

Dead Internet Hypothesis: AI, Censorship, and the Decline of Human-Centered Digital Discourse

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the “Dead Internet Hypothesis”, which argues that much of today’s online activity is no longer driven by real human interaction but instead generated, curated, and amplified by artificial intelligence. It claims that the internet has shifted from being a democratic and participatory space to a corporatized system optimized for engagement, often at the expense of genuine communication. By analysing AI-generated media, monopolized search engines, recommendation algorithms, and digital echo chambers, the research highlights how online discourse is increasingly shaped by algorithmic logic rather than human agency. Using theoretical frameworks such as Habermas’ Public Sphere, McLuhan’s Medium Theory, Baudrillard’s Hyperreality, and van Dijk’s Algorithmic Culture, the paper critically examines the erosion of free speech, the illusion of pluralism, and the rise of simulated narratives. Case studies involving Google’s search algorithms, Facebook’s EdgeRank, TikTok’s recommendation engine, and X’s AI bot activity demonstrate how major platforms prioritize algorithmic visibility over authentic voices. The study concludes by questioning whether human agency can be restored in a digital landscape dominated by AI. It proposes possible interventions, including algorithmic transparency, platform decentralization, and AI literacy, as ways to resist the monopolization of communication. Ultimately, the research challenges the belief that the internet remains an open forum for public discourse, suggesting instead that it has become a controlled, artificial environment where AI governs what is seen, shared, and believed.

Keywords: Algorithmic Gatekeeping, AI-Generated Content, Digital Echo Chambers, Platform Monopolization, Synthetic Online Discourse.

Received / Accepted: 04 March 2025 / 24 July 2025

Citation: Öğüç, Ç. (2025). The Dead Internet Hypothesis: AI, Censorship, and the Decline of Human-Centered Digital Discourse, *İmgelem*, New Media Studies Special Issue, 751-776.

Ölü İnternet Hipotezi: Yapay Zeka, Sansür ve İnsan Merkezli Dijital Söylemin Çöküşü

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, günümüz çevrim içi faaliyetlerinin büyük bir kısmının artık gerçek insan etkileşimleriyle değil, yapay zeka tarafından üretilen, düzenlenen ve yayılan içeriklerle yönlendirildiğini öne süren “Ölü İnternet Hipotezi”ni incelemektedir. Araştırma, internetin demokratik ve katılımcı bir alan olmaktan çıkarak, gerçek iletişim pahasına etkileşimi maksimize eden kurumsallaşmış bir sisteme dönüştüğünü savunmaktadır. Yapay zeka tarafından oluşturulan medya içerikleri, tekel haline gelmiş arama motorları, öneri algoritmaları ve dijital yankı odaları analiz edilerek, çevrim içi söylemin insan iradesinden çok algoritmik mantıkla şekillendiği ortaya konulmaktadır. Habermas’ın Kamusal Alan kuramı, McLuhan’ın Araç Kuramı, Baudrillard’ın Hipergerçeklik kavramı ve van Dijk’in Algoritmik Kültür yaklaşımı gibi kuramsal çerçevelerden yararlanan çalışma, ifade özgürlüğünün aşınması, çoğulculuk yanılması ve simüle edilmiş anlatıların yükselişi gibi konuları eleştirel bir şekilde ele almaktadır. Google’ın arama algoritmaları, Facebook’un EdgeRank sistemi, TikTok’un öneri motoru ve X (eski Twitter) platformundaki bot faaliyetlerini içeren vaka analizleri, büyük dijital platformların gerçek seslerden ziyade algoritmik görünürlüğü önceliklendirdiğini göstermektedir. Çalışma, yapay zekânın egemenliğindeki

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dijital dünyada insan iradesinin yeniden tesis edilip edilemeyeceği sorusunu ortaya koyarak; algoritmik şeffaflık, platformların merkezsizleştirilmesi ve yapay zekâ okuryazarlığı gibi müdahale alanlarını önerir. Sonuç olarak, internetin hâlâ açık bir kamusal tartışma alanı olduğu inancını sorgulayan araştırma, onun artık yapay zekânın neyin görülüp paylaşılacağına ve neye inanılacağına karar verdiği kontrollü ve yapay bir ortam haline geldiğini ileri sürmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Algoritmik Bekçilik, Yapay Zekâ Tarafından Üretilen İçerik, Dijital Yankı Odaları, Platform Tekelleşmesi, Sentetik Çevrim İçi Söylem.

Başvuru / Kabul: 04 Mart 2025 / 24 Temmuz 2025

Atıf: Öğüç, Ç. (2025). Ölü İnternet Hipotezi: Yapay Zeka, Sansür ve İnsan Merkezli Dijital Söylemin Çöküşü, *İmgelem*, Yeni Medya Çalışmaları Özel Sayısı, 751-776.

INTRODUCTION

The Dead Internet Hypothesis suggests that the internet, once an open space for human discourse, has transformed into an algorithmically curated, AI-dominated ecosystem, where much of the content is generated or amplified by artificial intelligence. “In which automated computer operations process data in such a way as to significantly shape the contemporary categorizing and privileging of knowledge, places, and people” (Knox 2015: 5). “This allocates AI a great amount of potential power, and the next stage of digitalization is shifting from a digital society into an ‘AI-embedded’ society” (Borsci et al. 2023: 1466).

This paper critically examines how AI-driven content generation, corporate-controlled algorithms, and engagement-based ranking systems have reshaped the public sphere of online communication. By utilizing theoretical frameworks such as McLuhan’s Medium Theory, Habermas’ Public Sphere, Baudrillard’s Hyperreality, and van Dijck’s Algorithmic Culture, this study explores whether the internet remains a democratic space for engagement or has become a manufactured simulation of discourse, steered by algorithmic forces.

Furthermore, this paper considers alternative perspectives, arguing that AI’s role in content personalization, fact-checking, and community moderation may, in some cases, enhance rather than erode digital communication. This study adopts a qualitative multiple case study design to explore the impact of artificial intelligence, algorithmic gatekeeping, and platform monopolization on human-centered digital discourse. Integrating critical media theory with empirical case analysis, the research investigates four major digital platforms - Google, Facebook, TikTok, and Twitter (X) - each of which plays a central role in shaping contemporary information ecosystems.

Situated within the frameworks of critical media theory and platform studies, this research employs a qualitative interpretive approach. The study combines theoretical inquiry with document-based empirical analysis to examine how AI technologies influence digital

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communication. Rather than aiming for statistical generalization, the objective is to generate a conceptually rich and critical understanding of how algorithmic systems restructure the conditions of public discourse.

The analysis is grounded in interpretive methods, including document analysis and critical discourse analysis. Key sources include platform policy documents, transparency reports, peer-reviewed academic literature, and third-party audits of algorithmic systems. This triangulation of data sources enables a multidimensional investigation into the structural and discursive transformations driven by AI.

The selected platforms - Google, Facebook, TikTok, and Twitter/X - were chosen due to their dominant roles in the global digital communication landscape. Each represents a distinct modality of algorithmic control and information mediation. Google functions as the primary search engine and informational gatekeeper, shaping access to knowledge. Facebook, utilizes engagement-based algorithms to filter and amplify content based on predicted user interest. TikTok Operates through AI-driven personalization and subtle content moderation, often described as “soft censorship”. Twitter/X facilitates real-time public discourse, heavily impacted by algorithmic ranking and automated accounts.

Their inclusion allows for comparative analysis across different algorithmic architectures and socio-technical contexts, highlighting the varied ways AI technologies intervene in digital discourse.

This study adopts a qualitative multiple case study design to examine how algorithmically governed digital platforms influence the nature of public discourse in the age of artificial intelligence. The research is guided by the following core questions:

1. How do major digital platforms algorithmically shape public discourse?
2. To what extent has AI-driven content replaced organic human interaction online?
3. How do different platforms (e.g., TikTok, Facebook, Google, X) approach content moderation and curation?

The four platforms were selected as case studies due to their “global dominance in user engagement and content dissemination”, “centrality in public discourse, especially during politically sensitive events” and “availability of external evaluations, including third-party

audits, peer-reviewed studies, leaked moderation guidelines, and user-reported suppression patterns”.

The study primarily draws on academic literature in media studies, communication, and platform governance, publicly accessible reports from think tanks, civil society groups, and research institutions and empirical findings from prior content analysis, algorithm audits, and platform behaviour studies. Data were interpreted through thematic synthesis and comparative analysis, with close attention to how AI systems shape visibility, virality, and suppression of content. While the study does not conduct original fieldwork or algorithmic audits, it triangulates data from a range of credible, independent sources to assess the broader patterns and systemic tendencies of AI-driven discourse shaping.

While many of the patterns discussed - such as content suppression or political polarization - appear correlated with algorithmic intervention, this study does not claim direct causality in the absence of controlled experimental data. To ensure conceptual clarity and analytical consistency, the following key terms used throughout the study are defined and operationalized as follows:

Table: 1. Key Concepts and Operational Definitions in the Study of Algorithmic Digital Culture

| Concept | Operational Definition |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Death of the Internet | The observable decline of human-centered, participatory, and transparent digital discourse - replaced by content that is algorithmically curated or AI-generated, often lacking clear origin, intention, or accountability. |
| Organic Discourse | Dialogic interaction initiated and sustained by real users in open, non-scripted digital environments without algorithmic amplification or intervention. |
| Authentic Human Interaction | Engagement between verified or traceable human users in public or semi-public digital spaces, such as comment sections, forums, or social feeds - distinguished from automated, manipulated, or bot-generated content. |

Source: Author’s own work.

These definitions provide a conceptual framework for interpreting patterns across platforms and serve as anchors for analyzing shifts in content visibility, user behavior, and the mediation of public discourse.

This study draws on four major theoretical perspectives - McLuhan’s Medium Theory, Habermas’ Public Sphere, Baudrillard’s Hyperreality, and van Dijck’s Algorithmic Culture - to analyze how algorithmic systems have reshaped digital communication. These frameworks are not simply cited as background but are employed as analytical lenses to interpret the selected case studies of Google, Facebook, TikTok, and Twitter/X. Each theory offers a distinct conceptual tool for understanding the dynamics of AI-driven communication:

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Table 2. Theoretical Frameworks and Their Application to AI-Driven Media Platforms

| Theory | Core Concept | Applied Relevance |
|---------------------------|--|---|
| McLuhan (1964) | <i>“The medium is the message”</i> - media shape perception more than content itself | Platforms like Facebook or TikTok are not neutral carriers but technologies that <i>reshape</i> human discourse |
| Habermas (1989) | The <i>public sphere</i> as a space for rational-critical debate | AI-curated platforms fragment discourse and suppress the diversity essential for democratic engagement |
| Baudrillard (1981) | <i>Hyperreality</i> - simulations replace and distort real experience | AI-generated content and personas create a simulacrum of dialogue that may no longer involve authentic humans |
| van Dijck (2013) | <i>Algorithmic culture</i> - platforms shape culture through invisible rule systems | Platform algorithms pre-select, rank, and suppress content, becoming cultural architects rather than mediators |

Source: Author’s own work.

Taken together, these theoretical frameworks offer a powerful lens through which to interpret the internet’s transformation from a participatory medium to an automated, algorithmically managed system. Habermas laments the erosion of the rational-critical public sphere under media commercialization, while Baudrillard takes this further, suggesting that contemporary media simulate reality to the point that authentic discourse is replaced by hyperreality. McLuhan’s insight that “the medium is the message” helps explain how platform architectures reshape not just what is communicated, but how users perceive and interact. Van Dijck’s notion of algorithmic culture and datafication adds a contemporary dimension, illustrating how computational systems quantify user behavior and control visibility. Together, these perspectives converge on the idea that public discourse is no longer driven by democratic deliberation but increasingly shaped by algorithmic prediction and affective manipulation.

The rise of AI-assisted content production is one of the primary forces driving the erosion of human-centered digital discourse. In this transformation, the role of human editors is increasingly relegated from creative producers to supervisory gatekeepers, as algorithmically generated outputs take precedence over human judgment and authorship. “In the process of AI-assisted news writing, the role of editors is defined as supervisory or controlling; this renders editorial creativity and the intellectual dimension of journalism secondary” (Yücedağ and Özkul 2023: 287). This shift not only alters the nature of media production but also undermines the epistemological authority of human agents, paving the way for algorithmic systems to become the new arbiters of relevance and truth. Thus, the ascendancy of AI technologies marks

not just a technical evolution but a normative rupture in the foundations of knowledge and communication.

The death of organic internet communication: Algorithmic gatekeeping and the illusion of free speech

There are serious questions about who controls digital discourse and what information is prioritised, hidden, or amplified as a result of the shift from an open and natural internet to an ecosystem that is managed by artificial intelligence. Three of the biggest content platforms, Google, Facebook, and TikTok, use in-house AI-powered algorithms to decide what content shows up in news feeds, search results, and suggested videos. Although the goal of these algorithms is to maximise participation, they have also come under fire for stifling opposing views, fostering digital echo chambers, and influencing public opinion to support political and corporate agendas.

The idea behind the internet was to provide a decentralised, democratic platform where people could freely discuss topics, access a variety of viewpoints, and participate in international discourse without being constrained by corporate and institutional influence. Algorithmic filtering and platform oligopoly have, in modern times, profoundly altered information dissemination in cyberspace. Unlike traditional media gatekeepers, these algorithms operate without human oversight and are primarily optimized for profit-driven engagement rather than democratic discourse.

Google's search algorithm: The information monopoly

Google's dominance in global information retrieval is well established, with estimates suggesting it handles over 90% of global search engine queries (StatCounter 2024). This gatekeeping function is reinforced by an algorithmic architecture that ranks, personalizes, and curates search results based not only on relevance but also on user behaviour, prior search history, and advertising priorities.

Google no longer functions as a neutral search engine; it has evolved into an opaque curator of knowledge, selectively determining which information is elevated as valuable and which is rendered invisible through algorithmic suppression. This algorithmic filtering fundamentally alters how we perceive truth and reality online. "Search engines reflect the oppressive power structures of societies; marginalized communities - particularly people of colour, women, and activists - are systematically excluded or misrepresented in algorithmic rankings, which privilege dominant, advertiser-friendly narratives" (Noble 2018: 27)

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While Google's role as a search engine gatekeeper shapes information retrieval, platforms like TikTok operate at the level of content suggestion and behavioural nudging - where algorithmic visibility is even more opaque.

Facebook's engagement-based filtering and ideological silos

Facebook's News Feed algorithm (EdgeRank) is designed to maximize engagement by curating content based on user interactions (likes, shares, comments, watch time). Raza and Aslam (2024: 220) examine how Facebook's AI-driven curation systems both enhance user experience and reinforce political polarization. They argue that while personalization increases engagement, it simultaneously narrows the informational ecology by prioritizing content that confirms existing beliefs and marginalizes dissenting voices. As they conclude, these algorithmic filters not only tailor what users see but also constrain the sphere of public discourse, entrenching users within their own ideological echo chambers.

Algorithms such as Facebook's EdgeRank contribute to the creation of ideological echo chambers, reinforcing users' pre-existing beliefs through engagement-driven filtering. This phenomenon aligns with Eli Pariser's (2012) concept of the "filter bubble," in which personalization narrows exposure to opposing viewpoints, ultimately distorting users' perception of public discourse.

Scholars have emphasized how algorithmic systems prioritize content that maximizes engagement, often at the cost of diversity and accuracy. As Gillespie (2018: 142) explains, "Platforms' algorithmic systems are designed to maximize engagement and revenue, which inevitably privileges content that aligns with advertisers' interests. This creates a hierarchy where grassroots activists and independent creators - whose work challenges mainstream narratives - are pushed to the margins". The impact of these mechanisms goes beyond passive filtering; they actively shape user behaviour.

This attention economy fosters sensationalism over substance. Ribeiro et al. (2020: 32) argue that "algorithmic systems designed to maximize watch time or clicks inherently promote sensationalist and polarizing narratives. Marginalized or moderate voices are drowned out, creating an ecosystem where algorithmic realities replace organic discourse." Together, these perspectives highlight the profound influence algorithms exert on shaping online discourse and public opinion.

TikTok's AI-driven Content Moderation and Political Suppression

TikTok has emerged as a dominant force in shaping online content consumption through its highly advanced recommendation algorithms. Unlike platforms such as Google or Facebook, TikTok uses deep-learning models to predict user preferences with remarkable precision. According to Hines et al. (2022: 12), “By tracking retention rates and engagement loops, it creates a self-reinforcing cycle of content amplification that rewards virality over quality.” This design not only keeps users engaged but also promotes content based on emotional resonance rather than informational value.

At the same time, scholars have raised concerns about the broader implications of algorithmic filtering on political discourse. Corporate-owned platforms are often structured to favor narratives that uphold dominant power structures. As Benkler et al. (2018: 297) argue, “By deprioritizing controversial or activist content, their algorithms act as tools of ‘soft censorship,’ narrowing the range of visible political discourse.” This results in a restricted information environment where marginalized voices and dissenting opinions are less likely to surface in users’ feeds.

Aside from direct suppression, algorithmic segregation also intensifies information bubbles, where AI-powered recommendations create a digital world shaped around a person’s existing views. TikTok’s algorithm constantly tracks user interactions, watch time, and activity to show content that keeps them engaged, often creating a cycle of repetitive and confirming information. This method isolates people into echo chambers, preventing them from accessing fresh concepts and debates that contradict prevailing viewpoints.

In addition to algorithmic flaws, corporate and governmental influence significantly affects the material that appears on sites such as TikTok. According to research, AI-powered moderation purposefully suppresses subjects including political opposition, human rights abuses, and certain social movements. These measures lessen the visibility of politically sensitive content, whether as a result of direct government regulation, platform internal policies, or financial incentives. They thereby influence public opinion and manage the information flow in ways that are not even apparent to the majority of consumers. TikTok is one of the most evasive and manipulative digital platforms when it comes to ideological content management since its algorithm actively shapes content trends rather than merely responding to user preferences.

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Ungless et al.'s (2025: 1956) recent study surveying 627 TikTok users in the UK, particularly those with marginalized identities (e.g., LGBTQ+, ethnic minorities), found widespread reports of content being suppressed - not removed, but made less visible - without violating community guidelines.

The Consequences of Algorithmic Gatekeeping

Since AI systems now pre-select conversations rather than relying on human involvement to drive them, the increasing usage of algorithmic curation has resulted in a substantial loss of organic discourse. These algorithms prioritize content based on engagement metrics rather than substantive dialogue, thereby reducing opportunities for meaningful discussion and reinforcing ideological homogeneity. As a result, certain viewpoints are amplified while others are systematically suppressed, leading to a decline in public debate and a reduction in ideological diversity.

Scholars continue to debate the extent to which algorithmic curation influences ideological polarization on social media. While platforms like Facebook use algorithms to tailor user experiences, some researchers argue that user behaviour plays a more significant role in shaping exposure. As Bakshy et al. (2015: 1130) note, "Our work suggests that compared with the effect of friend selection, the effect of [Facebook's] News Feed ranking on the extent of ideological exposure is modest. Individual choice—for example, deciding which stories to click—plays a stronger role in limiting a person's exposure to a diverse range of content." Nevertheless, the decline in pluralistic communication is frequently linked to algorithm-managed "information silos," where users are repeatedly exposed to personalized content that confirms their existing beliefs. This phenomenon, described by Pariser (2012) as the "filter bubble", highlights how personalization can limit exposure to opposing viewpoints and narrow the scope of public discourse.

According to Perrotta and Selwyn (2022), these digital structures severely limit intellectual diversity, arguing that "digital environments that were once envisioned as open spaces for deliberation have increasingly become algorithmically governed systems, where users are enclosed within ideologically homogeneous echo chambers that reinforce pre-existing beliefs rather than fostering critical engagement"

One of the most serious effects of algorithmic filtering is political polarization, as AI-powered ranking systems naturally prioritize high-engagement posts and tend to amplify

misinformation, outrage-driven narratives, and extreme viewpoints instead of promoting balanced discussions. Social media platforms, designed to maximize user engagement through likes, shares, and comments, often favour sensational content with emotional appeal, creating echo chambers where users are repeatedly exposed to reinforcing perspectives while opposing views are pushed aside.

This trend has had lasting effects on political conversations, with figures like Donald Trump using these algorithmic mechanisms to maintain political influence. In recent speeches, Trump has frequently criticized media platforms for alleged censorship, claiming that Big Tech companies are silencing conservative voices while promoting liberal agendas. However, his campaign rhetoric also benefits from these same engagement-driven AI systems, as divisive and controversial statements tend to dominate online discussions and receive greater visibility through algorithmic amplification. “Misinformation and outrage-driven narratives are rewarded by engagement metrics, which incentivize creators to produce polarizing content. Algorithmic platforms thus act as accelerants for societal division” (DiResta et al. 2022: 12).

Engagement-based recommendation systems, such as those used by Facebook and Twitter/X, create reinforcing feedback loops that escalate exposure to politically extreme content. Over time, these loops can radicalize discourse by promoting confirmatory information while suppressing balanced or dissenting views. Similarly, Facebook’s algorithm has been found to prioritize misinformation and divisive narratives over factual reporting, further distorting the digital information landscape. “Facebook’s algorithm prioritizes content that elicits strong reactions (e.g., anger or moral outrage), which disproportionately benefits hyperpartisan and false news” (Thompson 2018).

One of the root causes of this issue is the platform’s bias toward emotionally charged content. Posts that provoke outrage, fear, or anger tend to receive more comments, likes, and shares, prompting the algorithm to amplify them even further in users’ feeds. As a result, fact-based journalism and balanced discussions are often overshadowed by sensational, misleading, or even completely false information. The algorithmic prioritization of divisive or emotionally provocative content distorts users’ understanding of reality and contributes to growing distrust in journalism, institutions, and democratic norms. Rather than rewarding factuality, the current engagement model amplifies content based on emotional impact, creating an environment where virality outpaces verifiability.

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To consolidate the platform-specific findings discussed above, the following table summarizes the role of algorithmic systems in each case study. It outlines the core AI functions, their effects on digital discourse, and the central concerns associated with each platform. This comparative overview highlights how different socio-technical configurations contribute to the broader decline of organic, human-centered communication online.

Table: 3. Platform-Specific AI Functions and Their Impact on Public Discourse

| Platform | AI Function | Impact on Discourse | Key Issue |
|-----------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Google | Search ranking algorithms | Shapes visibility of knowledge | Information gatekeeping |
| Facebook | Engagement-based filtering | Reinforces filter bubbles | Political polarization |
| TikTok | Deep learning for personalization | Suppresses dissent | Soft censorship |
| Twitter/X | Bot-driven amplification | Distorts trending topics | Authenticity erosion |

Source: Author's own work.

Consequences for Democracy and Public Discourse

As was previously said, the growing use of algorithmic curation and AI-driven content moderation has significant ramifications for democracy and public debate, changing how people interact with news, social concerns, and political beliefs. In the end, these systems shape public opinion in ways that undercut democratic values by reinforcing ideological biases, accelerating the dissemination of false information, and suppressing alternative opinions rather than encouraging a wide and pluralistic exchange of ideas.

“Users are more likely to share false claims when they evoke strong emotions, even if they recognize the content as inaccurate. This ‘emotional truthiness’ is amplified by algorithms prioritizing engagement over veracity” (Pennycook et al. 2021: 595). Since emotionally charged content generates higher engagement, social media platforms incentivize misinformation - whether intentional or unintentional - by giving it greater visibility than objective, fact-checked journalism.

Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral (2018: 1146) conducted a large-scale empirical analysis of 126,000 stories tweeted by 3 million users between 2006 and 2017. Using fact-checking sources (e.g. Snopes, PolitiFact) to verify accuracy, they found that false news was 70% more likely to be retweeted than true news, particularly due to emotional appeal and novelty. This peer-reviewed study, published in *Science*, offers robust evidence of virality bias but is limited to English-language content and pre-2018 Twitter datasets.

As these systems become more advanced, the risk of algorithmic bias influencing political discourse grows. The result is an increasingly closed digital ecosystem, where powerful entities control what perspectives are seen and heard, diminishing the internet's role as a space for free and open debate.

Given the growing evidence that AI-driven algorithms distort public discourse, several scholars and technology experts have proposed reforms to restore pluralistic communication and protect democratic integrity. These proposals focus on increasing transparency, decentralizing platform control, and giving users greater autonomy over the content they consume.

Transparency by itself is not enough to ensure algorithmic accountability. Platforms must make their algorithms accessible as well as the context, values, and trade-offs that are incorporated into their architecture. (Ananny & Crawford 2018: 973). More transparency in AI decision-making is one of the most often proposed reforms. In order to help users and regulators recognise and combat such biases, academics contend that platforms should reveal how their algorithms prioritise, filter, and restrict material. Furthermore, digital platforms are required to disclose information about their algorithmic content prioritisation procedures under the Digital Services Act (DSA), which was enacted by the European Commission in 2023. This restriction gives users the chance to challenge algorithmic filtering and ranking systems and guarantees that they can comprehend how decisions impacting their access to information are made. The DSA seeks to reduce algorithmic bias, encourage more equitable information dissemination, and give individuals more control over their digital experiences by requiring increased openness (European Commission 2023).

Platforms ought to give thorough explanations of their content ranking algorithms, including whether they give preference to political affiliations, sponsored articles, or engagement-based metrics. To make sure their online experience isn't being altered without their knowledge, users should have access to tools that let them examine their feed algorithms. Algorithmic accountability measures should be put in place by governments and independent watchdogs to make sure that AI-driven moderation does not excessively silence particular points of view.

While reforms such as algorithmic transparency, decentralization, and AI literacy are frequently cited as solutions to the problems posed by algorithmic governance, they are not without significant obstacles. Corporate platforms have little incentive to adopt transparency

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measures that may compromise proprietary systems or advertising revenue. Additionally, many of the most influential AI models are technically opaque, making it difficult even for developers to fully explain how they function. Political resistance also persists, particularly in countries where governments benefit from surveillance or platform partnerships. These economic, technical, and regulatory challenges complicate efforts to democratize digital infrastructure and underscore the need for sustained pressure from civil society, technologists, and policymakers alike.

Decentralising search engines and social media in favour of open-source, community-governed platforms rather than corporately controlled AI systems are another suggested remedy. New technologies that provide users more control over content distribution and moderation include federated systems (like Mastodon and Bluesky) and block chain-based social media networks. Decentralized platforms eliminate single points of control, reducing the power of corporate algorithms to shape public discourse. Federated social networks enable users to curate their digital spaces without relying on profit-driven AI recommendations. Open-source moderation tools offer more transparent content governance, preventing AI bias from shaping political and social visibility.

“Users expressed a strong desire for transparency and control over algorithmic curation. Many wanted the ability to switch to chronological feeds or customize their recommendations to avoid being trapped in filter bubbles.” (Eslami et al. 2015: 158) These reforms aim to restore human agency in digital communication, ensuring that AI remains a tool for enhancing discourse rather than controlling it.

Despite the widespread belief that the internet remains a space for free expression, the reality is far more complex. Algorithmic decision-making now dictates the boundaries of online discourse, shaping not only what people see and engage with but also what ideas are allowed to circulate. Many of us still hold onto the belief that we’re living in the early, idealistic era of internet freedom; when the technology was expected to overthrow authoritarian regimes and expand democratic space. But that vision no longer reflects today’s reality. Algorithms now thrive on our emotional intensity, feeding off outrage and distraction. In doing so, they manipulate what we see and say, turning what was once imagined as a public forum into a marketplace of hyper-targeted attention.

Thus, while the internet remains operational, its role as an open, human-driven space for public debate is increasingly disappearing. Without serious intervention and structural reforms, the digital world risks becoming a fully automated ecosystem where AI, rather than human discourse, determines the boundaries of political and social reality. One of the defining features of the so-called “dead internet” is the proliferation of AI-generated content, which has significantly altered the nature of digital communication. Muzumdar et al. (2024: 70) examine the implications of AI-driven systems on digital platforms, arguing that algorithmic engagement has redefined the architecture of online interaction. Their study emphasizes that “AI technologies ... prioritize virality and consumption over authentic communication, contributing to the erosion of trust, the loss of content diversity, and a dehumanized internet experience.” This aligns with broader critiques of how algorithmic curation displaces human-centered discourse in favour of automated content optimization.

Furthermore, Perrotta and Selwyn (2022: 8) claim that the emergence of automated moderation and AI-generated writing has drastically changed the nature of communication. According to their research on AI-mediated language models, “The communicative ‘work’ of large language models thus extends beyond generating text and includes the shaping of discursive norms and expectations. Crucially, LLMs are designed to generate outputs that align with probabilistic expectations derived from prior data. As such, their communicative behaviour reproduces and amplifies dominant patterns of language use — including implicit biases and ideological assumptions.” The question of whether AI is improving communication or just copying and reusing stuff in ways that restrict real conversation is brought up by this.

The shift from user-driven to algorithm-driven content dissemination has led to increasing concerns over information gatekeeping and digital echo chambers. This decline in organic digital participation is also linked to concerns over AI-generated misinformation.

Another critical factor contributing to the “death” of the internet is the corporatization and centralization of digital spaces. Where early internet forums, personal websites, and independent blogs once flourished, today’s online ecosystem is dominated by a handful of tech giants. Platform algorithms are primarily structured to serve commercial imperatives rather than to support meaningful dialogue. Engagement-driven algorithmic models are optimized to increase user attention and advertising revenue, often favouring viral, sensationalized, or AI-curated content over authentic human communication. This commercialization of digital discourse supports the view that the internet has become less of a democratic space and more of a controlled information economy.

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The reviewed literature highlights a fundamental shift in the nature of online communication. As AI-generated content increasingly replaces human discourse, and as platforms monopolize digital interactions, the internet has arguably lost its original function as a participatory, open medium. When combined, these results provide credibility to the argument that the internet is no longer the open, dynamic environment that it once was. Real human discourse is now either completely artificial, selectively enhanced, or increasingly infrequent in this AI-dominated environment. This presents serious questions about the direction of digital communication, especially in a time when artificial intelligence (AI) controls what is viewed, shared, and believed on the internet rather than human action.

Understanding the “Death” of the Internet

It is necessary to examine the internet’s evolution into an AI-driven discourse system from a variety of theoretical angles. But instead of just summarising these frameworks, this section assesses their applicability and drawbacks in a time characterised by digital automation and algorithmic decision-making.

According to Marshall McLuhan (1964), media technologies are extensions of human perception and thought. This concept becomes more complicated by the emergence of AI-driven algorithms, though, since AI not only increases human capacities but also changes communication on its own. Important problems are raised by the fact that, in contrast to traditional media, AI curates content using predictive analytics rather than human editorial oversight. Does AI replace and restructure human discourse, or does it simply extend it? Given AI’s growing generative role in content creation, curation, and amplification, the conventional understanding of media as an extension of human abilities may be out of date.

Marshall McLuhan’s Medium Theory (1964) argues that “the medium is the message” meaning that the form of communication shapes the content and user experience. McLuhan posited that each technological medium changes the way humans communicate and interact with the world. In the context of the “dead internet” hypothesis, the medium of the internet has evolved from human-driven discourse to algorithmically dictated content, thereby altering the nature of communication itself. Perrotta and Selwyn (2022) build on this idea, arguing that as algorithmic systems increasingly generate and amplify content across digital platforms, the space for authentic human expression diminishes. In such contexts, the internet shifts from

being a medium for genuine interpersonal exchange to a recursive network of machine-driven narratives that operate independently of human intention.

McLuhan (1964) also suggested that new media often extend human cognition but simultaneously obsolesce prior modes of engagement. Today, AI-generated content and recommendation algorithms dictate what users see, suppressing organic human conversation in favour of machine-optimized visibility. Thus, rather than an extension of human speech, the internet now functions as an automated system of computational speech, where algorithms dictate meaning, rather than people.

Habermas' Public Sphere: A fragmented, Algorithmic Debate Space

Jurgen Habermas (1989) theorized the public sphere as a space for rational-critical debate, where diverse voices contribute to democratic discourse. However, digital platforms, driven by engagement metrics and ad-based revenue models, often do not prioritize rational deliberation but rather maximize user engagement through emotional content (Perrotta & Selwyn 2022: 7). This prioritization has led to fragmented discourse, creating ideological echo chambers where users are repeatedly exposed to content that reinforces their existing beliefs. Rather than fostering a universal public sphere, AI-driven digital environments have polarized discussions into micro-publics, each operating within algorithmically curated information silos.

Jürgen Habermas (1989) developed the concept of the public sphere, referring to a space where individuals engage in rational-critical debate free from state or corporate control. The early internet (Web 1.0 and early Web 2.0) appeared to embody this ideal, providing open forums, independent websites, and grassroots platforms where users could freely express their ideas. However, as social media algorithms and AI-generated content replaced decentralized discussions, the internet shifted away from a true public sphere and toward a corporately curated communication environment.

The ideal of the internet as a democratic common has increasingly eroded under the influence of corporate surveillance structures. What was once envisioned as a participatory digital space has been reshaped by the logics of surveillance capitalism, where user engagement is driven by algorithmic optimization rather than public deliberation. As Zuboff (2019: 27) explains, “We used to imagine the internet as a vast common, open to all and shaped by the needs and voices of its participants. But under surveillance capitalism, the spaces we occupy have become ‘walled gardens’ - private enclaves governed by corporate imperatives. Here, the algorithms that determine visibility, engagement, and even relevance are designed not to foster

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genuine discourse but to serve commercial goals.” Instead of public debate, today’s internet is dominated by AI-curated feeds, filter bubbles, and data-driven manipulation, all of which distort rather than facilitate meaningful civic conversation.

Moreover, the rise of AI-generated news and misinformation further erodes the public sphere, as audiences can no longer distinguish between real and synthetic discourse. As Raza and Aslam (2024: 219) conclude in their study, “the role of AI and recommendation algorithm curation in spreading misinformation and deepening polarized political views have raised concerns.” This suggests that the internet is not just “dead” in terms of human engagement but also in its function as a democratic public sphere.

Baudrillard’s Hyperreality: The Internet as a Simulated Discourse

Jean Baudrillard (1981) introduced the concept of hyperreality, a condition where representations of reality become indistinguishable from reality itself. AI-driven digital environments reflect this phenomenon, as users interact with AI-generated content - including news articles, chatbots, deepfakes, and automated social media interactions - without always recognizing the artificial nature of these engagements. This dynamic raises critical ethical concerns regarding trust, manipulation, and authenticity in online communication. If AI-generated discourse becomes the dominant form of interaction, does the internet still function as a medium of human exchange, or has it become a synthetic ecosystem of simulations?

Jean Baudrillard’s Theory of Hyperreality (1981) is highly relevant to discussions about the AI-dominated internet. Baudrillard argued that modern media does not reflect reality but instead creates simulations that replace reality itself.

In the context of AI-generated content, the internet has become a simulacrum—a self-referential system where fake personas, deepfake influencers, and algorithmic content simulate real human communication, even though no authentic human interaction is taking place. As Pataranutaporn et al. (2021: 39) observe, “the growing presence of AI-generated personas and chatbot influencers in online spaces means that users increasingly interact with machine-simulated personalities rather than real individuals.”

This aligns with what Baudrillard (1981) described as the replacement of reality with a constructed, self-sustaining illusion. Today’s internet, rather than being an arena for organic human dialogue, is largely a simulation of engagement, powered by bots, recommendation algorithms, and AI-generated news cycles.

José van Dijck (2013) introduced the concept of algorithmic culture, emphasizing how platforms dictate cultural narratives through algorithmic decision-making. AI not only determines which information is visible or suppressed but also shapes behavioural patterns by reinforcing engagement-driven content selection. Unlike traditional mass media, which relied on human editorial judgment, today's AI-driven content filtering ensures that platform owners and corporate interests, rather than organic public discourse, determine what is amplified online. The result is an internet that is engineered for maximum engagement rather than intellectual diversity, democratic debate, or factual accuracy.

José van Dijck's (2013) concept of "algorithmic culture" describes how digital platforms do not simply reflect cultural communication but actively shape it through algorithmic curation. In the modern internet, algorithms dictate what is seen, what is shared, and what is considered important, leading to a homogenization of discourse and a decline in digital diversity.

The Fead Internet in Practice

The increasing dominance of AI-generated content in news production and journalism highlights a critical shift in digital discourse. To maintain journalistic integrity and information accuracy, news organisations have historically used human journalists, editors, and fact-checkers. However, the emergence of algorithmic writing systems brought about by AI-powered content generators has raised issues around bias, disinformation, and the loss of human control as they automate a large portion of the news production process.

The level of sophistication of AI-generated news has advanced to the point where it is frequently indistinguishable from journalism written by humans. However, AI-generated reporting lacks the editorial control, contextual knowledge, and investigative depth that are essential for responsible journalism, even while it is technically accurate and fluid. Though they lack the editorial scrutiny, contextual knowledge, and investigative depth necessary for responsible reporting, Muzumdar et al. (2024: 69) argue that a significant portion of online content - including news articles, comments, and reviews - is now produced by AI systems in ways that closely mimic human behaviour, contributing to the illusion of organic activity and diluting genuine human input. The growing use of large language models (LLMs), like OpenAI's GPT series, which can generate complete news pieces in seconds - often faster than professional journalists- has made this problem worse.

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Although there is no denying the effectiveness of AI-generated news, there are serious risks associated with it that call into question the legitimacy of contemporary media. False information and fabrication are among the main issues. Instead of fact-checking in real time, AI algorithms forecast the words in a sequence that are most statistically likely to occur. They can therefore produce deceptive narratives that seem to be written fluently but lack empirical validation. This increases the possibility of deceiving viewers with content that is technically inaccurate but has a persuasive structure - a condition called AI hallucination.

Also, prejudice in algorithmic training affects news produced by AI. Since pre-existing datasets are used to train AI models, any biases in those datasets may be systematically reinforced in material produced by AI. This may result in biased reporting that either covertly or blatantly supports specific political beliefs, cultural viewpoints, or disinformation campaigns. According to Muzumdar et al. (2024: 70), AI models are susceptible to promoting false or ideologically motivated narratives since they lack the critical thinking abilities necessary to distinguish between reliable media and biased sources.

The effect of AI-generated journalism on human employment is another significant worry. As media companies increasingly use AI to cut costs and speed up content creation, the automation of news production has raised concerns about job displacement in the journalism industry. The position of traditional journalists is in danger due to this deskilling impact, especially in fields that need for in-depth examination of complicated subjects, nuanced storytelling, and investigative reporting. AI is effective at synthesising and summarising information, but it is not capable of conducting interviews, critically evaluating sources, or conducting investigative work to unearth hidden realities.

Therefore, even while AI-generated news is quick and efficient, it also brings up social, professional, and ethical issues. The emergence of AI-powered journalism may result in a loss of journalistic integrity, a surge in false information, and a deterioration of the media's function as a democratic watchdog in the absence of human editorial control and accountability systems.

According to Perrotta and Selwyn (2022: 6), "the role of the human educator, researcher, or learner is reconfigured, and in some cases reduced, to a peripheral function that aligns with automated systems of optimisation, prediction and standardisation."

This case study illustrates how, rather than improving human communication, AI-generated material is displacing it, turning online discourse into more automated content recycling than genuine discussion.

Counterarguments and Limitations

While this paper critiques the rise of AI-generated and algorithmically curated content as a threat to authentic digital discourse, it is important to acknowledge scholarly and practical perspectives that highlight the benefits of algorithmic systems. For instance, machine learning tools have significantly improved content moderation, helping platforms filter out hate speech, misinformation, and abuse more efficiently than human moderators alone. Scholars like Gillespie (2018) argue that algorithmic moderation has become essential to scaling content governance in increasingly participatory environments. AI also plays a role in expanding access to knowledge through personalization, translation tools, and recommendations tailored to marginalized or niche communities.

Moreover, critics of the “dead internet” thesis argue that it can be overly deterministic, attributing social and political decay solely to technological systems without fully accounting for structural inequalities, media literacy gaps, or cultural shifts in public communication. Some scholars suggest that algorithmic amplification does not inherently suppress critical dialogue but may, in certain cases, amplify underrepresented voices, especially when design is inclusive and transparent. This study does not claim that all AI intervention is harmful, nor does it reject the possibility of constructive algorithmic design. However, it focuses on the risks and observable patterns of manipulation and homogenization that emerge when platform governance lacks transparency and accountability.

Finally, the study is limited by its reliance on secondary data, including academic literature, third-party audits, and publicly available reports. It does not include original platform audits, user interviews, or quantitative modelling. Future research could enrich this analysis through empirical user studies, content analysis, or experimental investigations into algorithmic behaviour and audience response. These tensions - between control and empowerment, simulation and visibility - frame the evolving debate on whether digital discourse is being enhanced or eroded in the age of algorithmic mediation.

CONCLUSION & FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

While this study critiques the dominance of algorithmically-curated content, it acknowledges that AI-driven systems also offer benefits - such as improving moderation, expanding access,

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and enabling niche communities to thrive. Moreover, this analysis is limited by its reliance on secondary data; no platform audits or user interviews were conducted. Future research could investigate user experiences directly or apply quantitative models to assess algorithmic impact at scale.

This paper has explored the transformation of the internet from a human-centered communication space to an AI-driven, algorithmically curated environment, ultimately supporting the argument that the internet has become a “dead” medium where genuine human discourse is increasingly rare or manipulated.

Theoretical frameworks such as McLuhan’s medium theory, Habermas’s concept of the public sphere, and Baudrillard’s notion of hyperreality collectively illuminate the transformation of the internet from a forum for authentic human discourse into a self-perpetuating, algorithmically governed information ecosystem increasingly dominated by artificial intelligence.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the fundamental nature of digital communication has been redefined - not through organic evolution, but through the increasing dominance of AI and algorithmic control, which has reshaped the internet into an environment that simulates engagement rather than fostering genuine dialogue. The “death” of the internet as a space for human discourse presents both challenges and opportunities for the future of digital communication. Below are the key implications that emerge from this research.

Baudrillard’s (1981) concept of hyperreality - a condition in which representations no longer reflect an external reality but instead constitute reality itself - has become increasingly relevant in the age of artificial intelligence. As AI-generated, AI-curated, and AI-optimized content saturates digital platforms, the boundary between authentic human discourse and synthetic simulation is progressively obscured. In hyperreal environments, the distinction between the “real” and the “artificial” collapses; simulations become more persuasive and engaging than the realities they are meant to represent. This dynamic is amplified by algorithmic systems that privilege virality, emotional intensity, and pattern recognition over context, intentionality, or truth. Consequently, what circulates as “discourse” online is often pre-engineered for maximum engagement rather than deliberative meaning. The result is a communicative landscape where users are no longer engaging with one another directly, but instead navigating a mirror-world of algorithmic reflections - what Baudrillard might call a

“simulacrum of discourse.” In such a system, the potential for critical dialogue and democratic engagement is displaced by the performance of interaction, rendering user’s passive participants in an automated spectacle of meaning.

José van Dijck (2013) argues that to reclaim the public value of connectivity, we must embed civic and democratic safeguards - such as transparency, democratic accountability, and public-interest regulation - directly into platform infrastructure, challenging the corporate logics that currently dominate algorithmic governance. As AI continues to replace human-generated content, ethical concerns about bias, misinformation, and corporate control are more pressing than ever. Perrotta and Selwyn (2022: 8) warn that “their communicative behaviour reproduces and amplifies dominant patterns of language use - including implicit biases and ideological assumptions.” There is a growing need for AI regulation, transparency, and digital ethics policies to ensure that AI-driven communication does not replace human agency in online discourse.

So, is the internet dead? The findings of this paper suggest that, while the internet remains functionally active, its role as a human-centered communication space has been fundamentally transformed. AI-driven algorithms, platform monopolization, and the rise of synthetic content have shifted the internet from an arena of organic discourse to a curated, automated engagement system.

The traditional internet is increasingly being replaced by algorithmic curation and AI-generated content. The new internet is not “dead” in the sense of inactivity, but rather “dead” in the sense that it no longer functions as an open, human-driven space for discourse.

While this paper has demonstrated that AI and algorithms have taken over much of internet discourse, the future of digital communication is still being shaped. If researchers, policymakers, and users push for decentralization, algorithmic transparency, and AI literacy, there may still be a chance to reclaim the internet as a space for meaningful human engagement rather than an AI-driven simulation of interaction. But if we fail to challenge its transformation into an algorithmic echo chamber, we may soon find ourselves speaking into a void where only AI listens.

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Zuboff, S. (2019). The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power, *PublicAffairs*.

Makale Bilgileri/Article Information

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|------------------------------|--|---|--|
| Etik Beyan: | Bu çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde bilimsel ve etik ilkelere uyulduğu ve yararlanılan tüm çalışmaların kaynakçada belirtildiği beyan edilir. | Ethical Statement: | It is declared that scientific and ethical principles have been followed while carrying out and writing this study and that all the sources used have been properly cited. |
| Çıkar Çatışması: | Çalışmada kişiler veya kurumlar arası çıkar çatışması bulunmamaktadır. | Conflict of Interest: | The authors declare that declare no conflict of interest. |
| Yazar Katkı Beyanı: | Çalışmanın tamamı yazar tarafından oluşturulmuştur. | Author Contribution Declaration: | The entire study was created by the author. |
| Mali Destek: | Çalışma için herhangi bir kurum veya projeden mali destek alınmamıştır. | Financial Support: | The study received no financial support from any institution or project. |
| Yapay Zekâ Kullanımı: | Bu çalışmada herhangi bir yapay zekâ tabanlı araç veya uygulama kullanılmamıştır. | Use of Artificial Intelligence: | This study did not utilize any artificial intelligence-based tools or applications. |
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