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Algorithmic Pre-Deliberation and the Infrastructural Production of Public Opinion

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Abstract

Public opinion is often treated as the outcome of communicative processes such as public debate, mediated discussion, and collective interpretation. Revisions of public sphere theory still assume that public visibility emerges through discursive struggle and institutional mediation. The growing dominance of digital platforms unsettles this assumption, as ranking and recommendation systems organize visibility at scale before interpretation, disagreement, or persuasion. This article introduces algorithmic pre-deliberation to name this upstream infrastructural stage, in which visibility regimes in feeds structure the conditions of publicness prior to deliberation. It argues that public opinion in platform-mediated environments is shaped not only through communicative interaction but also through algorithmic allocation of attention that amplifies certain topics, formats, and affective registers. By shifting analysis from discursive outcomes to pre-discursive conditions, the article contributes to public opinion theory and platform studies by locating algorithmic power in the patterned production of salience that precedes public reasoning and contestation.

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Keywords

Algorithmic pre-deliberation, public opinion, visibility regimes, platform governance, attention economy, public sphere, infrastructure, mediatization.

Introduction

Public opinion has long been regarded as one of the foundational concepts of modern social and political theory. From classical accounts of the public sphere to contemporary studies of mediated communication, it has been understood as the outcome of processes through which individual views become collectively recognized judgements. In this tradition, public opinion emerges through debate, circulation, and symbolic negotiation within a shared communicative space [Habermas, 1989; Fraser, 1990; Castells, 2009]. Even when these models acknowledge inequalities of access, power asymmetries, and institutional mediation, they largely preserve a central assumption: that public visibility is produced through discursive struggle and social interaction rather than preconfigured by technical systems.

This assumption has become increasingly difficult to sustain in platform-based media environments. Digital platforms do not simply host public communication; they actively organize it through algorithmic systems that rank, recommend, and amplify content at scale. These systems intervene at a stage that precedes interpretation, disagreement, or persuasion. They determine which topics, narratives, and expressive forms are made visible and repeatedly encountered within everyday information flows. As a result, visibility can no longer be treated as a neutral background against which public debate unfolds; it has become an infrastructural outcome shaped by computational systems that operate continuously and often opaquely [Gillespie, 2018; van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018].

A substantial body of research has documented the effects of algorithmic mediation on public communication. Scholars have examined phenomena such as filter bubbles, echo chambers, algorithmic bias, misinformation, and the emotionalization of online discourse [Beer, 2017; Kitchin, 2017]. These studies demonstrate that algorithms shape what people encounter, how content circulates, and how beliefs may be reinforced. Yet much of this literature conceptualises algorithms as intervening variables within an already existing public sphere. The underlying structure of visibility is often taken for granted, even as its consequences are critically analysed.

What remains comparatively under-theorised is the upstream stage at which algorithmic systems configure the conditions of public communication before discourse takes place. While it is widely acknowledged that platforms influence what is visible, less attention has been paid to how this influence operates as an infrastructural form of power that precedes and shapes deliberation. The question is not only how algorithms affect what people think, but how they organize what can be thought about, discussed, and recognized as publicly relevant in the first place.

Visibility has never been a purely neutral condition. In public sphere theory, it is socially organized: it reflects institutional arrangements, professional routines, and struggles over recognition. Yet the organizing principles of visibility have historically been legible in institutional terms. Editorial decisions, despite their biases, were embedded in identifiable organisational structures and could therefore be criticised as such. Platform-based environments complicate this by shifting the organization of visibility towards automated systems whose criteria are often neither publicly articulated nor easily contestable [Gillespie, 2018; Pasquale, 2015].

This shift has consequences for how publics are conceptualized. Instead of assuming a public arena in which issues compete for attention through discursive performance alone, platform environments increasingly present publics with a pre-structured horizon of salience. In such settings, issues appear not only because they are argued for, but because they become compatible with recommendation logics that reward repeatability and engagement. This does not imply that algorithms fully determine public life, but it suggests that the distribution of attention is increasingly shaped by infrastructural conditions rather than solely by communicative agency.

A related implication concerns the relationship between visibility and knowledge. Public opinion research often presumes that issues become objects of collective judgement once they are publicly available as topics of discourse. Platform environments, however, complicate the sequence. Topics become publicly 'real' not only by being articulated but by achieving sustained algorithmic presence across feeds, recommendations, and trending surfaces. This points to a distinctive epistemic condition in which repeated exposure can operate as a signal of importance, sometimes displacing institutional markers of relevance such as editorial prioritization [Napoli, 2019; Tufekci, 2015].

This article addresses that gap by introducing the concept of algorithmic pre-deliberation. The term refers to the infrastructural stage of public communication at which algorithmic systems organize the field of visibility within which deliberation becomes possible. By focusing on this stage, the analysis shifts attention from persuasion and discursive outcomes to the computational and organisational processes that preconfigure the space of public attention. Public opinion, in this view, is not only the result of communicative interaction but also an effect of algorithmic visibility regimes that determine which issues, frames, and affective registers become salient.

The theoretical move proposed here does not replace deliberative or discursive models of public opinion; it reframes them. Deliberation continues to matter, but it unfolds within environments increasingly structured by algorithmic selection and optimization. This is not only a back-end phenomenon. Platform interfaces also govern visibility through front-end surfaces that cue what should matter—trending lists, 'For You' pages, recommended topics, and notification prompts. These surfaces operate as public signals of relevance and urgency: they do not merely reflect public interest, but participate in producing it by framing what appears as collectively salient. The contemporary public thus encounters a pre-organized horizon of issues and styles presented as worth attention before any deliberative engagement begins.

This interface-driven organization of attention complicates the relationship between participation and influence. Much scholarship on digital media has treated participation as a democratizing resource: the ability to publish and circulate content outside institutional gatekeepers. Yet visibility regimes imply that participation does not translate straightforwardly into public presence. While many may speak, only some forms of speech become structurally compatible with optimization logics and thus gain repeatable visibility. The openness of platforms is therefore compatible with systematic patterns of amplification that are not reducible to overt censorship or editorial selection.

Finally, the platform condition invites a reconsideration of the political economy of publicness. When visibility is organized through engagement-driven optimization, the public sphere is partially shaped by the incentives of attention markets. This does not mean that public discourse is simply 'commercialised'; it means that the infrastructures allocating visibility are tuned to metrics that have economic value for platforms. The result is an environment in which public salience becomes entwined with measurable attention, and measurable attention becomes a mechanism of governance [Pasquale, 2015; Napoli, 2019; Zuboff, 2019]. Against this background, algorithmic pre-deliberation is proposed as a concept that captures a specific upstream mechanism: the infrastructural organization of visibility prior to discourse, through which collective attention is patterned and public opinion formation becomes conditionally structured. This framing also clarifies what is novel about the article's intervention. Rather than treating platforms as merely new channels of circulation, it approaches them as environments that reorganize the preconditions of public communication. The concept of algorithmic pre-deliberation is proposed to name this reorganization at the level of visibility itself: the patterned processes through which issues become perceptible, repeatable, and collectively recognisable. In doing so, the article connects debates in public sphere theory with platform scholarship by insisting that the

organization of attention is not an external "context" for public opinion, but one of its constitutive conditions.

At the same time, the argument remains careful about scope. It does not claim that algorithmic systems unilaterally determine public agendas, nor that publics are reducible to computational outputs. Rather, it specifies an upstream mechanism that interacts with institutional media, cultural repertoires, and political contestation. The analytic point is that deliberation is increasingly conditioned by prior organization: the field of what becomes publicly available is structured before arguments begin, and this structuring has consequences for recognition, contestability, and the durability of public issues.

The article proceeds by first situating algorithmic mediation within public opinion theory and platform studies, then defining algorithmic pre-deliberation as a distinct analytical stage, and finally discussing its implications for power, legitimacy, and contestation under platform-mediated visibility regimes. This approach aims to provide a conceptual framework that is both theoretically grounded and empirically usable, offering clear indicators that can support future research without requiring privileged access to platform code.

Public Opinion and Algorithmic Mediation

Theories of public opinion have historically been grounded in the idea that collective judgments arise through communicative interaction within a public sphere. In deliberative and critical traditions alike, public opinion is understood as something that takes shape through the circulation of arguments, the contestation of meanings, and the symbolic negotiation of social reality. Whether conceived in normative or empirical terms, the public sphere has been imagined as a space in which visibility emerges through discourse rather than being preordained by technical systems [Habermas, 1989; Fraser, 1990].

Media institutions have long played a role in shaping this space by selecting, framing, and amplifying certain issues. Yet even in mass-mediated environments, the logic of visibility was tied to human editorial judgment and institutional routines. What became publicly salient was the result of organisational priorities, professional norms, and political pressures. While these processes were far from neutral, they were nonetheless embedded in social structures that were at least partially accessible to critique and intervention.

Algorithmic systems introduce a qualitatively different mode of mediation. Recommendation and ranking systems do not operate through editorial discretion or explicit political judgment. They rely on computational logics that infer relevance from patterns of interaction, engagement, and circulation. From the perspective of platform studies and science and technology studies, such systems function as infrastructures that organize social life by embedding particular values and priorities into technical architectures [Star & Ruhleder, 1996; Bowker & Star, 1999; van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018].

These infrastructures do not merely distribute content; they actively structure the conditions under which content becomes visible. Algorithms determine which posts, videos, or narratives are more likely to be encountered repeatedly, which are likely to fade quickly, and which may never appear at all. Visibility thus becomes an effect of computational optimization rather than solely a result of discursive struggle. This shift has profound implications for how public opinion is formed, as it alters the mechanisms through which collective attention is coordinated.

The infrastructural character of algorithmic mediation also complicates traditional distinctions between public and private communication. Platform environments collapse these domains by rendering individual acts of expression subject to algorithmic amplification and aggregation. What begins as a personal post may become publicly salient not because of its intrinsic significance, but

because it aligns with the platform's optimization criteria. In this way, algorithmic systems reconfigure the pathways through which private expression enters public visibility.

To treat algorithmic systems as infrastructures is to recognize that they do not simply mediate content, but enact a politics of attention. Infrastructures govern by making some actions easier than others and by normalizing certain pathways while rendering others improbable. In platform environments, these pathways are increasingly defined by measurable engagement and predicted relevance, which become operational proxies for public significance. This is a crucial shift because engagement is not equivalent to importance, nor does it necessarily correspond to deliberative quality. What becomes visible may be what is easy to consume, emotionally charged, or rapidly shareable, rather than what is socially consequential or normatively urgent [Beer, 2017; Zuboff, 2019].

This infrastructural perspective also helps clarify the relationship between platforms and institutional media. Platform logics do not replace journalism or public institutions, but they reorganize how institutional outputs circulate. News and public information increasingly compete within the same attention economy as entertainment and personal expression. The result is not simply more noise, but a reconfiguration of the pathways through which public issues become collectively recognisable. In this context, visibility becomes a form of power not reducible to propaganda or persuasion but grounded in distributional capacity: the ability to allocate attention differentially and repeatedly [Napoli, 2019; Pasquale, 2015].

Moreover, the infrastructural organization of visibility has distributional consequences for voice. Even where participation is formally open, structural patterns of visibility mean that not all voices have equal chances of becoming publicly salient. This is not only a question of bias in the narrow sense but of systemic compatibility between communicative styles and optimization criteria. Certain modes of expression may be favoured because they generate measurable engagement, while other forms—more complex, slower, less affectively immediate—may struggle to circulate. Such dynamics complicate accounts of digital participation that equate access with influence.

Couldry and Hepp [2017] describe deep mediatization as a condition in which media infrastructures become constitutive of social reality rather than merely channels through which reality is represented. Algorithmic mediation exemplifies this condition by shaping the patterns through which publics encounter issues as collectively salient. Platforms increasingly shape not only the circulation of discourse but the conditions of appearance for public issues.

The infrastructural approach also helps specify what is at stake in debates about algorithmic accountability. If visibility is produced through opaque computational systems, then the conditions of publicness become harder to contest. Editorial decisions in mass media could be criticised through professional norms, public complaints, or political pressure. Algorithmic decisions are more difficult to contest because they are distributed across models, metrics, and interface surfaces, and because their criteria are often proprietary or practically inaccessible. In this sense, the problem is not simply that users are misinformed, but that the mechanisms shaping what counts as publicly relevant become less legible to public critique [Pasquale, 2015; Gillespie, 2018].

At the same time, treating algorithmic mediation as infrastructure avoids simplistic technological determinism. Platforms do not autonomously impose public relevance; they operationalize particular definitions of relevance that are embedded in organisational priorities, economic incentives, and cultural assumptions about attention. These definitions become stabilised through measurement. What is measurable becomes actionable, and what is actionable becomes systematically amplified. Over time, this can normalize certain modes of public communication—not by prohibiting alternatives, but by making them less likely to achieve durable visibility.

This dynamic also has consequences for knowledge production in the public realm. When public salience is inferred from engagement, the system can elevate signals that are loud rather than accurate, repeated rather than reasoned, and emotionally compelling rather than socially consequential. This does not imply that engagement is inherently irrational. It implies that engagement is an imperfect proxy for public importance and that its infrastructural centrality changes the epistemic conditions under which public opinion forms [Napoli, 2019; Tufekci, 2015].

By situating algorithmic systems within this broader theoretical lineage, it becomes clear that they are not simply new tools within an existing public sphere. They are transforming the conditions under which publicness is produced. The field in which opinions are formed is increasingly structured by computational logics that privilege speed, engagement, and affective intensity, thereby reshaping the dynamics of public communication at a fundamental level.

Algorithmic Pre-Deliberation

Algorithmic pre-deliberation refers to the infrastructural stage of public communication at which algorithmic systems organize the field of visibility before deliberation takes place. At this stage, ranking, recommendation, and filtering systems determine which topics, narratives, and expressive forms are rendered perceptible, repeatable, and recognisable within platform-mediated environments. Rather than shaping opinions directly, these systems configure the conditions under which opinions can be formed, articulated, and contested.

This argument requires a shift in how algorithmic power is conceptualized. A large part of the literature approaches algorithms through the lens of exposure, persuasion, or downstream effects: what people see, what they believe, how they polarize, and how misinformation spreads. Such questions remain important, but they often presuppose a communicative space that already exists. Algorithmic pre-deliberation directs attention to a more basic level: the organization of that space itself. Algorithms do not participate in argumentation; they do not persuade or refute. Yet they structure the horizons within which persuasion, refutation, and disagreement can occur by shaping what is likely to be encountered as socially relevant.

Pre-deliberation is analytically distinct from algorithmic bias, agenda-setting, or personalization. Algorithmic bias concerns systematic inequalities or discriminatory outcomes across groups. While bias may appear within visibility regimes, it does not capture the broader significance of how algorithmic infrastructures shape public communication. Pre-deliberation remains operative even where content selection is not overtly discriminatory: it structures salience, repeatability, and the temporal organization of attention. Agenda-setting and gatekeeping theories, by contrast, describe how media institutions prioritize issues and frames through editorial agency. Algorithmic systems restructure these dynamics by transforming selection into continuous, automated optimization. This does not eliminate human influence, but it relocates it: decisions about relevance are embedded in system design, platform metrics, and the forms of engagement that are made measurable and actionable.

A further distinction concerns the temporal logic of visibility. Mass media mediation historically relied on relatively stable cycles of news production and editorial curation. Algorithmic systems reorganize temporality by rewarding speed, recency, and responsiveness to engagement signals. Public attention becomes more volatile, and visibility becomes more contingent upon rapid amplification. This produces a specific kind of pre-deliberative setting in which public issues acquire salience through repetition and acceleration rather than through sustained editorial prioritization or institutional debate.

The mechanism can be described in terms of visibility production. Algorithmic systems infer relevance from behavioural traces and translate that inference into ranking and recommendation. Visibility becomes a function of measurable interaction rather than merely of informational importance. Over time, this creates a selective environment in which some forms of expression are structurally advantaged. Content that is emotionally intense, easily consumable, or readily shareable becomes more compatible with optimization criteria and therefore more likely to achieve durable prominence. The resulting public sphere may appear pluralistic, but its visibility conditions are shaped by relatively uniform computational logics.

Algorithmic pre-deliberation can be further specified as a multi-dimensional process. First, it is a process of selection: systems determine what enters the visible field at all. Second, it is a process of sequencing: systems organize the order and proximity through which issues are encountered, thereby shaping associative meaning and perceived relevance. Third, it is a process of intensification: some issues are made repeatedly present through cross-surface reinforcement, while others are encountered sporadically and remain weakly stabilised. Fourth, it is a process of formatting: visibility regimes privilege communicative forms that are compatible with rapid consumption and measurable engagement, shaping not only what becomes salient but how it becomes expressible.

These dimensions clarify why pre-deliberation cannot be reduced to bias or personalization. Even when users receive different feeds, they are exposed to visibility conditions shaped by similar optimization principles. The system's power lies not only in differentiating audiences but also in standardizing the infrastructural criteria through which content achieves prominence. In this sense, algorithmic pre-deliberation can coexist with both fragmentation and convergence: fragmentation in audience segmentation, convergence in the dominance of optimization-compatible communicative forms.

This infrastructural standardization has implications for recognition and voice. Public opinion requires not only the expression of viewpoints but their recognition as publicly relevant. Recognition depends on visibility that is sustained enough to be taken up by others as an object of discussion. Pre-deliberation structures these conditions by shaping which issues become repeatedly encountered as common objects of attention. The theoretical point is therefore not that algorithms replace deliberation, but that they increasingly define the preconditions under which deliberation becomes socially possible.

The concept also clarifies a central tension in contemporary publicity: platforms may widen participation while narrowing the pathways to durable salience. Under such conditions, the struggle for public presence becomes partly a struggle for compatibility with optimization logics. This does not eliminate politics; it relocates contestation into infrastructural conditions of visibility that are less explicit and more difficult to challenge.

Algorithmic Visibility Regimes

Algorithmic pre-deliberation operates through relatively stable patterns of selection, amplification, and repetition that can be described as algorithmic visibility regimes. These regimes emerge from the interaction of ranking systems, platform metrics, and the accumulated behavioural signals produced by users. They are not simple technical outputs; they are sociotechnical configurations that shape what counts as salient and what becomes durable in the public imagination.

Visibility regimes structure public attention in at least three interconnected ways. They produce hierarchies of prominence by organizing what is repeatedly surfaced and recommended. They privilege particular formats and styles of expression, reinforcing the visibility of communicative forms that align

with optimization criteria. They also impose a distinctive temporality on public discourse, accelerating attention cycles and intensifying competition for visibility.

A central feature of visibility regimes is their reliance on feedback. Algorithmic systems are trained and continually calibrated on behavioural data, meaning that the visibility of content is shaped by signals produced in response to prior visibility. This creates recursive dynamics: visibility generates engagement, engagement signals relevance, relevance produces further visibility. Such feedback loops can stabilize attention around a limited set of issues or expressive styles, producing a sense of collective importance that is partly an artefact of infrastructural repetition. The mechanism is not simply that people are persuaded; it is that the system continuously produces conditions under which certain topics become more available to collective awareness [Bucher, 2018; Kitchin, 2017].

These dynamics help explain why platform-based publics can appear simultaneously dynamic and repetitive. Attention cycles accelerate, yet the forms of content that achieve durable visibility often converge around recognisable templates. This can be understood as a regime-level effect: not the dominance of a single narrative, but the stabilization of criteria that determine which narratives become visible. Such regimes privilege immediacy, affective intensity, and compressibility—qualities that fit short-form and rapid circulation. This is not a claim about user irrationality; it is a claim about infrastructural selection conditions that reward particular communicative affordances.

Visibility regimes also reshape the public's temporal experience. Traditional mass media systems operated through relatively synchronised cycles: scheduled broadcasts, daily editions, and routinised news rhythms. Platform environments produce a different temporality in which issues can surge rapidly and decline just as quickly, while other issues persist through algorithmic reinforcement. This can change how publics interpret continuity and crisis. When salience becomes a function of algorithmic repetition rather than institutional scheduling, public attention may become more volatile and more dependent on platform-level cues of what counts as trending, relevant, or worth watching.

The concept of pseudo-pluralism can be further specified in this context. Platforms may display diverse content at the level of viewpoints, identities, or topics, yet still standardize the deeper infrastructural criteria that govern visibility. Diversity of opinions does not necessarily entail diversity of visibility conditions. A public sphere can be formally open while being structured around a narrow set of optimization logics that privilege certain communicative registers. The effect is a public environment in which difference is expressed through formats that remain compatible with the same attention metrics. Algorithmic pre-deliberation points to this structural uniformity: plurality at the surface, standardization at the level of visibility governance. Another way to specify visibility regimes is to emphasize how they distribute not only attention but also interpretive cues. Platform interfaces increasingly provide signals that guide interpretation: popularity indicators, view counts, engagement ratios, recommendation labels, and trend markers. These signals function as forms of social proof, shaping how users infer collective relevance and legitimacy. In classical public sphere models, collective relevance is often produced through institutional cues such as editorial prominence, headline placement, or the authority of recognized public actors. In platform environments, relevance is frequently inferred from metricised visibility. The issue is not that metrics are "false", but that they become infrastructural cues through which publics interpret what matters. This metricization of relevance can accelerate cycles of salience by reinforcing content that already appears popular, producing a self-amplifying dynamic of visibility.

Visibility regimes also reshape the communicative ecology of critique. When certain issues become rapidly salient through algorithmic reinforcement, critical responses and counter-claims may also be pulled into the same accelerated tempo. This can shorten the time available for interpretive stabilization

and public learning. Under conditions of accelerated salience, publics may encounter issues in fragmented sequences rather than through sustained interpretive frames. The consequence is that public opinion may form through rapid cycles of recognition and reaction rather than through slower processes of deliberative consolidation. Importantly, this is not a normative claim that slower is always better; it is an analytical claim that the temporal structure of visibility shapes the conditions under which collective judgements can stabilize.

From the standpoint of algorithmic pre-deliberation, these dynamics imply that visibility is not merely a distributional variable but an infrastructural architecture. It is produced through the interplay of ranking, interface design, and behavioural feedback. The public sphere thus becomes not only a communicative space but a patterned environment whose conditions of appearance can be analysed. Understanding public opinion under these conditions requires accounting for the ways in which metricised signals, interface cues, and algorithmic reinforcement jointly structure what becomes collectively perceivable as salient.

Visibility regimes have implications for how public problems are recognized. Public problem formation depends not only on the presence of grievances or claims but on their capacity to achieve sustained public visibility. In platform environments, sustained visibility is increasingly produced by infrastructural repetition and cross-surface amplification. This can influence which issues are perceived as collective priorities and which remain socially marginal despite their material significance. The argument is not that algorithms decide public problems, but that they provide the infrastructural conditions that make certain problems more likely to be collectively recognized as such.

Methodological Framework

This article adopts a theoretical and conceptual research design aimed at developing an analytical category and an explanatory model rather than measuring empirical effects. The objective is not to assess individual attitudes, behavioural outcomes, or causal impacts of particular platforms. Instead, it is to identify the infrastructural conditions under which public opinion formation becomes possible in algorithmically mediated environments and to provide a conceptual vocabulary for analysing those conditions.

The analysis proceeds through conceptual reconstruction and theoretical synthesis. It draws on public sphere theory and critical media studies that treat publicity as a social achievement shaped by institutions, norms, and power relations, and it draws on platform studies and science and technology studies that conceptualize algorithms and infrastructures as sociotechnical arrangements that organize social life. The methodological premise is that the organization of visibility should be analysed not only as an outcome of communication but also as a condition of communicative possibility.

A conceptual approach is appropriate because many outcome-focused studies, while invaluable, risk treating the public sphere as a stable container into which algorithmic systems intervene. By focusing on pre-deliberation, the analysis reorients inquiry towards the organization of the container itself: the patterned conditions of visibility that shape what becomes available for discourse. The methodological logic is therefore closer to mechanism-oriented theorization than to effect measurement. Algorithmic pre-deliberation is proposed as a mechanism specifying how visibility is structured through ranking, recommendation, and amplification. It functions as an explanatory bridge between platform infrastructures and public opinion formation without reducing the latter to a direct technological effect.

Although the article does not include a platform-specific case study, it is designed to be empirically tractable. The concept can guide operationalization in future studies through observable indicators such

as patterns of repeated visibility, cross-surface reinforcement, shifts in attention tempo, and the stabilization of particular communicative formats. These indicators do not require access to proprietary code and can be examined through interface analysis, comparative platform observation, and mixed-method designs that triangulate trace data with qualitative interpretation. The argument here is that an explicit account of pre-deliberation is needed for such empirical work to be conceptually coherent; without it, analyses risk conflating downstream discursive dynamics with upstream infrastructural organization.

This methodological stance is deliberately modest and explicit. It strengthens interpretability by separating conceptual contribution from empirical claims while remaining clear about what would count as evidence for or against the proposed mechanism. If algorithmic pre-deliberation is operative, then changes in platform visibility structures should be associated with changes in what becomes publicly discussable, even when underlying social concerns remain constant. Supporting evidence could include the differential durability of issues across platform surfaces, the degree of cross-surface reinforcement, and the extent to which salience is stabilised through repeated algorithmic exposure rather than through institutional agenda-setting. Conversely, the framework would be weakened if public salience were consistently determined by discursive contestation or institutional mediation independently of algorithmic organization.

This is why the article treats algorithmic pre-deliberation as an analytically separable stage. The purpose is not to overstate algorithmic power but to specify where it is located: in the pre-discursive organization of attention. By making the mechanism explicit, the framework invites falsification and comparative research, including cross-platform comparison, longitudinal observation of attention cycles, and designs that examine how visibility is produced across interface surfaces over time. The present contribution is to clarify the conceptual target of such research and to argue that without an account of pre-deliberation, empirical debates risk missing a key layer of the contemporary organization of publicness.

Discussion: Rethinking Public Opinion Theory

Algorithmic pre-deliberation requires a reconsideration of core assumptions within public opinion theory. Traditional accounts, whether normative or critical, locate the formation of public opinion in processes of communication: the articulation of views, contestation of claims, circulation of frames, and negotiation of meanings. Even where inequality and symbolic power are emphasized, the underlying model presumes that visibility is produced through communicative struggle and institutional mediation.

Pre-deliberation modifies this picture by foregrounding an infrastructural layer that precedes discourse. When algorithmic systems organize the field of visibility, they shape what has the opportunity to become publicly discussable. This does not mean that discourse no longer matters. It means that discourse increasingly unfolds within horizons configured by computational selection and amplification. Public opinion must therefore be understood as jointly produced: through deliberation and through the infrastructural organization of attention.

This shift reconfigures how power is conceptualized in the public sphere. Classical models often locate power in institutional control, ideological framing, or unequal access to platforms of speech. Algorithmic pre-deliberation points to a form of power that operates through the allocation of visibility. It shapes not only which actors speak, but which forms of speech are likely to be encountered, repeated, and recognized as relevant. This is not reducible to censorship or manipulation. It is better understood as infrastructural governance of attention, in which public salience is continuously recalibrated through optimization logics.

The implications extend to the relationship between attention and legitimacy. In deliberative democratic theory, legitimacy is tied to the quality of public reasoning and the openness of debate. In algorithmic environments, attention becomes a practical proxy for relevance, and relevance is operationalized through measurable engagement. This creates conditions in which the appearance of collective importance can be generated without corresponding deliberative depth. Some issues become publicly salient because they are structurally compatible with optimization criteria, not because they are sustained through reasoned public contestation.

A further consequence concerns the affective and temporal organization of public discourse. When visibility regimes privilege content that produces immediate engagement, public communication can become more affectively intense and more temporally accelerated. This does not imply that emotion is incompatible with democratic communication, nor does it reduce publics to irrational reactions. It implies that the infrastructures of visibility shape the conditions under which issues are first encountered: often through high-salience cues that invite rapid response rather than slow interpretive consolidation.

These dynamics point to an epistemic dimension of pre-deliberation. In many public contexts, repeated visibility functions as a cue of collective relevance: if an issue appears constantly, it is perceived as socially important. Platform environments intensify this cue because repetition is not solely the product of institutional prioritization or sustained deliberation; it is also a product of algorithmic reinforcement. The risk is not simply misinformation, but the infrastructural production of perceived importance. Issues can become "public problems" through repeated visibility driven by optimization criteria rather than through cumulative public reasoning. Public opinion is thus not only a communicative phenomenon but also an infrastructural arrangement shaping the conditions of collective knowing.

Algorithmic pre-deliberation also helps clarify why platform publics can appear both plural and patterned. Platforms may host a diversity of viewpoints while still privileging uniform criteria of prominence. Diversity of content does not guarantee diversity of visibility conditions. Infrastructural governance can standardize what becomes prominent even when the visible outputs appear heterogeneous. At the same time, personalization can segment audiences while producing convergence around similar optimization criteria. Public discourse may therefore be fragmented in audience distribution yet standardised in the communicative forms and affective registers that reliably achieve visibility. Analysing these dynamics at the level of infrastructural conditions avoids reducing them to individual psychology or treating them solely as downstream effects of persuasion.

Taken together, these dynamics indicate that public opinion theory must integrate an infrastructural dimension. Algorithmic pre-deliberation provides one way of doing so. It enables analysis of how algorithmic systems shape the conditions of appearance for public issues, how salience is stabilised through repetition, and how the horizons of discourse are configured before arguments begin. This perspective complements existing approaches focused on persuasion, bias, or misinformation by locating algorithmic power at the level of pre-discursive organization.

Conclusion

This article has introduced the concept of algorithmic pre-deliberation to theorize an upstream stage of public opinion formation in platform-mediated environments. The central claim is that public opinion is shaped not only through deliberation and communicative interaction, but also through algorithmic visibility regimes that organize what becomes publicly salient prior to discourse.

By foregrounding this pre-discursive organization of attention, the analysis complements discursive and effect-based approaches rather than replacing them. Algorithmic systems do not

eliminate deliberation; they restructure the horizons within which deliberation becomes possible. recognizing this transformation makes it possible to analyze algorithmic power without reducing it to manipulation or bias alone, and to conceptualize public opinion as an outcome of both communicative practice and infrastructural allocation of visibility.

The conceptual framework developed here provides a basis for future research that can examine pre-deliberation empirically by mapping how issues achieve durable visibility across platform surfaces, how metricised cues function as signals of relevance, and how attention tempo and repetition shape perceived importance. It also invites further theoretical work on how publics are constituted when visibility becomes a continuously optimised process. Understanding public opinion under such conditions requires treating visibility not as a neutral background for discourse, but as an organized field that conditions what can become publicly discussable in the first place.

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Алгоритмическая пред-делиберация и инфраструктурное производство общественного мнения

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Аннотация

Общественное мнение часто рассматривается как результат коммуникативных процессов, таких как публичные дебаты, опосредованное обсуждение и коллективная интерпретация. Пересмотры теории публичной сферы по-прежнему предполагают, что публичная видимость возникает в результате дискурсивной борьбы и институционального посредничества. Растущее доминирование цифровых платформ ставит это предположение под сомнение, поскольку системы ранжирования и рекомендаций организуют видимость в масштабе до интерпретации, разногласий или убеждения. В данной статье вводится понятие алгоритмической пред-делиберации для обозначения этой восходящей инфраструктурной стадии, на которой режимы видимости в лентах структурируют условия публичности до делиберации. В статье утверждается, что общественное мнение в средах, опосредованных платформами, формируется не только посредством коммуникативного взаимодействия, но и посредством алгоритмического распределения внимания, которое усиливает определенные темы, форматы и аффективные регистры. Смещая анализ от дискурсивных результатов к преддискурсивным условиям, статья вносит вклад в теорию общественного мнения и исследования платформ, локализуя алгоритмическую власть в структурированном производстве значимости, предшествующем публичному обсуждению и полемике.

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Ключевые слова

Алгоритмическая пред-делиберация, общественное мнение, режимы видимости, управление платформами, экономика внимания, публичная сфера, инфраструктура, медиатизация.

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