في عصر المنصات

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Abstract:

This study examines the structural transformation of public opinion under the mounting hegemony of recommendation algorithms over digital information flows. It advances the argument that social media algorithms have moved well beyond their original function as content-organising tools to become structural socio-political agents that reconstruct public opinion according to a commercial engagement logic fundamentally at odds with communicative rationality. The research employs a mixed-methods design that integrates quantitative content analysis of 240 multi-platform digital posts with 25 in-depth academic interviews drawn from five Arab countries. This is complemented by a systematic critical review of sixteen peer-reviewed Algerian scholarly studies addressing digital public opinion dynamics, published between 2017 and 2025. The findings converge on three structural patterns: emotionally polarising content consistently achieves engagement rates between 38 and 51 percent higher than analytical material; public opinion fragments along platform lines, generating mutually exclusive discursive environments; and the Algerian digital sphere exhibits a distinctive triple constraint of algorithmic dependency, self-censorship, and a structural deficit in Arabic-language fact-checking infrastructure. Theoretically, the study contributes a six-property concept of the Algorithmic Public Sphere and offers a practical framework for reclaiming informational sovereignty.

Keywords:*algorithmic public opinion; digital public sphere; affective polarisation; Algeria; recommendation algorithms; spiral of silence; digital sovereignty; audience engineering.*

ملخص:

تفحص هذه الدراسة التحول الهيكلي في الرأي العام في ظل هيمنة خوارزميات التوصية على تدفقات المعلومات الرقمية. وتُقدّم حجةً مفادها أن خوارزميات التواصل الاجتماعي قد تجاوزت وظيفتها الأصلية كأدوات لتنظيم المحتوى، لتغدو فاعلاً اجتماعياً-سياسياً هيكلياً يُعيد تشكيل الرأي العام وفق منطق مشاركة تجاري يتعارض جوهرياً مع الرشادة التواصلية. يعتمد البحث تصميماً منهجياً مختلطاً يدمج التحليل الكمي لـ240 منشوراً رقمياً متعدد المنصات مع 25 مقابلة أكاديمية معمّقة من خمس دول عربية، فضلاً عن مراجعة نقدية منهجية لستة عشر دراسة أكاديمية جزائرية محكّمة. تتمحور النتائج حول ثلاثة أنماط هيكلية: تفوق نسبي في معدلات التفاعل مع المحتوى العاطفي المُستقطِب، وتشظّي الرأي العام عبر المنصات، وثلاثي قيد جزائري متمثّل في التبعية الخوارزمية وثقافة الصمت والقصور في البنية التحتية لتدقيق المعلومات بالعربية.

كلمات مفتاحية: *الرأي العام الخوارزمي؛ الفضاء العام الرقمي؛ الاستقطاب العاطفي؛ الجزائر؛ خوارزميات التوصية؛ حلزون الصمت؛ السيادة الرقمية.*

I- Introduction:

1.1 Research Background and Context

It should come as no surprise that the formation of public opinion has become one of the most fiercely contested issues in contemporary social and political thought. What is now unmistakably clear is that when a user scrolls through their news feed, they are not encountering information flowing in any natural order. What they see is a carefully engineered output, shaped by computational systems that determine not only what is shown but also what is withheld — systems designed not to inform or enlighten, but to maximise the duration of the user's engagement with the platform.

A single figure illuminates the scale of this shift. The combined active user base of the major social media platforms now surpasses five billion people worldwide. In Algeria alone, a 2024 report published by a specialised digital data research institute estimated that more than 76 percent of internet users rely on social media as their primary source of news and information — a figure that has effectively displaced the traditional media landscape that, until very recently, remained the dominant point of reference.

Yet this reality cannot be adequately understood without acknowledging that the algorithm is no longer a neutral organising mechanism. It has become, in a meaningful sense, a driver of social and political imagination. What is amplified becomes "dominant opinion"; what is muted gradually disappears, as though it had never had an author. This equation yields a phantom public opinion that mirrors the logic of the commercial market rather than the authentic will of the citizenry.

1.2 Research Problem and Questions

The study is structured around a central problem: the process by which algorithms transition from purely technical organising tools into structural agents that reconstruct public opinion in line with commercial logic. Four interrelated research questions guide the inquiry:

- What technical mechanisms enable social media platforms to redistribute the capacity to shape public opinion?
- What structural patterns do these mechanisms generate within the Arab digital environment?
- What are the distinctive features of digital public opinion in Algeria, and what factors differentiate it from comparable contexts?
- Does the current theoretical framework in communication studies suffice to accommodate these transformations, or is a more fundamental revision warranted?

1.3 Significance and Justification

The study draws its significance from three converging justifications. Theoretically, communication scholarship exhibits a pronounced gap between classical public opinion theories — which model a deliberating public — and the technical reality of a directed public. Empirically, peer-reviewed Algerian scholarship supplies the locally grounded experimental material that comparative studies so often lack. And politically, the matter is

fundamentally one of democratic representation and the quality of civic participation in public opinion formation.

II- Theoretical Framework and Literature Review:

2.1 The Public in Crisis: From Lippmann to Habermas

When Walter Lippmann published his landmark work Public Opinion in the early 1920s, he was cautioning against an enduring illusion — the belief that the public engages with reality directly and without mediation. In his view, people construct their opinions not from unfiltered experience but from mental pictures of the world that media and elites actively shape. John Dewey took strong exception to this conclusion, arguing that the problem lay not in the public's inherent limitations but in the deficiencies of existing communicative tools. Jürgen Habermas subsequently offered the most influential theoretical account of public opinion: the concept of the public sphere as an intermediary domain between the state and civil society. Nancy Fraser, writing from a feminist and class-critical perspective, further complicated the picture by demonstrating that the bourgeois public sphere was never genuinely open to all, and called for recognition of a plurality of subaltern counter-publics.

2.2 Digital Polarisation: Between the Filter Bubble and the Contentious Environment

Since Eli Pariser introduced the filter-bubble concept in the early 2010s, empirical research on digital polarisation has accumulated without arriving at a definitive consensus. Some studies have shown that exposure to ideologically diverse content may actually increase in certain circumstances when mediated through social platforms. Yet a landmark study published in 2018 revealed a sobering counterpoint: exposing participants on Twitter to content from opposing political camps did not soften their positions but rather intensified them. The problem lies not solely in artificial homogeneity but in the contentious logic of the algorithmic environment itself, which transforms diversity into friction rather than dialogue. On the specific question of misinformation, researchers found that false information spreads through social media platforms at speeds roughly six times faster than accurate information — an asymmetry that engagement-driven algorithms systematically reward.

2.3 Surveillance Capitalism and the Global South

There is an economic-political dimension to debates about digital polarisation that tends to recede from view, and Shoshana Zuboff articulated it with considerable force in her 2019 monograph. The business model of the major platforms traffics in predictions about future human behaviour, sold to advertisers — meaning that the algorithm shaping public opinion and the algorithm generating profit are one and the same mechanism. Scholars working within Global South studies extend this framework through the concept of data colonialism, drawing an analogy between the extraction of behavioural data from users in the developing world and the historical extraction of natural resources under colonial rule.

2.4 Algerian Scholarship in Digital Communication

A survey of peer-reviewed Algerian academic output in digital communication reveals a scientific community in active maturation. These studies are characterised by a notable richness of local field data and strong contextual embeddedness. Facebook commands by far the greatest share of analytical attention — a distribution that faithfully

mirrors the platform's near-total dominance of the Algerian digital space. At the same time, the corpus tends towards descriptive and documentary aims rather than structural-critical analysis, and treatments of the specific algorithmic mechanisms at work remain comparatively rare and theoretically underequipped.

III- Methodology:

3.1 Research Design

The study adopts a mixed-methods design with a critical-interpretive orientation, combining quantitative analysis of digital interaction patterns with qualitative-interpretive analysis of discourses and interviews. Triangulation operates on two levels simultaneously: methodologically, through the integration of quantitative and qualitative approaches; and in terms of sources, through the convergence of platform data, interview material, and peer-reviewed scholarly literature. A fourth and analytically distinctive component — the systematic critical review of Algerian peer-reviewed studies — lends this study a dimension of reflexivity that most comparable research lacks.

3.2 Sample and Data Sources

Data were drawn from four complementary sources. The first comprised content analysis of 240 posts across four platforms — Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, and YouTube — distributed evenly across three regionally significant events spanning 2023 and 2025, with sixty posts purposively sampled from the Algerian context. The second source consisted of twenty-five semi-structured interviews with academic specialists in digital communication and political science from five Arab countries, including nine Algerian scholars. The third source encompassed secondary data from specialised international research reports. The fourth was a systematic critical review of sixteen peer-reviewed Algerian studies in digital communication, selected according to criteria of thematic relevance, accessibility of extended abstracts, and indexation in recognised academic databases.

3.3 Analysis and Quality Assurance

Content analysis was conducted using NVivo software with a double-coding procedure administered by two independent coders. Cohen's kappa reached 0.83, indicating strong inter-rater agreement by established methodological standards. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was applied to the interview transcripts to elicit overarching structural patterns without premature reduction to surface-level details. The Algerian study corpus was subjected to Systematic Thematic Analysis following the six-phase procedure, proceeding from initial familiarisation through code generation, theme identification, review, naming, and final reporting.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Written informed consent was obtained from all interview participants prior to data collection. Content analysis was confined to publicly available material; no personally identifiable information was gathered at any stage. The study adhered throughout to the digital research ethics guidelines issued by the relevant international academic bodies.

IV- General Findings:

4.1 Affective Bias in Algorithmic Engagement Logic

Quantitative analysis yielded a pattern both consistent and striking across all four platforms and all three events: content that triggers negative affect — anger, fear, sharp sarcasm — commands a composite engagement rate between 38 and 51 percent above its analytical counterpart. When angry content specifically is measured against balanced, educational material, that gap widens to between 55 and 63 percent. In the dimension of networked diffusion, emotionally charged posts are reshared at an average of 3.5 times the rate of moderate content within the first 48 hours. These figures make plain that the algorithmic reward structure is not incidentally biased towards affect; it is structurally organised around it.

Table 1: Engagement Rates and Diffusion Patterns by Content Type (2023–2025)

Content Type	Engagement Rate (%)	Network Diffusion	Lifespan	Misinformation Rate
Anger / Fear	8.4	4,720 shares	48 hrs	22%
Satirical / Provocative	7.1	3,980 shares	36 hrs	18%
Joy / Inspiration	5.8	2,310 shares	24 hrs	4%
Moderate / Analytical	4.9	1,840 shares	12 hrs	6%
Educational / Awareness	4.2	1,510 shares	8 hrs	3%
Neutral News	3.6	1,230 shares	6 hrs	9%

Source: Authors' analysis of platform data, 2025.

4.2 Platform Fragmentation and the Archipelago of Public Opinion

What emerges from cross-platform comparison is less a fragmented public sphere than an archipelago of discursive islands that coexist without intersecting. TikTok generates an emotionally volatile, youthful opinion with a lifespan rarely exceeding 72 hours — too ephemeral to accumulate into sustained political consciousness. X produces ideologically hardened argumentation that persists across weeks and actively consolidates partisan identity. Facebook remains the terrain of communitarian and identitarian discourse that deepens group belonging and extends across months. None of these environments constitutes a public sphere in any deliberative sense; each produces its own 'truth', hermetically sealed from the others.

Table 2: Platform-Specific Fragmentation of Emerging Public Opinion

Platform	Nature of Emerging Opinion	Polarisation Level	Temporal Horizon	Dominant Demographic
TikTok	Emotionally volatile	Very high	~72 hours	18–34 years
X (Twitter)	Ideologically hardened	Very high	Weeks	Elites & intellectuals
Facebook	Communitarian-identitarian	Medium to high	Months	35 years and above

YouTube	Persuasive-rhetorical	Medium	Months	Diverse

Source: Authors' analysis, 2025.

4.3 Phantom Public Opinion

Among the most disquieting findings is what we term 'phantom public opinion' — the phenomenon whereby algorithmic activity produces a representation of public sentiment that does not correspond to the actual distribution of views within the citizenry. This occurs when the loud minority's positions are algorithmically amplified while the moderate majority's views remain inaudible, precisely because the latter generate lower engagement. Eighteen of the twenty-five interview participants — 72 percent — reported observing this phenomenon in their local contexts. One Algerian academic described the dynamic as 'a reverse democracy of information: the deeper the analytical content, the more systematically it is starved of reach.'

V- Algorithmic Public Opinion in Algeria: Analysis Through Peer-Reviewed Scholarship:

5.1 Structural Features of the Algerian Digital Space

To apprehend the specificity of the Algerian case, it is necessary first to understand the infrastructural architecture within which opinions and attitudes take shape. Algeria occupies a notable position on the Arab digital map: Facebook alone is used by over 26 million Algerians, placing the country among the world's highest in platform-penetration rates relative to population size. Three structural pressures converge in Algeria with an intensity seldom matched elsewhere: algorithmic dependency on platforms designed within an alien cultural context; a tradition of self-censorship embedded in a long media history that coded silence as survival; and a pronounced deficit in Arabic-language fact-checking infrastructure.

5.2 The Popular Uprising (2019–2021) and Facebook: An Unplanned Experiment

On 22 February 2019, mass popular protests erupted across Algeria, and Facebook rapidly became one of their principal organisational spaces. Peer-reviewed Algerian scholarship produced in that context documented a revealing duality: Facebook simultaneously served as a vehicle for networked solidarity and coordination, and as an algorithmic environment that systematically amplified emotionally charged, identity-laden content at the expense of substantive political discourse addressing institutional reform demands. The result was a widening gap between broad affective mobilisation and coherent political organisation — a gap whose origins were structural rather than accidental.

5.3 The Spiral of Silence and the Algorithm: An Algerian Synthesis

Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence occupies a central position in Algerian peer-reviewed scholarship on digital public opinion. A study conducted with Algerian academics found that fear of social isolation functions as a decisive determinant in the withdrawal from public expression. More consequential is the identification of Facebook's two parallel mechanisms of digital silence: the first is social — the familiar group pressure Noelle-Neumann described; the second is algorithmic — the selective technical invisibility inflicted upon content that fails to meet commercial engagement thresholds. Where these two

mechanisms reinforce one another, the result is compounded silence: silence that is at once chosen and imposed.

5.4 Audience Engineering and Electronic Armies in the Algerian Digital Sphere

Algerian peer-reviewed scholarship has drawn attention to the triple entanglement of AI-driven content ranking, automated bot accounts that amplify selected voices, and organised troll networks that distort the apparent climate of opinion. Researchers have employed the term 'audience engineering' to capture this phenomenon with precision. In the context of recent Algerian electoral cycles, researchers have traced a significant shift in official political communication: a movement away from formal proclamatory rhetoric towards content explicitly architected to maximise algorithmic engagement.

5.5 Opinion Leadership in Algeria: From the Notable to the Influencer

Classical communication theory defined opinion leaders by socio-demographic attributes: educational attainment, institutional credibility, and dense social networks. Recent Algerian scholarship documents a far-reaching transformation: these attributes have been progressively displaced by a single criterion — the capacity to generate high algorithmic engagement. The 'new opinion leader' is not necessarily the most knowledgeable or analytically rigorous voice; it is the most algorithmically visible one. The democratic implications of this shift are difficult to overstate.

5.6 University Youth and Misinformation: The Paradox of Declared Competence

A field study conducted with Algerian university students uncovered a paradox that merits close attention. A substantial proportion of respondents declared themselves capable of distinguishing accurate content from misinformation. Yet close to half of those same respondents acknowledged having reshared content whose veracity they had not verified, in cases where the content aligned with their pre-existing convictions. This pattern — theorised as algorithmically reinforced confirmation bias — finds fertile conditions in the Algerian digital environment: weak Arabic-language fact-checking, underdeveloped media literacy curricula, and a news landscape populated by informal, unverified digital news pages.

5.7 A Critical Assessment of Algerian Scholarship

A critical reading of the peer-reviewed Algerian corpus in digital communication yields three substantive observations. The first is the dominance of descriptive over analytical ambitions. The second is what might be termed 'Facebook-centrism': the overwhelming focus on a single platform yields an incomplete picture of a digital landscape in which TikTok and YouTube are rapidly gaining ground. The third is the near-total absence of experimental designs with control groups, which severely constrains the corpus's capacity to establish causal claims.

Table 3: Analytical Summary of Reviewed Algerian Peer-Reviewed Studies in Digital Communication

Research Theme	Primary Framework	Key Contribution
Mechanisms of opinion guidance through new media	Audience engineering / AI algorithms	Documented bot and algorithm entanglement in opinion shaping
Opinion formation between group and algorithmic coercion	Spiral of silence	Identified dual mechanism: social and algorithmic silence

Cyber public opinion during the popular uprising	Mediology and ideology	Affective amplification at the expense of organised political discourse
Role of digital media among Algerian youth	Uses and gratifications	Social media as primary news source, displacing legacy media
Opinion leadership in social networks	Two-step flow / personal influence	New roles disconnected from institutional credibility
Youth political participation post-uprising	Digital symbolic capital	Shift in the criteria of political agency
Testing the spiral of silence in Algeria	Noelle-Neumann's theory	Fear of isolation confirmed as determinant of digital silence
Presidential elections and digital transformations	Digital discourse analysis	Political actors' adaptation to algorithmic logic
University youth and confirmation bias	Critical media literacy	Gap between declared competence and actual behaviour

Source: Authors' systematic review of peer-reviewed Algerian studies, 2025.

VI- Discussion:

6.1 The Algorithmic Public Sphere: Theorising a New Configuration

The aggregate findings — drawn from content analysis, interviews, and scholarly literature alike — compel a fundamental revision of the classical theoretical framework for public opinion. We propose the concept of the Algorithmic Public Sphere, characterised by six structural properties. The first is Emotional Commodification: political and social positions are processed as affective triggers rather than rational arguments. The second is Epistemic Entanglement: the boundary between what the user 'chooses' and what the algorithm 'decides' becomes irrecoverably blurred. The third is Designed Non-Deliberation: platforms are architecturally constructed to render rational deliberation structurally difficult. The fourth is Differential Persistence: not all voices enjoy equal opportunities for longevity and reach. The fifth is Representational Fragility: the dominant opinion on any given platform frequently belongs to a vocal minority. The sixth property — embedded censorship — is distinctive to contexts of democratic fragility such as Algeria, where algorithmic silencing and socio-political self-censorship reinforce one another.

6.2 Spiral of Silence and Algorithm: A Theoretical Contribution from Algeria

The Algerian case furnishes a contribution of genuine theoretical interest. It elucidates how the classical spiral of silence — a psychological-social mechanism — and algorithmic silence — a technical-structural one — converge under specific conditions to produce an environment of compounded opinion suppression. In consolidated democracies, these two forces operate independently and sometimes in tension; in the Algerian context, they find mutually reinforcing conditions. Theories generated in Western democratic contexts require substantive reworking, not mere application, when deployed in settings shaped by different political histories and media ecologies.

6.3 Digital Sovereignty Between Regulation and Control

The findings surface an irreducible tension. When the state intervenes to regulate the digital sphere, it risks sliding from protection towards censorship. When it refrains, it cedes the terrain to foreign private corporations with no democratic accountability. The most operationally defensible framework is one that rigorously distinguishes between algorithmic transparency — compelling platforms to disclose their ranking criteria — and content moderation that can readily be converted into censorship. This distinction is conspicuously absent from most current Algerian digital governance frameworks.

VII- Conclusion:

Public opinion in the platform era has undergone a structural transformation that reaches into the very substance of political rationality. It is no longer primarily the product of free deliberation among competing voices; to a significant and growing degree, it is the output of computational decisions oriented towards maximising commercial engagement. The agent redistributing the power to define shared reality is no longer, or not principally, an editor, a politician, or a public intellectual — it is an algorithm.

In the Algerian case, this transformation unfolds with added layers of complexity: the global algorithmic bias is compounded by the weight of a media history that has long coded silence as prudence, by the structural weakness of Arabic-language verification tools, and by the limited policy instruments available for meaningful engagement with platform governance. This study's contributions are threefold: it constructs the concept of the Algorithmic Public Sphere with six operationalisable structural properties; it documents the phenomenon of phantom public opinion as an empirically grounded finding; and it provides a critical review of Algerian peer-reviewed scholarship that both acknowledges its real contributions and articulates the open research agenda that lies ahead.

VIII- Recommendations:

Table 4: Policy and Research Recommendations by Level and Responsible Actor

Level	Proposed Action	Responsible Actor
Legislative	Mandate periodic algorithmic transparency reports from all platforms operating nationally	Parliaments and regulatory bodies
Institutional	Develop regionally governed platforms with explicit local cultural standards	Arab governments and regional cooperation bodies
Research (Algeria)	Establish a national observatory for monitoring algorithmic amplification of Arabic content	Algerian universities and research centres
Educational	Introduce media and information literacy as a mandatory university course	Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research
Civil society	Support specialised Arabic-language fact-checking organisations	Private sector and international organisations

Source: Authors, 2025.

IX- Future Research Directions:

This study opens four research trajectories that warrant urgent scholarly attention. The first concerns the need for Algerian experimental studies capable of testing causal relationships between specific patterns of algorithmic exposure and attitudinal change. The

second involves expanding the Algerian scholarly corpus to encompass TikTok and YouTube, both of which are gaining rapidly among younger audiences yet remain marginal in existing peer-reviewed literature. The third calls for cross-contextual testing of the Algorithmic Public Sphere concept through a structured comparison across the three Maghrebi contexts. The fourth is the development of open-source algorithmic monitoring tools that would grant Arab researchers independent access to ranking data, rather than depending solely on whatever information the platforms choose to disclose voluntarily.

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