Derleme Makalesi / Review Article

FROM AGENDA-SETTING TO ALGORITHMIC GATEKEEPING: RETHINKING MEDIA POWER IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Gündem Belirlemeden Algoritmik Eşik Bekçiliğine: Dijital Çağda Medya Gücünün Yeniden Düşünülmesi

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Abstract

The digital age has profoundly transformed the functioning of media systems across production, distribution, and circulation processes. While classical communication theories such as agenda-setting and gatekeeping long provided reliable frameworks for explaining the societal impact of media, the rise of social media platforms, the direct involvement of users as content producers, and the invisible regulatory role of algorithms have increasingly exposed the limitations of these approaches. Artificial intelligence–based recommendation systems and algorithmic ranking mechanisms now determine which news and information enter circulation, bringing "algorithmic gatekeeping" to the forefront of theoretical debate. This study is a conceptual review based on a literature search conducted in Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science databases for the period 2010–2025. The analysis identifies where classical theories fall short in the digital context and discusses how algorithmic processes restructure media power through three operational dimensions: visibility allocation, threshold adjustment, and circulation velocity. Findings indicate that digital media not only shape the distribution of content but also fundamentally influence the scope, quality, and democratic plurality of public debate. By sharpening the conceptual boundaries of "algorithmic agenda-setting" and "algorithmic gatekeeping," the study contributes to the literature at a theoretical level and proposes a conceptual framework with testable propositions for future research.

Keywords: *Agenda-Setting, Gatekeeping, Algorithmic Media, Public Sphere, Digital Communication, Media Power, Democracy, Social Media Algorithms.*

Özet

Dijital çağ, medya sistemlerinin işleyişini üretim, dağıtım ve dolaşım süreçlerinin tümünde köklü biçimde dönüştürmüştür. Gündem belirleme ve eşik bekçiliği gibi klasik iletişim kuramları, uzun yıllar boyunca medyanın toplumsal etkilerini açıklamada güvenilir çerçeveler sunmuş olsa da, sosyal medya platformlarının yükselişi, kullanıcıların içerik üretiminde doğrudan aktör haline gelmesi ve algoritmaların görünmez düzenleyici rol üstlenmesi, bu kuramların sınırlarını belirginleştirmiştir. Yapay zekâ tabanlı öneri sistemleri ve algoritmik sıralama mekanizmaları, haberlerin ve bilgilerin hangi önceliklerle dolaşıma gireceğini tayin ederek "algoritmik eşik bekçiliği"ni yeni bir kuramsal tartışma odağına taşımaktadır. Bu çalışma, 2010–2025 dönemini kapsayan ve Google Scholar, Scopus ile Web of Science veri tabanlarında yürütülen literatür taramasına dayalı kavramsal bir derlemedir. Analiz, klasik kuramların dijital bağlamda yetersiz kalan noktalarını açığa çıkarmakta; görünürlük tahsisi, erişim eşiği ayarlaması ve dolaşım hızının mimarisi olmak üzere üç işlem boyutunda algoritmik süreçlerin medya gücünü yeniden yapılandırma biçimlerini tartışmaktadır. Bulgular, dijital medyanın yalnızca içerik dağıtımını değil, kamusal tartışmaların kapsamını, niteliğini ve demokratik çoğulculuğun işleyişini de köklü biçimde etkilediğini göstermektedir. Çalışma, "algoritmik gündem belirleme" ve "algoritmik eşik bekçiliği" kavramlarını keskinleştirerek literatüre kuramsal düzeyde katkı sunmakta ve gelecek araştırmalar için sınanabilir önermeler içeren bir kuramsal çerçeve önermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Gündem Belirleme, Eşik Bekçiliği, Algoritmik Medya, Kamusal Alan, Dijital İletişim, Medya Gücü, Demokrasi, Sosyal Medya Algoritmaları.*

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INTRODUCTION

The digital age has profoundly transformed the functioning of media systems, leading to significant changes in processes ranging from news production to its distribution and consumption. In particular, the widespread use of the internet, the rise of social media platforms, and the penetration of mobile technologies into every sphere of life have weakened the power of traditional mass communication models and paved the way for the emergence of new forms of communication. These developments are not confined to a purely technical transformation; they have also reignited debates concerning which actors wield media power and how it is exercised. In this context, the social, political, and cultural functions of the media are being redefined, while the structure of the public sphere, modes of access to information, and processes of democratic participation are reconsidered within a different framework (Castells, 2009).

To better understand this transformation, it is necessary to consider the historical context of media studies. Within the history of media research, the agenda-setting and gatekeeping theories have been regarded as fundamental theoretical frameworks for explaining the effects of media on public opinion. McCombs and Shaw's (1972) "Chapel Hill" study clearly demonstrated the media's power to shape the public agenda by influencing which issues are perceived as important. This perspective revealed that mass communication tools not only transmit information but also direct society's attention toward specific matters. On the other hand, White's (1950) pioneering work introduced the concept of "gatekeeping" to the literature by showing the critical role of individual editorial choices and organizational structures in the flow of news. Later, Shoemaker and Vos (2009) expanded this concept, redefining gatekeeping as a multi-actor and multi-layered process rather than merely a matter of individual decisions. Thus, both agenda-setting and gatekeeping theories have long served as reliable reference points in explaining the social impact of media.

However, the digital media environment that has developed in the twenty-first century has rendered the explanatory power of these classical theories increasingly contested. Social media platforms, news websites, and digital content producers have not only accelerated the processes of information production but have also largely delegated control over content circulation to algorithms. Algorithmic systems, described by Gillespie (2018) as "invisible regulators," determine which content users encounter and, in doing so, delineate the boundaries of public discourse. Consequently, media power is no longer vested solely in journalists or

editors but is also embodied in algorithmic mechanisms designed by global technology companies with commercial objectives.

At this point, intense debates in the literature have emerged concerning the opportunities and risks associated with this transformation. It is frequently discussed that the digital shift entails both opportunities and challenges for democratic functioning. Napoli (2019) argues that algorithms, by facilitating personalized flows of information, can enrich user experience and strengthen the public good. In contrast, Tufekci (2015) emphasizes that algorithmic ranking mechanisms generate new risks that threaten democratic pluralism by confining users to homogeneous perspectives and narrowing the space for critical debate. Similarly, Pariser (2011), through the concept of the "filter bubble," contends that users are increasingly exposed only to content that reinforces their preexisting views; meanwhile, Sunstein (2017) demonstrates that "echo chambers" weaken the democratic public sphere and exacerbate political polarization.

On the other hand, these debates are not unidirectional, and intermediary approaches have also emerged. In addition, hybrid models have been developed to better understand how traditional theories are transformed within the digital context. Bennett and Iyengar (2008) argued that media effects must be reconsidered within a fragmented information environment, while Chadwick (2013), through the concept of the "hybrid media system," demonstrated the interweaving of traditional and digital media dynamics. These approaches indicate that classical theories are not entirely obsolete but rather need to be integrated with the new conditions of the digital age.

In recent years, one of the most prominent debates has revolved around the concept of "algorithmic gatekeeping." The regulation of information flows is no longer carried out solely by human actors but also through machine learning models, artificial intelligence–based recommendation systems, and platform algorithms. The recommendation system of YouTube, the News Feed algorithm of Facebook, and the content-ranking mechanism of TikTok function as invisible "gatekeepers" that determine which content users are exposed to. For this reason, an increasing number of scholars in the literature argue that classical agenda-setting and gatekeeping theories need to be reconsidered under the conditions of the digital age (Gillespie, 2018; Napoli, 2019).

In conclusion, these debates also help clarify the aim of this article. This study seeks to integrate, within a systematic framework, the increasingly influential approaches of "algorithmic agenda-setting" and "algorithmic gatekeeping" by examining the ways in which

classical agenda-setting and gatekeeping theories fall short in explaining the redistribution of media power in the digital age. As a theoretical inquiry based on secondary sources, the article demonstrates how media power has been restructured and in which dimensions the functioning of the public sphere has been transformed. In doing so, it reestablishes the relationship between classical theories and the digital ecosystem, offering a coherent conceptual synthesis for contemporary media studies. By repositioning the dispersed strands of "algorithmic gatekeeping" and "algorithmic agenda-setting" within a theoretical architecture, the study explicitly defines their points of articulation with classical theories. The contribution of this article lies in systematically situating the concepts of "algorithmic agenda-setting" and "algorithmic gatekeeping" within the classical literature on agenda-setting and gatekeeping, sharpening their scope and points of connection, and thereby providing an updated framework for analyzing the relationship between media and democracy. The methodological framework of the study is outlined in the following section.

METHOD AND SCOPE

This study is a conceptual review based on secondary sources and relies on a literature search completed as of 17 August 2025. The search was conducted in Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science databases. The main search strings, written in quotation marks and combined with Boolean operators, were as follows: "algorithmic gatekeeping" OR "algorithmic agenda-setting" OR ("recommendation systems" AND "public sphere") OR "platform governance." The publication year range was limited to 2010–2025 because research on algorithmic systems and social media platforms became more prominent after 2010, following the widespread adoption of algorithm-driven content curation. Inclusion criteria covered peer-reviewed journal articles as well as books and book chapters published by reputable academic publishers. Exclusion criteria consisted of newspaper articles, blog content, and non-peer-reviewed texts. Foundational works in the field (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Lewin, 1947; White, 1950; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009) were additionally included through purposive sampling. Duplicate records were removed, and only original works offering theoretical contributions were evaluated. This protocol aims to maintain conceptual integrity while ensuring transparency and replicability.

This study defines algorithmic gatekeeping through three observable operational dimensions. The first is visibility allocation, referring to the determination of a content's position, repetition frequency, and likelihood of recommendation on the screen through ranking and recommendation algorithms. The second is threshold adjustment, encompassing suitability

filters, moderation rules, and sensitivity thresholds that determine whether content enters circulation. The third is the architecture of circulation velocity, whereby design features such as notifications, autoplay, infinite scroll, and trending interfaces shape the diffusion speed and lifespan of content. These three dimensions operate as a conceptual model that establishes causal links among actors (platforms, content producers, users), mechanisms (learning-to-rank systems, recommendation policies, governance rules), and outcomes (agenda fragmentation, visibility inequalities, quality of debate).

THEORETICAL BACKROUND

One of the most established approaches to explaining social influence in media research is the agenda-setting theory developed by McCombs and Shaw (1972). This perspective posits that the media does not primarily persuade the public directly but rather delineates the boundaries of the agenda by deciding which issues are worthy of discussion. The classical study conducted by McCombs and Shaw in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, revealed a strong correlation between the issues prioritized in news coverage and the matters voters considered important in their political agendas. This finding has been conceptualized in the communication literature through the oft-cited maxim, "the media may not tell people what to think, but it tells them what to think about," and has since become a foundational reference point in explaining media effects over subsequent decades (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

The gradual expansion of this framework has led to new conceptual developments within the agenda-setting literature. Subsequent studies have revealed that the media's influence is not limited merely to the selection of issues but also extends to the specific attributes through which these issues are presented. This development has been termed "second-level agenda-setting" in the literature (McCombs, 2004; Weaver, 2007). At the first level, the focus lies on which issues the media prioritizes; at the second level, the emphasis shifts to how these issues are framed, with which attributes they are highlighted, and with which evaluative elements they are presented. In this way, the media shapes not only the scope of the agenda but also its tone and the manner in which it is perceived.

Another fundamental approach that developed in parallel with agenda-setting debates is the gatekeeping theory. Closely related to the agenda-setting perspective, gatekeeping was first introduced by Kurt Lewin (1947) to explain decision points in food consumption processes and was later adapted to news content by David Manning White (1950). In White's classical study, the decisions of an editor regarding which news stories to publish and which to exclude were examined, revealing the significant role of personal value judgments in this process. This

analysis demonstrated that the flow of information is filtered by specific "gatekeepers" and that the news reaching the public never circulates in a raw form but rather passes through editorial choices.

In later years, the theory evolved into a multilayered structure, bringing new depth to media research. Over time, gatekeeping theory expanded from an individual editorial choice to a broader perspective. Shoemaker and Vos (2009) examined the gatekeeping process across five distinct levels: individual, routine, organizational, inter-institutional, and ideological. This approach showed that news selection is influenced not only by personal preferences but also by the economic structures of media organizations, their political relationships, and social pressures. Thus, gatekeeping has been redefined as a multilayered process and has become a central theoretical framework in modern media studies.

However, with the process of digitalization, the limitations of these classical approaches have become increasingly evident. The accelerated digitalization of the twenty-first century has profoundly transformed the media ecology. Manuel Castells' (2009) "network society" approach offers a critical theoretical framework for explaining this transformation. According to Castells, the production and circulation of information have shifted from hierarchical structures to network-based ones, rendering communication processes decentralized and multi-actor in nature. In this new ecosystem, not only traditional media organizations but also social media users, online content creators, and algorithmic systems have become decisive actors in shaping information flows.

At this point, it is clear that the explanatory capacity of classical theories has narrowed, and new concepts are required. This development has limited the ability of both agenda-setting and gatekeeping theories to fully explain contemporary dynamics. While agenda-setting theory once served as a powerful tool to explain the influence of traditional media on public opinion, today the social agenda is shaped not only by media organizations but also by the algorithms of social media platforms (Napoli, 2019; Trielli & Diakopoulos, 2020). Similarly, gatekeeping is now carried out not solely by journalists or editors but also through artificial intelligence–based systems designed by platform companies (Napoli, 2015; Thorson & Wells, 2016).

These debates have also given rise to a new orientation in the literature focusing on the democratic functions and risks of algorithms. In particular, algorithmic ranking and recommendation mechanisms act as invisible gatekeepers, determining which issues are brought to the forefront and which are relegated to the background—often without direct human intervention. Gillespie (2018) emphasizes that the content moderation policies of digital

platforms shape public discourse, while Bucher (2018) demonstrates how algorithmic power generates new asymmetries in the political and social spheres. Tufekci (2015), in turn, highlights the unpredictable effects of algorithmic ranking on democratic processes.

Therefore, the emerging concepts in the literature should be evaluated in integration with classical theories. In the digital media age, the flow of information is filtered not only by human actors but also by opaque algorithmic systems driven by commercial motivations. At this point, the concept of "algorithmic agenda-setting" explains which issues are prioritized by the media and with which attributes they are presented, while the concept of "algorithmic gatekeeping" clarifies the processes through which content enters circulation and becomes visible. In this context, the contribution of this study is not to propose "algorithmic agenda-setting" and "algorithmic gatekeeping" for the first time, but rather to reposition their existing uses within a theoretical architecture and to demonstrate their systematic points of articulation with the classical agenda-setting/gatekeeping literature. Both approaches are increasingly debated in the literature, signaling the need to reconsider classical theories in the digital context (Bucher, 2018; Napoli, 2015; Thorson & Wells, 2016).

Following these theoretical discussions, the method and scope of the study must be clarified. Rather than producing empirical data, this research constitutes a conceptual review based on secondary sources. Its aim is to bring together the fragmented debates in the literature and to theoretically demonstrate how classical theories can be repositioned within the context of the digital age. In this way, the relationship between continuity and transformation in the media effects literature is systematized, offering a theoretical synthesis that contributes to contemporary communication research.

In this regard, presenting a comparative account of the key differences between classical and algorithmic approaches makes the points of continuity and transformation in the literature more visible. The comparison in Table 1 systematically outlines the theoretical dimensions of the shift from classical approaches to algorithmic approaches.

Table 1. Comparison of Classical and Algorithmic Approaches

Approach	Core Focus	Actors Determining Information Flow	Operational Logic	Impact on Democratic Processes
Agenda-Setting	Determining which issues will be placed on the public agenda	Traditional media organizations, editors, journalists	Prioritization of news and its presentation to the public	Directs public attention to certain issues, influencing what society discusses

Approach	Core Focus	Actors Determining Information Flow	Operational Logic	Impact on Democratic Processes
Gatekeeping	Selection of which information enters circulation	Editors, reporters, media owners	Filtering based on personal, institutional, and ideological factors	May limit diversity, carries ideological influences
Algorithmic Gatekeeping	Filtering of content flow by algorithms	Algorithms designed by digital platforms	User interactions, data tracking, advertising, and commercial objectives	Personalizes information flow but raises transparency issues and democratic risks
Algorithmic Agenda-Setting	Determining which issues are highlighted by algorithms	Digital platforms, AI-based recommendation systems	Content ranking and recommendation mechanisms	Shapes public perception of issue importance, leading to personalized and fragmented agendas

Source: McCombs & Shaw (1972); White (1950); Shoemaker & Vos (2009); Napoli (2015, 2019); Gillespie (2018); Bucher (2018); Thorson & Wells (2016).

The distinctions summarized in Table 1 provide a solid conceptual foundation for the ensuing discussion on algorithmic gatekeeping. While classical approaches emphasize the role of human actors in shaping information flows, algorithmic approaches center on the systems designed by digital platforms. Therefore, this comparison clarifies the theoretical basis for the subsequent analysis.

Algorithmic Gatekeeping

The concept of gatekeeping, developed in communication studies to explain who filters information and according to which criteria, was initially elaborated by Lewin (1947) and White (1950), highlighting the decisive role of individual editorial choices. Shoemaker and Vos (2009) later expanded this model into five levels—individual, routine, organizational, inter-institutional, and ideological—showing that media content is always filtered through actors, institutions, and values.

With digitalization, gatekeeping has increasingly been carried out through algorithmic systems. Social media platforms, search engines, digital news sites, and online content providers organize the flow of information through complex algorithms (Napoli, 2015). The term "algorithmic gatekeeping" thus emphasizes the need to reinterpret classical theory in the digital age (Thorson & Wells, 2016).

Algorithmic gatekeeping is not merely a technical process of content ranking; it is also a mechanism of power that determines social visibility, access to information, and the boundaries of public debate. Facebook's News Feed algorithm, X's (formerly Twitter) content-ranking system, YouTube's recommendation engines, and Google's search algorithms directly affect the information users can access (Bucher, 2018). These systems regulate content visibility by taking into account users' interaction histories, click-through rates, the commercial objectives

of the platform, and advertising revenues. Gillespie (2014) defines this process as "the invisible yet decisive dimension of platform policies," emphasizing that algorithms are not neutral technical tools but regulatory actors imbued with normative choices. This reframing highlights that search and recommendation systems not only structure distribution logics but also exercise agenda-setting influence; therefore, they are directly articulated with algorithmic agenda-setting, discussed below.

In this context, empirical studies examining the role of algorithms in democratic processes have also drawn significant attention. The study by Trielli and Diakopoulos (2020) demonstrates that search engine algorithms possess agenda-setting power in electoral processes. This finding reveals that algorithmic gatekeeping influences not only media consumption but also democratic participation and political processes more broadly. In this way, algorithmic ranking and recommendation systems institutionalize algorithmic agenda-setting by determining not only the circulation of content but also which issues emerge as "topics" of public concern.

There are also positive evaluations of algorithmic gatekeeping. Anderson (2011) argues that algorithms facilitate user experience in the age of information abundance by enabling individuals to access topics of interest more quickly through personalized content. Recommendation systems reduce informational complexity, enhance efficiency, and lower the time costs for users. From this perspective, algorithms assume a functional role in regulating the flow of information in modern societies. Nevertheless, the increasingly prominent critical debates in the literature cannot be overlooked.

On the other hand, the more dominant strand in the literature argues that algorithmic gatekeeping poses risks for democratic processes. Beer (2017) contends that the opacity of algorithms prevents users from knowing the criteria by which they are directed, creating a form of "invisible manipulation" Noble (2018) demonstrates that search engine algorithms can produce outcomes that marginalize minority groups and reproduce structural inequalities. Pariser's (2011) notion of the "filter bubble" highlights how algorithms may expose users only to content that reinforces their own worldviews, while Sunstein's (2017) discussion of "echo chambers" shows how this dynamic deepens social polarization.

Allcott and Gentzkow (2017), in their analysis of Facebook's role in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, demonstrate that algorithmic processes played a critical role in the spread of misinformation and disinformation. Similarly, Tüfekçi (2015) emphasizes the unpredictable social effects of algorithmic ranking, noting in particular its unintended consequences for the

quality of political participation. Therefore, the effects of algorithmic gatekeeping must be evaluated not only at the individual level but also in terms of its broader societal implications.

Algorithmic gatekeeping transforms not only individual information flows but also broader social power relations. Couldry and Mejias (2019) explain this process through the concept of "data colonialism," arguing that platforms shape social life based on economic and ideological motivations. Napoli (2019) similarly contends that algorithmic regulations operate primarily in line with commercial interests rather than the public good, thereby necessitating new ethical and legal debates in media policy.

In conclusion, when different orientations in the literature are considered together, algorithmic gatekeeping emerges as a new analytical lens that goes beyond classical theories. It complements the shortcomings of traditional gatekeeping theory while simultaneously raising new questions about the nature of media power. This phenomenon demonstrates that digital platforms are not merely technical intermediaries but also actors that generate "digital power." Therefore, algorithmic gatekeeping should be regarded as a central analytical tool for understanding the relationship between media and society today.

Visibility Allocation

Visibility allocation constitutes the first operational dimension of algorithmic gatekeeping and refers to the structured distribution of attention within digitally mediated environments. In contrast to editorial prominence in legacy media systems, visibility in platform-based communication is dynamically produced through algorithmic ranking, recommendation systems, and interface design. Empirical research on algorithmic curation demonstrates that what users encounter is shaped by ranking mechanisms that systematically prioritize certain content while rendering other material marginal or invisible (Rader & Gray, 2015).

Algorithmic visibility is therefore not a neutral outcome of information abundance but a consequence of optimization processes embedded in platform infrastructures. Open-access studies of news recommender systems show that algorithmic ranking logics influence public exposure by amplifying specific topics and sources according to engagement-based criteria rather than journalistic relevance (Bodó et al., 2019). From this perspective, visibility allocation operates as a central gatekeeping mechanism through which algorithmic systems restructure agenda dynamics by determining what becomes noticeable, repeatable, and socially salient in the digital public sphere.

Threshold Adjustment

Threshold adjustment represents the second operational dimension of algorithmic gatekeeping and refers to the criteria, automated decision logics, and moderation mechanisms that determine whether user-generated content is allowed to enter circulation at all. In digital platforms, algorithms are used to enforce content policies, classify speech, and remove or demote material before it reaches wider audiences, often without human oversight (Prem & Krenn, 2023). This algorithmic moderation operates as a pre-distribution filter, shaping what content passes the threshold into public visibility and what is suppressed or altered based on platform rules and automated classifications. Research on algorithmic censorship demonstrates that these systems can exercise broad control over communications by intervening at scale, effectively determining which expressions remain publicly accessible and which are excluded on the basis of automated norms and enforcement logics (Cobbe, 2020). As a result, threshold adjustment shifts traditional gatekeeping decisions from editorial judgment to algorithmic processes, raising concerns about transparency, bias, and the democratic legitimacy of visibility decisions in public discourse

Architecture of Circulation Speed

The architecture of circulation speed in digital networks is fundamentally shaped by the temporal dynamics of information diffusion among users. Qi, Liang, Wang, and Cheng (2018) demonstrate that both micro-level interactions between node pairs and macro-level network structures critically determine how fast content spreads. By modeling information propagation in online social networks using a discrete-time approach, they show that the speed at which information reaches users depends on the timing and sequence of contacts, highlighting the role of temporal patterns in accelerating or slowing the diffusion process. This perspective underscores that algorithmic gatekeeping not only selects content but also interacts with network and temporal structures to influence circulation speed.

Media, Power and Democracy

In modern societies, the media is not merely a tool for transmitting information but also a decisive center of power in shaping social and political relations. As emphasized in Habermas's (1989) theory of the public sphere, the media is a key actor that facilitates the formation of public opinion, provides a platform for democratic deliberation, and mediates the collective will of citizens. Habermas's model of the public sphere describes a space in which rational debates can take place freely, enabling citizens' participation in political decision-making processes. In this model, the media is seen not only as a provider of information but

also as a central institution of "democratic mediation" in the functioning of democratic societies.

Historically, the question of which actors defined media power has been subject to intense debate. In the era of traditional mass communication, media power was largely determined by editorial decisions, ownership structures, and the political-economic ties of news organizations. The connection between media ownership and political power directly shaped the framing of information presented to the public (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Within this framework, the media has been viewed not as a neutral channel of information transmission but as a contested space where ideological struggles are conducted.

With digitalization, however, this landscape has undergone a profound transformation. Today, media power increasingly shifts toward the algorithms of digital platforms. Platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, and YouTube regulate the visibility of news and content according to user engagement, advertising revenues, and platform-specific dynamics (Gillespie, 2018). Thus, it is not only journalists but also technology companies with commercial objectives—and the algorithmic mechanisms they design—that determine the direction of the public agenda. This development signifies the transfer of media's democratic functions into the hands of large technology corporations (Zuboff, 2019).

The relationship between this transformation and democracy is discussed in the literature along two axes. The first perspective argues that digital media strengthens democratic participation. From this standpoint, social media provides citizens with easier access to the public sphere, enables marginalized actors to gain visibility, and enhances political participation (Shirky, 2011; Castells, 2012). Cases such as the Arab Spring, the Gezi Park protests, and the #MeToo movement demonstrate how social media can mobilize citizens and make democratic demands visible.

Conversely, a more critical approach contends that digital media undermines democratic functioning. The opaque operation of algorithms can narrow the boundaries of public debate, render certain viewpoints invisible, and weaken pluralism by exposing users only to content aligned with their own perspectives (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2017). The "filter bubble" and "echo chamber" debates underscore the potential threats digital media power poses to democratic pluralism. During the 2016 U.S. presidential election, social media platforms were found to play a critical role in spreading misinformation and disinformation (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Similarly, Wardle and Derakhshan's (2017) conceptualization of

"information disorder" demonstrates that algorithmic processes accelerate the circulation of false information, thereby undermining democratic decision-making processes.

These criticisms highlight not only the political but also the economic and social dimensions of digital media power. Digital media also produces a new form of economic and political control. Zuboff's (2019) concept of "surveillance capitalism" shows that large technology companies, by processing user data, not only generate commercial profit but also construct a new form of power that directs social behavior. In this regard, algorithmic processes are not merely technical tools but mechanisms of power through which social relations and political order are reconstituted.

Therefore, it can be argued that the relationship between media and democracy today is dual in nature. Media power in the digital age embodies both the potential to expand the public sphere and the risks of weakening democratic functioning. On the one hand, digital media amplifies citizens' voices and encourages new forms of participation; on the other hand, it undermines democratic pluralism through opaque processes of algorithmic gatekeeping. For this reason, understanding the media–democracy nexus requires updating classical theories, addressing the social implications of algorithmic processes at a theoretical level, and reinforcing these inquiries with interdisciplinary research.

DISCUSSION

The reshaping of media power in the digital age necessitates theoretical renewal within communication studies. Classical theories such as agenda-setting and gatekeeping were of great importance in explaining the social effects of media during the era of mass communication; however, today, social media, algorithms, and user-generated content have revealed the limitations of these frameworks (McCombs, 2004; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). At this point, the concept of "algorithmic gatekeeping" emerges as a contemporary explanatory tool for understanding the operation of media power.

In this regard, the diverse orientations that have emerged in the literature concerning the social functions of algorithms are noteworthy. On one side, it is argued that algorithms can facilitate access to information and foster a more participatory public sphere. Digital platforms play a significant role in increasing the visibility of diverse social actors and helping marginalized groups make their voices heard, thereby enabling citizens to participate more actively in political processes (Shirky, 2011; Castells, 2012). Movements such as the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and #MeToo demonstrate that algorithmically circulated content can function as a powerful tool for social mobilization.

Yet this optimistic perspective is counterbalanced by the critical debates that dominate the literature. Another line of thought contends that the opaque functioning of algorithms may narrow democratic discourse, render certain viewpoints invisible, and weaken pluralism by confining users to homogeneous groups of opinion (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2017).

The economic dimension emerging in the digital media ecosystem should not be overlooked. The commercial interests of digital platforms directly shape the design and functioning of algorithmic mechanisms. Napoli (2015) and Zuboff (2019) have demonstrated that algorithms are not neutral technical tools but systems driven by market logics. The processing of user data, the maximization of advertising revenues, and the optimization of content according to consumption time constitute the main economic dynamics underpinning algorithmic gatekeeping. Thus, the media–democracy relationship is reconfigured not only along the axis of public interest but also through market mechanisms.

These economic and governance dynamics have been translated into concrete obligations through the European Union's recent regulations. The Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Digital Markets Act (DMA) impose requirements on platforms such as systemic risk assessment, transparency reporting, data access for researchers, and independent auditing (Regulation (EU) 2022/2065; Regulation (EU) 2022/1925). In addition, the Artificial Intelligence Act (AI Act), which entered into force in the summer of 2024, sets phased obligations regarding algorithmic systems and makes the legal boundaries of algorithmic gatekeeping even more explicit (Regulation (EU) 2024/1689). This regulatory framework demonstrates that the theoretical dimensions proposed in this study are not merely academic abstractions but can be transformed into practical governance tools.

At this point, the theoretical contribution of this study becomes evident. This article contributes to the literature by reinterpreting classical media theories in light of the dynamics of the digital age, repositioning the concept of "algorithmic agenda-setting" within a theoretical architecture, and sharpening its conceptual contours. This framework explains how agenda-setting and gatekeeping approaches are transformed in the digital media ecosystem while offering a renewed theoretical foundation for understanding the media–democracy nexus. In particular, the role of AI-based recommendation systems in shaping public opinion opens a new research trajectory within media studies (Bucher, 2018; Gillespie, 2018). Rather than expanding concepts through normative claims, the approach presented here reorganizes existing findings on a conceptual map, producing a synthesis that is consistent with classical approaches yet makes the unique dynamics of the digital age visible.

In conclusion, traditional theoretical tools alone are insufficient to understand media power today; a comprehensive analysis of the social effects of algorithmic processes is crucial both for communication research and for the healthy functioning of democracy. Future studies should therefore investigate the dimensions of transparency and accountability in algorithmic processes, as well as their implications for democratic pluralism, through interdisciplinary approaches. In this regard, platform governance models prioritizing transparency, explainability, and auditability constitute key levers for reducing the tension between algorithmic power and the public good.

Limitations and Future Research

In light of the discussion, the limitations of this study should also be explicitly acknowledged. This research is a conceptual review that does not produce empirical data; its findings are based on secondary sources and are limited to the scope of the selected literature. Future studies are expected to test the proposed framework through comparative empirical analyses across different political and cultural contexts, employing algorithm experiments and field research, as well as by applying criteria related to platform governance. Furthermore, assessments of generalizability through multi-platform and time-series comparisons would significantly strengthen the framework.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the restructuring of media power in the digital age through a theoretical discussion of the transformations brought about by digitalization. Classical theories such as agenda-setting and gatekeeping provided important frameworks for explaining the functioning of media over several decades; however, the widespread diffusion of the internet, the rise of social media platforms, the emergence of algorithms as invisible regulatory actors in content circulation, and the direct participation of users in content production have exposed the limitations of these theories.

Building on this framework, the findings can also be discussed in terms of their implications for democracy and the public sphere. The results indicate that the circulation of information today is no longer determined solely by the decisions of journalists and editors. Media power is increasingly shaped by AI-driven algorithms and platform designs. These algorithmic systems function as new actors that determine which content is highlighted, which is rendered invisible, and which issues gain prominence on the agenda. Thus, the boundaries of the social agenda are being reshaped not only by traditional media organizations but also by digital platforms operating on commercial imperatives.

The theoretical contributions of this study can be grouped into two major innovations. First, it advances the concept of "algorithmic gatekeeping," which denotes the shift from human-centered filtering mechanisms toward algorithmic processes. While in traditional gatekeeping editors, reporters, and media institutions decided which news to publish, today this function is carried out by software systems that evaluate user interactions, click-through rates, viewing times, and commercial goals. This shift foregrounds quantitative metrics and platform logics over human values in content selection.

The second significant contribution is the conceptual extension of "algorithmic agenda-setting." Whereas in the era of mass communication agenda-setting referred to the media's role in defining social priorities, today the agenda is shaped not only by media organizations but also by the invisible decision-making processes of algorithms. The content presented to users is tailored to their past behaviors, preferences, and interactions, producing a personalized and fragmented public agenda. This process fundamentally transforms the functioning of the public sphere and makes the emergence of a shared agenda increasingly difficult.

These contributions show that the impact of algorithms extends beyond the technical to encompass political and cultural dimensions. The findings indicate that algorithms are not merely technical tools but actors that reshape social and political relations. By determining the boundaries of public debate, digital platforms directly affect democratic processes. On the one hand, they amplify the voices of marginalized actors and foster new forms of participation; on the other hand, through opaque operations they render certain perspectives invisible and constrain the scope of public discussion. This dual character makes digital media power a complex domain containing both opportunities and risks.

The theoretical contributions of this study can be summarized under three dimensions. First, it identifies the specific ways in which the explanatory power of classical theories has become inadequate in contemporary conditions, emphasizing the need for their reinterpretation. Second, it develops conceptual extensions showing that algorithms are not merely tools of content ranking but mechanisms that reproduce social power relations. Third, it outlines a theoretical framework for understanding the media–democracy relationship that builds on classical theories while incorporating the dynamics of the digital age.

At the same time, this study not only provides a theoretical framework for the current situation but also offers directions for future research. In particular, there is a need for empirical studies that examine in greater detail the social impacts of algorithmic processes. Comparative research investigating how algorithms operate across different cultural and political contexts,

which groups are advantaged, and which actors are marginalized will fill important gaps in the literature. Moreover, studies assessing regulatory mechanisms aimed at enhancing the transparency and accountability of algorithmic processes will provide both theoretical and practical contributions to democratic societies.

In conclusion, this study underscores the inadequacy of classical communication theories under contemporary conditions while advancing a new theoretical architecture that places algorithmic processes at its center. Algorithmic processes represent a new mechanism of power through which social relations are reproduced, democratic debates are bounded, and the public sphere is transformed. With its conceptual extensions beyond classical theories, this article provides theoretical contributions both to the communication literature and to democratic processes. Future research will deepen these contributions, render the social impacts of algorithmic processes more visible, and help develop a more comprehensive understanding of media power in the digital age. In this sense, the study positions "algorithmic agenda-setting" and "algorithmic gatekeeping" as a theoretical scaffold open to empirically testable hypotheses and proposes a roadmap for comparative analyses across diverse political and cultural contexts. In addition, future research should evaluate algorithmic processes not only at the theoretical level but also in light of the principles of transparency, explainability, and accountability. Platform governance designs that prioritize these principles will serve as key levers in mitigating the tension between algorithmic power and the public interest.

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