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Algorithmic Curation and the Public Sphere: A Theoretical Framework of Attention, Visibility and Deliberation in Platform-Mediated Societies

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ABSTRACT

The public sphere was theorised for a world in which editors, broadcasters and other gatekeepers decided what the public saw. It now operates in a world in which recommendation algorithms make that decision person by person, usually optimising for engagement. This conceptual, non-empirical paper revisits public-sphere theory under algorithmic curation. It draws on Habermasian and post-Habermasian public-sphere theory, the attention-economy and platform-studies literatures, and peer-reviewed research published between 2023 and 2026 on recommendation systems, visibility and their political effects. Every source was checked against its Crossref record and screened for retractions and corrections. The paper distinguishes three functions that a public sphere performs: making matters visible, enabling deliberation, and forming public opinion. It argues that algorithmic curation transforms each of them. Visibility comes to be allocated by predicted engagement rather than by public relevance. Deliberation gives way to parallel monologues addressed to sorted audiences, and the encounters across lines that do occur tend to be selected for hostility. Public opinion forms through cascades that the ranking system shapes and through distorted signals about what other people think. From this visibility–deliberation–opinion framework, the paper derives six propositions. They concern the conditions under which platform-mediated publics can still perform public-sphere functions, the effects of curation on minority and marginal voices, the limits of transparency and user control as remedies, and the position of African digital publics that depend on a handful of foreign platforms. The paper then proposes a framework for evaluating platform governance against public-sphere criteria rather than user-satisfaction or engagement metrics, and concludes with recommendations for regulators, platforms, African governments and civil society, and researchers.

Keywords: public sphere; algorithmic curation; recommendation systems; attention economy; visibility

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1. INTRODUCTION

When a young person in Nairobi, Lagos or Johannesburg opens TikTok, X or Facebook, no editor has decided what she will see. A ranking system has done so, drawing on her past behaviour, the behaviour of people like her and the platform's estimate of what will keep her scrolling. Millions of such decisions are made every minute, each one private and each one different. Together they now perform much of the work that newspapers, broadcasters and public meetings once performed: they decide what a society notices, who speaks to whom and how opinion takes shape.

The concept of the public sphere was built for a different arrangement. In the classical account, a public sphere is a space in which private people come together as a public to discuss matters of common concern, and in which the force of the better argument, rather than status or money, shapes opinion. The mass-media version of that space relied on gatekeepers who, whatever their failings, selected content according to judgements about public relevance and addressed audiences that shared a common agenda. Habermas's late work on a new structural transformation of the public sphere argues that platforms dissolve this arrangement, and the responses to it have been divided (Lafont, 2023; Schlesinger, 2024). Others argue that "the" public sphere has already fractured into a network of overlapping publics that nonetheless perform many of the same functions (Bruns, 2023).

Empirical research on recommendation systems has meanwhile advanced quickly. Large-scale studies of Facebook and X have tested how ranking and resharing affect exposure, knowledge and polarisation (González-Bailón et al., 2023; Guess et al., 2023; Piccardi et al., 2025). Audits show that engagement-based ranking amplifies hostile and emotionally charged content that users say they do not want (Milli et al., 2025). Normative work asks what recommender systems owe citizens rather than consumers (Brown, 2026; Hyzen et al., 2026; Naudts et al., 2025). Yet these literatures seldom meet. Public-sphere theory tends to treat algorithms in general terms, while the empirical work rarely asks which public-sphere function a finding bears on. African digital publics, shaped largely by platforms headquartered elsewhere, are mostly absent from both.

This paper asks three questions. Which functions of the public sphere does algorithmic curation transform, and how? Under what conditions can platform-mediated publics still perform those functions? And against what criteria should platform governance be judged, particularly in Africa? It answers them by developing a visibility–deliberation–opinion framework, six propositions and an evaluation framework for platform governance.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

Algorithmic curation refers to the automated selection, ranking and filtering of content for individual users by recommendation systems. It differs from editorial curation in three respects: it is personalised rather than shared, it is continuous rather than periodic, and it is usually optimised for a measurable proxy, such as engagement or watch time, rather than for a judgement about importance. *Engagement* means observable user responses such as clicks, likes, shares, comments and viewing time.

The *public sphere* is used here in a functional sense. Following Jungherr and Schroeder (2023), the paper treats the public arena as the set of structures that make society visible to itself and provide spaces for the formation of publics and counterpublics. Three functions are distinguished. *Visibility* is the function of bringing matters of common concern to collective attention. *Deliberation* is the function of exposing claims to the reasons and objections of others. *Opinion formation* is the function through which individual views aggregate into something that can be called public opinion, which in turn can inform and constrain political decisions.

The *attention economy* refers to the arrangement in which platforms earn revenue by capturing and

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selling human attention, so that attention, rather than information, becomes the scarce resource around which communication is organised. *Platform governance* refers to the rules, practices and institutions, public and private, that shape how platforms operate, including content moderation, ranking design and regulation.

2.2 THEORETICAL REVIEW

Public-sphere theory has moved through three broad positions. The first, classical Habermasian position judges communication by its contribution to rational-critical debate among equals. Habermas's recent restatement, as Lafont (2023) summarises it, holds that the business model of social media, based on maximising engagement through data harvesting and personalisation, threatens the inclusive public sphere on which democracy depends, and that the decline of traditional media operating under journalistic norms leaves citizens without a shared basis for debate. Lafont accepts the diagnosis but presses the question of what democratic citizens can do about it.

The second, post-Habermasian position doubts that a single public sphere ever existed. It emphasises plural publics, counterpublics and the networked connections among them. Bruns (2023) argues that the public sphere is now irretrievably fractured into public spheres, spherules, platform publics, issue publics and personal publics, which overlap and still serve many of the functions once attributed to the public sphere as a whole. On this view, the right question is not whether a unified public sphere survives but how the network of publics is structured and who controls the links between them.

The third position is structural and regulatory. Schlesinger (2024) describes a post-public sphere in which states respond to platformisation through "neo-regulation", shaped by national security and geopolitical competition. Jungherr and Schroeder (2023) argue that artificial intelligence strengthens intermediary structures, allowing those who control them greater control over the public arena, and that the data-driven nature of these systems threatens to push challenges to the political status quo out of sight. Hyzen et al. (2026) propose "epistemic welfare", the conditions and capabilities for individual epistemic agency in the public sphere, as a normative standard for recommender systems. Naudts et al. (2025) argue that the largest platforms perform a public function and that citizens therefore have a right to "constructive optimisation", meaning ranking that respects their fundamental rights and civic values rather than only their value as consumers.

The attention-economy literature adds a mechanism. Kleinberg et al. (2024) identify an "inversion problem": recommender systems predict behaviour, such as clicks, while hoping to identify preferences, and the two can diverge. What people do in the moment is not what they would choose on reflection. Rathje et al. (2024) show that people across political lines believe that platforms amplify divisive, negative and misleading content, and that accurate, nuanced and educational content should be amplified but is not. The gap between engagement and considered preference is the space in which public-sphere functions are lost.

2.3 EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Exposure and segregation. González-Bailón et al. (2023) studied political news exposure among United States adult Facebook users during the 2020 election and found high ideological segregation that increased from potential exposure to actual exposure and then to engagement, with a substantial corner of the news ecosystem consumed only by conservatives, where most misinformation sat. Curation, in other words, sharpened the separation that existed in the available supply.

Attitudes and knowledge. Guess et al. (2023) removed reshared content from the feeds of consenting Facebook users for three months. The intervention reduced exposure to political news, including news from untrustworthy sources, lowered clicks and reactions, and reduced news knowledge, but it did not significantly change polarisation or political attitudes. Such results caution against simple claims that algorithms create polarisation, and they show that curation also affects what people know.

Hostility and affective polarisation. Milli et al. (2025) compared X's engagement-based ranking with a reverse-chronological baseline and found that the algorithm amplified emotionally charged, out-group hostile content that users said made them feel worse about the other side, and that users did not prefer the political posts the algorithm selected.

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Ranking by stated preferences reduced hostile content but risked reinforcing like-minded content. Piccardi et al. (2025) built a method that reranks participants' X feeds without platform cooperation and, in a ten-day field experiment during the 2024 United States campaign, found that increasing or decreasing exposure to content expressing anti-democratic attitudes and partisan animosity shifted out-party animosity, providing causal evidence that ranking choices affect affective polarisation.

Social learning. Brady et al. (2023) argue that algorithms exploit human social-learning biases towards prestigious, in-group, moral and emotional information, oversaturating feeds with it and distorting people's perception of social norms. Metzler and Garcia (2024) review the evidence and conclude that algorithms mostly reinforce existing social drivers, creating feedback loops that make the separate effect of algorithms hard to isolate.

Visibility and marginal voices. Brown (2026) argues that algorithmic reach is concentrated among a small minority of already-amplified speakers, undermining equality of opportunity for political influence. Rauchberg (2025) documents the suppression and surveillance of disabled TikTok creators. Hojati and Nault (2026) model shadowbanning, the hiding of content without telling its author, and show that its benefits for platforms depend on users not suspecting it and on the accuracy of moderation tools. Acosta Navas (2025) examines automated moderation as a feature of the digital public sphere and argues that a version of the free-speech principle can guide platform content policies.

Transparency and control. Oeldorf-Hirsch et al. (2026) collected screenshots of "why am I seeing this" cues from United States users and found that most cues refer to the user's own behaviour, the behaviour of their network or sponsorship, while users remained critical of algorithms and wanted more transparency. Griffin (2025) argues that the European Union's Digital Services Act frames political problems as risks, privileges technocratic expertise and delegates risk management to the platforms themselves, which favours the companies it seeks to regulate. Alnemr (2026) argues that deliberative democrats should look beyond institutional reform to the ways ordinary citizens contest algorithmic harms.

African digital publics. South African youth on TikTok frame local political events within globally recognised causes, partly to gain algorithmic visibility, which can limit engagement with local complexity (Schoon & Bosch, 2024). Nigeria's #EndSARS protests drew on music, memes and digital creativity to mobilise youth (Bamidele, 2026), and earlier Nigerian protest movements relied on the organisational tools of mobile social networking apps (Uwalaka, 2023). Owens-Ibie et al. (2026) show that state–platform interactions and selective enforcement in Nigeria produce new forms of marginalisation within digitally mediated public spheres. West African parties organise heavily through WhatsApp (Fisher et al., 2024), and in South Africa's 2024 elections political disinformation spread through closed WhatsApp groups via relational trust (Gondwe, 2025). Effoduh (2025) describes how Big Tech and local intermediaries perpetuate data extraction, infrastructure dependency and algorithmic bias in Africa, with risks of silencing local voices. The Kenyan case of *Arendse & 42 Others v Meta*, analysed by Mbioh (2025), shows African courts asserting jurisdiction over outsourced content moderation. Udupa et al. (2023) show the limits of machine-learning moderation for extreme speech and call for "ethical scaling" grounded in community participation.

2.4 GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

Three gaps stand out. First, public-sphere theory and the empirical study of recommender systems remain largely separate: the theory speaks of fragmentation in general, while experiments measure attitudes, exposure and affect without saying which public-sphere function is at stake. Second, the remedies most often proposed, transparency and user control, have not been assessed against public-sphere criteria. Third, African digital publics, which depend on foreign platforms and are governed largely from elsewhere, are rarely treated as a distinct case in theory. This paper addresses these gaps.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design. This is a theoretical, non-empirical article. It uses integrative conceptual synthesis to build a framework and to derive propositions for later empirical testing. No human participants were involved and no primary data were collected, so

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population, sampling and instrument validation in the empirical sense do not apply.

Source identification. Literature was identified through structured searches of EBSCOhost databases accessed through the University of South Africa (Unisa) Library (Academic Search Ultimate, Business Source Ultimate, APA PsycInfo and Library, Information Science and Technology Abstracts), the Crossref metadata service and the OpenAlex scholarly index. Search terms combined "public sphere", "algorithmic curation", "recommender system", "engagement-based ranking", "shadowban", "algorithmic visibility", "algorithmic transparency", "Digital Services Act" and "platform governance" with "deliberation", "polarisation", "Africa", "Nigeria", "Kenya" and "South Africa". Searches were run on 21 October 2026.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria. Peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2023 and 2026 were included if they addressed public-sphere theory, the political or epistemic effects of recommendation systems, visibility and moderation, the governance of ranking, or digital publics in Africa. Preprints, conference papers, book reviews, editorials, grey literature, items without a resolvable digital object identifier (DOI), and outlets whose peer-review practices could not be confirmed were excluded.

Verification. Each candidate was checked against its Crossref record for DOI, authors, title, journal, volume, issue and pagination, and was screened for retractions, corrections and expressions of concern through Crossref update metadata. Two otherwise relevant studies of Facebook's 2020 election feeds were excluded because correction notices are attached to them. Where an article is indexed in the EBSCOhost databases, its peer-reviewed status and abstract were also confirmed there. Publication year follows the issue year where one exists. Thirty articles met all criteria and are cited.

Analytic procedure. Sources were coded for the public-sphere function their findings bear on (visibility, deliberation or opinion formation), the mechanism involved, the remedy discussed and the setting. Mechanisms that recurred across settings were stated as propositions, and African studies were used to judge whether each mechanism was likely to be stronger, weaker or different in form in African digital publics.

Bases of judgement and trustworthiness. Conceptual work is judged by clarity, parsimony, explanatory reach and falsifiability. Each proposition is stated so that it could prove wrong, and the discussion identifies evidence that would weaken it.

AI usage disclosure. Generative AI tools were used to assist with literature retrieval, metadata checking and language editing. The arguments, interpretations and conclusions were developed and reviewed by the author(s), who take full responsibility for the content. No AI tool is listed as an author, and no source was cited without verification against its publisher record.

Limitations. The synthesis is restricted to English-language journal articles from a four-year window. The strongest causal evidence on ranking comes from the United States, and peer-reviewed research on recommendation systems in African settings remains scarce, so several African claims rest on studies of digital activism, governance and moderation rather than on audits of ranking itself.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 RESULTS: THE VISIBILITY–DELIBERATION–OPINION FRAMEWORK

The synthesis shows that algorithmic curation transforms each of the three public-sphere functions, and that the transformations share a root: ranking is optimised for predicted engagement, which is a property of the relationship between a piece of content and an individual user, whereas the public sphere depends on properties of the relationship between content and a public. Table 1 summarises the framework.

Table. 1. The visibility–deliberation–opinion framework

Function	Under editorial gatekeeping	Under algorithmic curation	Key mechanism
Visibility	Shared agenda selected by judgements of public relevance	Personalised feeds ranked by predicted engagement	Engagement–relevance gap; slow, local and new issues sink (P1)

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Function	Under editorial gatekeeping	Under algorithmic curation	Key mechanism
Deliberation	Common forums where claims meet objections	Sorted audiences; cross-cutting contact selected for hostility	Segregation plus amplified out-group animosity (P2)
Opinion formation	Impressions of others drawn from shared sources	Impressions drawn from feeds saturated with moral and emotional content	Cascades and distorted perceived norms (P3)

Note. Compiled by the author(s) from the synthesis in Sections 2 and 4.1.

Visibility: from public relevance to predicted engagement. Under editorial curation, what became visible depended, imperfectly, on judgements about importance. Under algorithmic curation, it depends on a prediction of whether a particular user will respond. The two can diverge sharply. Matters that are important but slow, complex or local generate weak engagement signals and sink; matters that provoke anger or identity-based reactions rise (Brady et al., 2023; Milli et al., 2025). People themselves say that accurate, nuanced and educational content deserves amplification and does not receive it (Rathje et al., 2024). The visibility of political challengers is also at stake. Jungherr and Schroeder (2023) warn that data-driven curation can push challenges to the status quo out of sight, because a new issue has no engagement history to learn from. African activists adapt to this logic. South African youth on TikTok frame local events in terms of global causes that the algorithm already recognises, which gains reach but can thin out local meaning (Schoon & Bosch, 2024).

Deliberation: from shared forums to parallel monologues. Deliberation requires that claims meet objections. Personalised curation sorts audiences so that most claims reach people who already agree with them. González-Bailón et al. (2023) show that segregation increases at each step from what is available to what is seen and what is engaged with. Where curation does bring opposing sides into contact, it tends to select the most hostile material. Milli et al. (2025) found that engagement-based ranking amplified out-group hostility relative to a chronological feed, and Piccardi et al. (2025) showed that changing exposure to partisan animosity changes how people feel about the other side. The result is not the absence of cross-cutting contact but contact of the wrong kind: encounters chosen for their capacity to provoke rather than to inform. The modest effects of feed changes on attitudes found by Guess et al. (2023) are consistent with this reading. Curation may change less what people believe than how, and with whom, they argue.

Opinion formation: from aggregation to algorithmic cascades. Public opinion was never a simple sum of private views, but in a mass-media public, people formed impressions of what others thought from a shared and relatively stable set of sources. Under algorithmic curation, those impressions come from feeds saturated with prestigious, in-group, moral and emotional content (Brady et al., 2023). This distorts perceived norms: people may overestimate how extreme or angry others are. Cascades, in which visible engagement attracts further engagement, then shape which positions appear popular. Because algorithms mostly amplify existing social drivers rather than invent them (Metzler & Garcia, 2024), the opinion that forms is neither purely algorithmic nor purely social; it is the product of a feedback loop between the two.

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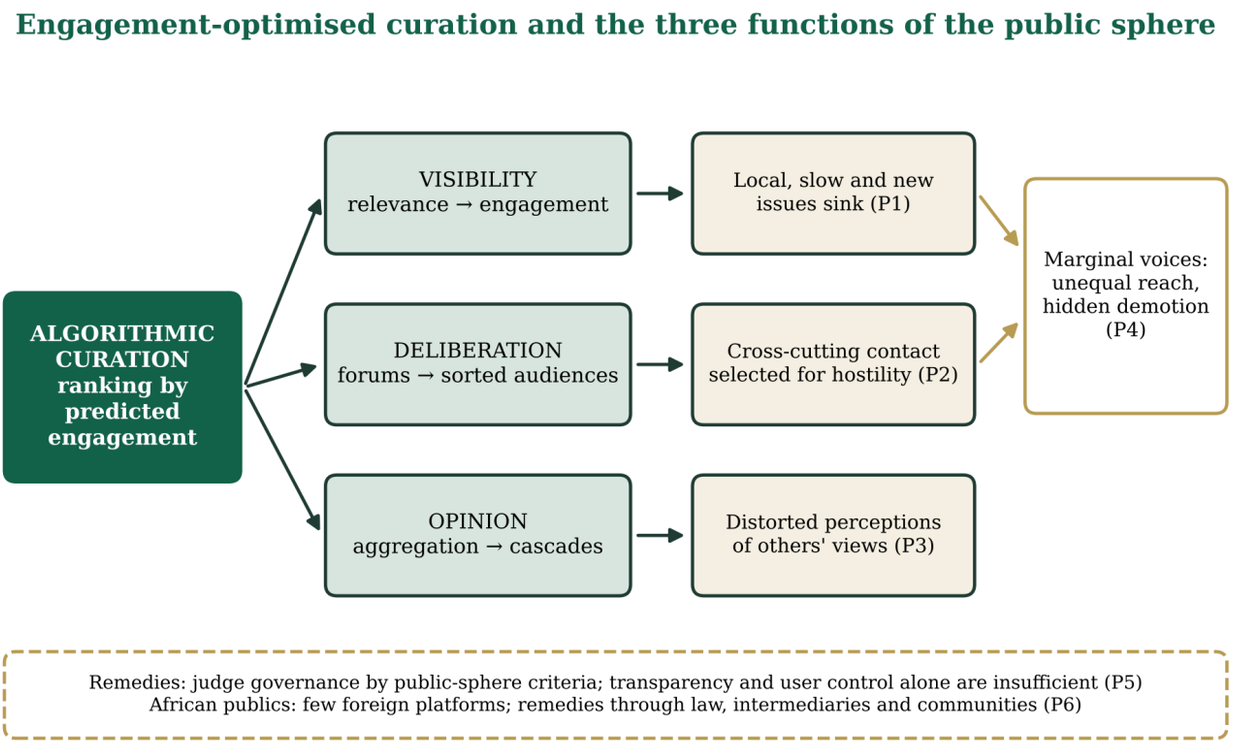


Figure. 1. The visibility–deliberation–opinion framework: engagement-optimised curation transforms the three public-sphere functions, with effects on marginal voices and the governance conditions under which publics can still perform them. Source: developed by the author(s).

From the framework, six propositions follow.

Proposition 1: Platform-mediated publics perform the visibility function only to the extent that ranking incorporates signals of public relevance that are independent of predicted engagement. The inversion problem (Kleinberg et al., 2024) and the gap between engagement and stated preference (Milli et al., 2025; Rathje et al., 2024) imply that engagement alone will systematically under-expose matters of common concern that are slow, complex or local. The proposition would be weakened by evidence that engagement-ranked feeds surface such matters as reliably as editorially curated or preference-based feeds.

Proposition 2: Algorithmic curation degrades deliberation less by isolating citizens than by structuring their encounters across lines around hostility. Segregation is high (González-Bailón et al., 2023), but the sharper deliberative problem is that the cross-cutting content people do see is selected for out-group animosity (Milli et al., 2025; Piccardi et al., 2025). The proposition would be weakened by evidence that the cross-cutting content in engagement-ranked feeds is no more hostile than that in chronological or randomly ordered feeds.

Proposition 3: Under algorithmic curation, public opinion is shaped more by distorted perceptions of what others think than by changes in individual attitudes. Feed interventions show limited effects on attitudes (Guess et al., 2023), while algorithmic oversaturation of moral and emotional content distorts perceived norms (Brady et al., 2023). The proposition would be weakened by evidence that people's estimates of others' views are no less accurate among heavy users of algorithmic feeds than among others.

Proposition 4: Algorithmic curation compounds existing inequalities of voice, and the compounding is hardest to detect where moderation is opaque. Reach is concentrated among those already amplified (Brown, 2026), disabled and other marginalised creators report suppression (Rauchberg, 2025), and shadowbanning works best for platforms precisely when users do not suspect it (Hojati & Nault, 2026). In Nigeria, selective enforcement and state–platform interactions produce

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new minorities within digital spaces (Owens-Ibie et al., 2026). The proposition would be weakened by audits showing that marginal speakers receive reach proportional to their engagement, and that hidden demotion is rare.

Proposition 5: Transparency and user control are necessary but insufficient remedies, because they treat a collective problem as a matter of individual choice. Transparency cues mostly explain a user's own feed in terms of their own behaviour (Oeldorf-Hirsch et al., 2026); they do not reveal what the public as a whole is or is not seeing. User controls can reduce hostile content for an individual while reinforcing like-minded content (Milli et al., 2025). Risk-based regulation that delegates assessment to platforms risks capture (Griffin, 2025). Public-sphere functions are properties of the aggregate, so remedies must operate at that level, through obligations of constructive optimisation (Naudts et al., 2025), equalising mechanisms such as recommendation floors for political speech (Brown, 2026), and independent auditing of the kind Piccardi et al. (2025) show is feasible. The proposition would be weakened by evidence that widespread uptake of individual controls improves aggregate measures of visibility and deliberation.

Proposition 6: Where digital publics depend on a few foreign platforms, public-sphere functions are governed largely from outside the polity, and local remedies work mainly through law, intermediaries and community participation. Africa's dependence on Global North platforms entrenches data extraction and algorithmic bias (Effoduh, 2025). Ranking and moderation policies are set elsewhere, and states respond through neo-regulation that often serves security rather than publicness (Schlesinger, 2024). Yet African courts have begun to assert jurisdiction over platform practices (Mbioh, 2025), and community-based moderation offers an alternative to imported automation (Udupa et al., 2023). The proposition would be weakened by evidence that platforms adapt ranking and moderation to African public-sphere needs without legal or civic pressure.

Table 2 turns the framework into criteria for evaluating platform governance.

Table. 2. Evaluating platform governance against public-sphere criteria

Function	Engagement metric	Public-sphere criterion	Indicator
Visibility	Time spent; clicks	Matters of common concern, including local and minority issues, reach collective attention	Reach of civic and local news; time for new issues to surface
Deliberation	Comments; shares	Cross-cutting encounters inform rather than provoke	Hostility of cross-cutting exposure relative to a chronological baseline
Opinion formation	Reactions; virality	People perceive others' views accurately	Accuracy of perceived norms among users
Voice	Follower growth	Reach is fairly distributed and demotion disclosed	Concentration of political reach; rate of disclosed demotion

Note. Developed by the author(s) from the propositions in Section 4.1.

4.2 DISCUSSION

The framework clarifies a debate that often talks past itself. One side, represented by Habermas's diagnosis as Lafont (2023) presents it, sees filter bubbles and echo chambers isolating citizens. The other side points to experimental evidence that feed changes have small effects on attitudes and polarisation (Guess et al., 2023; Metzler & Garcia, 2024). Distinguishing three functions shows that both can be partly right. Curation may leave individual attitudes largely stable while still reshaping what becomes visible, how encounters across lines unfold, and what people believe others think. The harm lies less in changed minds than in a changed structure of public communication.

The framework also refines the post-Habermasian position. Bruns (2023) is right that the public sphere has become a network of publics, but networks have architects. In platform-mediated societies, the links between publics, the paths along which issues travel from a spherule to national attention, are set by ranking systems optimised for engagement. Jungherr and Schroeder's (2023) point about strengthened intermediaries follows: the question is no longer only whether many publics exist but who controls the connections between them and on what criteria.

Implications for governance. Most current evaluation of platforms relies on user-satisfaction

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and engagement metrics, which measure whether individuals respond, not whether publics function. The paper therefore proposes evaluating platform governance against public-sphere criteria, set out in Table 2. For visibility, the criterion is whether matters of common concern, including local and minority issues, reach collective attention. For deliberation, it is whether encounters across lines are informative rather than merely hostile. For opinion formation, it is whether people's perceptions of others' views are accurate. For voice, it is whether reach is distributed fairly and demotion is disclosed. These criteria are compatible with the epistemic-welfare approach of Hyzen et al. (2026) and the constructive-optimisation right proposed by Naudts et al. (2025), but they translate those normative ideas into indicators that auditors and regulators can measure.

African digital publics. Three features of African digital publics sharpen the framework. First, dependence on foreign platforms means that ranking decisions affecting African visibility are made without African input, and engagement signals are dominated by global audiences, which is why local activists frame issues in global terms (Schoon & Bosch, 2024). Second, much political communication has moved into closed messaging groups (Fisher et al., 2024; Gondwe, 2025), where curation is social rather than algorithmic but where platform design still shapes forwarding and group size. Third, states may respond to platform power with restrictive measures that marginalise critics rather than protect publicness (Owens-Ibie et al., 2026). Nigeria's protest movements show that digital publics can still perform public-sphere functions under these conditions (Bamidele, 2026; Uwalaka, 2023), but they do so in spite of the architecture rather than because of it. The governance task in Africa is therefore twofold: to secure public-sphere obligations from platforms, and to prevent regulation from becoming a tool of control.

Counterarguments. One objection is that editorial gatekeeping was itself exclusionary and that algorithms have opened visibility to voices that editors ignored. The framework accepts this; #EndSARS and South African TikTok activism are examples. Its claim is that algorithmic visibility, although more open at the entry point, is allocated by a criterion that is indifferent to public relevance and that compounds inequalities of reach. A second objection is that public-sphere criteria are too vague to operationalise. Table 2 responds by pairing each criterion with indicators that can be measured through audits and surveys.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Algorithmic curation has replaced much of the gatekeeping on which public-sphere theory was built. This paper has argued that it transforms all three public-sphere functions. Visibility follows predicted engagement rather than public relevance. Deliberation gives way to sorted audiences and hostile encounters, and opinion forms through cascades and distorted perceptions of others' views. Platform-mediated publics can still perform these functions, but only when ranking incorporates signals of public relevance, when reach is fairly distributed and demotion disclosed, and when governance is judged by public-sphere criteria rather than by engagement. Transparency and user control help individuals but cannot by themselves restore functions that belong to publics.

Several recommendations follow. Regulators should require large platforms to report public-sphere indicators, including the reach of civic and local news, the hostility of cross-cutting exposure and the distribution of political reach, and should grant independent researchers the data access needed to audit them. Platforms should offer and test ranking options optimised for stated preferences and public relevance, disclose demotion to affected users, and invest in moderation and ranking expertise for African languages and contexts. African governments and regional bodies, including the African Union, should develop shared regulatory approaches that strengthen their leverage over foreign platforms while protecting freedom of expression, so that regulation serves publicness rather than control. Civil society, journalists and universities should build independent audit capacity in Africa, drawing on reranking methods that do not require platform cooperation. Researchers should study ranking in African settings directly and measure perceived-norm accuracy alongside attitudes.

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6. CONTRIBUTION TO EXISTING KNOWLEDGE

The paper contributes in four ways. Conceptually, it offers a visibility–deliberation–opinion framework that links public-sphere theory to the empirical study of recommendation systems, function by function. Theoretically, it argues that algorithmic curation degrades public-sphere functions mainly by changing the structure of public communication rather than individual attitudes, and it states six falsifiable propositions, including on marginal voices and the limits of transparency and user control. Practically, it proposes an evaluation framework that judges platform governance by public-sphere criteria with measurable indicators. Contextually, it brings African digital publics, which depend on a few foreign platforms, into public-sphere theory as a distinct case.

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