

THE DECLINE OF REASON UNDER THE ALGORITHMIC POWER OF CONTEMPORARY DEMOCRACY

El declive de la razón bajo el poder algorítmico en la democracia contemporánea

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Abstract

This article analyzes the silent decline of reason under the influence of algorithmic power in the digital age. Once the foundation of human freedom and moral agency, reason is now increasingly subordinated to instrumental rationality embodied in algorithms designed for efficiency, prediction, and control. This topic is justified by the urgency of understanding how technological mediation affects autonomy, critical thinking, and democratic participation. The objective of the study is to examine the philosophical and political implications of this transformation. The methodology combines conceptual analysis and critical reflection based on contemporary philosophical sources. Four main propositions are developed: 1) algorithmic power extends the logic of instrumental reason and functions as a mechanism of biopolitical control; 2) critical reason is silently eroded by automated systems that limit reflective judgment; 3) this erosion contributes to an epistemic and political crisis in which public reason is manipulated and moral responsibility fragmented, thereby weakening democracy; and 4) reclaiming reason requires ethical reflection, epistemic agency, and a democratic pedagogy grounded in critical and moral education. The article concludes that defending democracy in the digital age requires more than regulatory frameworks—it demands a deep and sustained revitalization of reason as a central pillar of civic life.

Keywords

Algorithmic power, Public reason, Democracy, Digital capitalism, Critical education.

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Resumen

El presente trabajo analiza el declive contemporáneo de la razón en el contexto del poder algorítmico que caracteriza a la era digital. Una vez fundamentadas la libertad humana y la agencia moral, la razón se encuentra hoy subordinada a la racionalidad instrumental, encarnada en algoritmos diseñados para optimizar la eficiencia, la predicción y el control. La justificación del tema radica en la necesidad urgente de comprender cómo esta transformación tecnológica afecta la autonomía humana, el pensamiento crítico y la vida democrática. El objetivo del estudio es explorar las implicaciones filosóficas y políticas de esta transformación mediante un enfoque teórico-conceptual, sustentado en el análisis crítico de fuentes filosóficas contemporáneas. La metodología utilizada combina la revisión bibliográfica y la reflexión argumentativa. El artículo se organiza a partir de cuatro proposiciones: 1) el poder algorítmico prolonga la lógica de la razón instrumental y actúa como mecanismo de control biopolítico; 2) la razón crítica se debilita progresivamente ante la automatización de los procesos de pensamiento; 3) esta transformación genera una crisis epistémica y política que afecta la razón pública y la responsabilidad moral; 4) defender la democracia digital requiere una pedagogía centrada en la reflexión ética, la agencia epistémica y la educación crítica. Se concluye que revitalizar la razón es condición necesaria para enfrentar los desafíos de la era algorítmica.

Palabras clave

Poder algorítmico, razón pública, democracia, capitalismo digital, educación crítica, control biopolítico.

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Introduction

Democracy depends not only on institutions but also on the vitality of public reason: the ability of citizens to think critically, distinguish truth from falsehood, and assume moral responsibility in public life. In the algorithmic age, this foundation is increasingly under threat. As digital platforms mediate public discourse through opaque algorithms designed to maximize engagement and control, reason is subtly reshaped. These systems reinforce instrumental, emotional, and polarized modes of thinking, which erode rational deliberation and foster epistemic passivity.

This article argues that the algorithmic governance of public communication contributes to what might be called the silent death of reason: a gradual erosion of critical thinking that remains largely invisible to those affected. Individuals believe they are acting freely, but their perceptions and decisions are shaped by an algorithmic logic that eludes their awareness. The central problem addressed here is how algorithmic power transforms the cognitive conditions of democratic participation and undermines citizens' epistemic and moral agency.

The aim of this study is to offer a philosophical and political analysis of this transformation, positing the hypothesis that defending democracy in the digital age requires more than just normative solutions: it demands a fundamental revitalization of reason as an ethical, epistemological, and

pedagogical imperative. This reflection is particularly timely in a context in which democratic systems around the world are facing crises of trust, polarization, and disinformation—crises exacerbated by the algorithmic organization of knowledge and visibility. From a methodological standpoint, this is a conceptual and theoretical-critical study grounded in political philosophy, media theory, and epistemology. It employs documentary analysis, conceptual reconstruction, and normative reasoning to examine the epistemic and political implications of algorithmic mediation.

The article is structured into four sections. The first examines how algorithmic power embodies and extends the logic of instrumental rationality, transforming the cognitive environment of contemporary society. The second analyzes the silent erosion of reason in the algorithmic age, highlighting its subtle yet profound effects on critical thinking and autonomy. The third section explores the link between epistemic passivity and democratic fragility, showing how algorithm-driven knowledge systems undermine democratic deliberation. Finally, the fourth section proposes a normative response: the revitalization of reason as an ethical, epistemic, and educational imperative essential to restoring democratic accountability in the digital age.

This article addresses the problem of how algorithmic systems reconfigure public reason and democratic agency in contemporary digital societies. It asks: How does algorithmic power contribute to the erosion of critical reason, and what normative responses are required to defend democracy in the digital age? The article argues that algorithmic governance extends the logic of instrumental rationality and biopolitical control, thereby undermining epistemic autonomy and moral responsibility. Its main contribution lies in integrating critical theory, biopolitics, and studies on digital capitalism into a unified philosophical critique of algorithmic democracy.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on critical theory, particularly the tradition of the Frankfurt School. Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) identified the rise of instrumental reason as a foundational threat to autonomy and emancipation in modern societies. In their classic analysis, rationality—when stripped of its critical and emancipatory functions—is reduced to a mere tool of domination. This insight remains deeply relevant in the digital age, where algorithmic systems intensify the logic of efficiency, prediction, and control at the absolute expense of democratic deliberation and reflection.

Complementing this perspective, Habermas (1984, 1987, 1989, and 1996) emphasized the normative importance of communicative rationality and a robust public sphere as strict prerequisites for democratic life. Algorithmic mediation structurally undermines these conditions for communicative action and public reason by systematically promoting emotional and polarized content while simultaneously suppressing discourse-oriented communication.

Furthermore, Foucault's (2008) theory of biopolitics clarifies how power in contemporary societies operates not through direct, repressive coercion, but through the continuous management of knowledge and subjectivity. Within this framework, algorithmic governance can be interpreted as a contemporary instantiation of algorithmic biopower: a sophisticated mode of regulation that operates through systematic datafication and predictive behavioral control (Yeung, 2018; Zuboff, 2019).

Recent scholarship has also highlighted the role of digital infrastructures in reinforcing epistemic inequality and cognitive manipulation. Zuboff's (2019) concept of "surveillance capitalism," Couldry and Mejías's (2019) critique of data colonialism, and Feenberg's (2005) critical theory of technology provide essential frameworks for understanding how data-driven architectures restructure social relations and epistemic authority. Moreover, the contemporary spread of disinformation and tribalized cognition (Zollo et al., 2017; Ecker et al., 2022; Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017) empirically demonstrates the severe epistemological consequences of algorithmic content curation.

In summary, this theoretical framework integrates the critiques of instrumental reason, biopolitical control, and algorithmic regulation to examine how the overarching logic of digital capitalism erodes public reason, weakens democratic participation, and fragments moral responsibility. Rather than treating the decline of reason as an isolated or purely technological phenomenon, this study situates it within broader structural transformations of knowledge, power, and political agency.

Methodology

This study adopts a theoretical and critical approach that combines a literature review, discourse analysis, critical hermeneutics, and ideological critique to examine the erosion of public reason under algorithmic power. The analysis draws on a diverse theoretical foundation, drawing inspiration from the Frankfurt School—particularly the critical theories



of Adorno, Marcuse, and Habermas—whose reflections on instrumental reason, the culture industry, and communicative action provide a conceptual framework for understanding the manipulation of public reason. The study also addresses Hannah Arendt’s reflections on totalitarianism, the banality of evil, and the collapse of judgment in modern societies, offering important insights into the moral dimensions of epistemic decline. Guided by dialectical materialism, the study situates algorithmic power within the broader socioeconomic structures of digital capitalism. From a dialectical materialist perspective, algorithmic systems are not neutral technological tools, but rather expressions of the economic logic of digital capitalism. The business models of large technology corporations—centered on data extraction, behavior prediction, and the monetization of attention—shape the cognitive environments in which individuals think, interact, and form political judgments. Therefore, the transformation of public reason cannot be separated from the material infrastructures and economic interests underlying algorithmic governance. The analysis unfolds in three stages. First, it reconstructs the philosophical critique of instrumental reason and biopolitical control. Second, it examines how algorithmic systems put this logic into practice within digital capitalism, reshaping public cognition, normalizing epistemic passivity, and contributing to the silent decline of critical and divergent thinking. Third, it assesses the democratic, moral, and educational implications of this transformation through a normative critique, focusing on the crisis of democratic agency and moral responsibility, as well as the urgent need to revitalize reason through ethical and pedagogical frameworks in the digital age.



Algorithmic Power and the Instrumentalization of Reason

This section examines how algorithmic systems embody the logic of instrumental rationality in contemporary digital capitalism. First, it reviews the philosophical concept of reason and then analyzes how algorithmic infrastructures transform rationality into mechanisms of prediction, efficiency, and behavioral control.

The Concept of Reason and the Rise of Instrumental Rationality

Philosophical conceptions of reason have evolved over time, reflecting specific historical contexts. For Immanuel Kant (2004), reason in its broadest sense refers to human intelligence, while in its strictest sense it

constitutes the highest stage of cognition, serving as the foundation for both knowledge and morality—albeit within recognized limits. From a Marxist-Leninist perspective, reason arises from socio-historical conditions, shaped by productive activity and class struggle, and is aimed at rationally organizing society for collective emancipation.

The Frankfurt School, however, issues a critical warning: reason itself can become distorted. Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) argue that, under modern capitalism, reason degenerates into instrumental reason—a form of rationality focused exclusively on efficiency and utility. Instead of fostering moral judgment and critical reflection, instrumental reason reduces both nature and humanity to objects of calculation and control. As they write: “What is in fact destroyed is the dialectic of reason, since instrumental reason turns every relationship into a calculable and controllable process” (p. 97).

This regression, they suggest, begins with the Enlightenment, where the emancipatory promise of reason turned into domination. Human beings became measurable units within production systems, stripped of dignity and redefined by their function. The bureaucratic state and capitalist markets increasingly rely on this logic, reinforcing existing power structures (Habermas, 1984). As Feenberg (2005) points out, this technocratic rationality erodes self-reflection and critical agency.

From this perspective, reason no longer liberates but rather administers. As Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) conclude: “In the administered world, instrumental reason extends its dominion over all spheres of life, dissolving both critical thinking and dialectical reason” (p. 119). The trajectory of reason—from Kantian morality to Marxist emancipation and the pessimism of the Frankfurt School—reveals its alienation under modern conditions. Reason, far from being neutral or immutable, must be examined within its social, economic, and political context.

If algorithms represent the technological embodiment of instrumental reason, the next question is how such systems reshape human cognition and public judgment in everyday digital life.

Algorithms as Technological Embodiments of Instrumental Reason

In contemporary digital capitalism, algorithms—particularly those driven by artificial intelligence (AI) and big data—have become concrete technological embodiments of instrumental reason. Rather than seeking understanding or emancipation, knowledge is increasingly valued for its utility in prediction, control, and optimization (Zuboff, 2019). This log-



ic underpins algorithmic governance, which prioritizes “computability” over deliberative or ethical considerations (Yeung, 2018). Commercially driven algorithms amplify sensationalist and divisive content, reinforcing patterns of behavioral manipulation and epistemic conditioning.

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, as traditional models of economic growth increasingly revealed their structural limits—such as rising resource costs, market saturation, and the declining efficiency of industrial infrastructure—capitalism faced growing pressure to expand into new spaces of accumulation. Under these conditions, a seemingly limitless digital sphere emerged. Digital platforms became the dominant organizational form of the post-industrial era because they could coordinate multilateral markets, control intermediary infrastructures, and, above all, accumulate data as a strategic asset.

Within these vast and ever-growing repositories of digital information, behavioral data has become one of the most valuable resources. Through the extraction of behavioral surplus, advertising no longer operates through generalized mass exposure, but rather through an increasingly precise alignment with users’ interests, preferences, and consumption patterns. From this transformation emerged a new model of accumulation commonly described as surveillance capitalism. The extraordinary growth of large technology companies over the past two decades has been driven largely by data-centric advertising models built on this logic of behavioral data extraction (Zuboff, 2019, pp. 112–113). As Zuboff argues, surveillance capitalism uses AI to maximize the predictability and control of behavior, institutionalizing instrumental rationality at the core of digital infrastructure. In a “datafied” society, algorithms process enormous sets of behavioral data to optimize performance across all domains—from marketing to police surveillance—at the expense of autonomy and reflexivity (Zuboff, 2019, pp. 241–243).

Mittelstadt et al. (2016) emphasize that “algorithmic systems are designed to optimize predefined objectives—whether click-through rates, user engagement, or revenue generation—through mathematical processes” (pp. 1–2). These systems quantify behavior and automate decisions, reducing freedom to a set of calculated outcomes.

Following the Frankfurt School, Marcuse (2013) warned that the reality principle had been transformed into a performance principle, demanding conformity to productivity and efficiency. As he later observed, “performance and efficiency have supplanted ethical and emancipatory values in advanced industrial society, subjecting human capacities to technological imperatives” (Marcuse, 2013, pp. 17–18). By their very de-



sign, algorithms model and digitize reality according to technical criteria. In doing so, they blur the line between what is rational and what is normatively legitimate. Thus, the warning from the Frankfurt School is no longer theoretical: it is algorithmically encoded in the dominant infrastructures of contemporary life.

Marx and Engels (2002) described capitalism as a system driven by the infinite accumulation of capital and the continuous incorporation of new spheres of life into market relations. From a Marxist perspective, surveillance capitalism represents a new regime of accumulation directed at human life experience, transforming all dimensions of life—search, communication, movement, emotions, and everyday interaction—into data assets subject to capitalist ownership and exploitation. As algorithmic systems increasingly penetrate everyday life through the logic of surveillance capitalism, their influence extends far beyond economic behavior and begins to reshape the cognitive and cultural foundations of democratic society. Thus, the erosion of critical thinking is not limited to individual cognition; ultimately, it transforms democratic culture itself.

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Algorithmic Governance and the Biopolitical Management of Life

Beyond their instrumental logic, algorithms also function as tools of biopolitical governance. Following Foucault's (2008) concept of biopolitics—the political rationality that governs life and populations—algorithms now manage human existence through data-driven modulation. Rouvroy and Berns (2013) describe algorithmic governance as “a new biopolitical regime in which data-driven processes regulate life, shaping the conditions of existence for populations” (pp. 164–165). With their ability to collect, analyze, and predict behavior on a large scale, algorithmic systems fundamentally reconfigure the structures of life (Cheney-Lippold, 2017).

Zuboff (2019) frames this phenomenon within surveillance capitalism, where human experience becomes raw material for predicting behavior and generating profit. Algorithms silently structure choices, influence attention, and manipulate preferences, often without informed consent. What emerges, is “a coup from above,” in which the private power of data eludes traditional democratic oversight. The result is a new form of domination—psychological rather than physical.

Today, surveillance is no longer limited to the state. As Lyon (2006) argues, the proliferation of digital technologies has expanded the scope of surveillance to the most private aspects of daily life, going beyond the traditional panopticon model (pp. 4–5). Zuboff (2019) expands on Foucault's

metaphor: constant observation through digital platforms invisibly shapes behavior (pp. 234–235). Individuals are continuously monitored, adjusted, and classified—not only as consumers but as governable subjects.

Couldry and Mejías (2019) characterize algorithmic power as a technopolitical assemblage that fuses instrumental reason with biopolitical control (p. 73). Optimization becomes the norm: individuals unconsciously conform to the metrics defined by the system. Although platforms proclaim their neutrality, they actually serve the interests of dominant powers, shaping what is visible, valuable, and legitimate.

Mir (2025) warns that these monopolistic platforms—though efficient—concentrate political and economic influence. Based on Metcalfe’s law, the value of these platforms grows exponentially, as does their potential for manipulation. Once behavioral data is sufficiently comprehensive, users can be “read”—even before they are self-aware—and guided accordingly. In Canada, for example, 80.5% of the population was using Facebook by the end of 2023 (Napoleon Cat, n.d.), giving Meta immense influence over public opinion.

The consequences are not abstract. The Cambridge Analytica scandal revealed how data and algorithms were used to deliver micro-targeted political messages designed to provoke emotional responses and influence undecided voters during the Brexit campaign (Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison, 2018; Cadwalladr and Townsend, 2018). Thus, disinformation now functions as a strategic form of political communication.

In the 2024 U.S. presidential election, Elon Musk—through platforms such as X and Tesla’s digital ecosystem—used targeted media campaigns to amplify his political influence (Financial Times, 2024). These examples reveal how algorithmic power—once limited to commerce or communication—now extends deeply into the political sphere, reshaping public discourse and challenging the foundations of democratic agency.



The Silent Decline of Reason in the Algorithmic Age

The silent decline of reason in the algorithmic age manifests itself through subtle transformations in the way people think, judge, and engage with information in digital environments. This process not only weakens critical and reflective abilities, but also limits exposure to diverse perspectives, thereby fostering polarized forms of consensus and undermining the conditions necessary for democratic deliberation.

The Erosion of Critical Thinking and Reflective Judgment

The erosion of critical thinking under algorithmic power is not an unforeseen phenomenon. As early as 1964, Herbert Marcuse diagnosed the loss of critical consciousness among modern individuals in a world dominated by technological rationality and consumerist ideology. In *One-Dimensional Man*, he warned that the optimization of commercial interests leads to the atrophy of social criticism, reducing individuals to passive consumers molded by a preconfigured system. New forms of control, masquerading as progress and efficiency, erode freedom by dulling critical faculties—a dynamic that is now intensifying in the algorithmic age. As reason recedes, individuals no longer question the structures around them; they come to desire and accept only what the system offers. Today's digital propaganda aims not only to persuade but also to generate cognitive submission: a population that no longer asks "why" (Bennett and Livingston, 2018).

Despite unprecedented access to information, users are increasingly suffering from cognitive overload. This saturation fosters susceptibility to conspiracy theories and disinformation, which have been key factors in recent global upheavals (Ecker et al., 2022). In Canada's 2025 federal election, for example, the online environment became a chaotic space flooded with misleading content that fractured public opinion, turning democratic discourse into a volatile arena governed more by prejudice than by reason (The White Hatter, 2025). Similar dynamics are observed around the world. TikTok, for example, has become a powerful vector for disinformation regarding events such as the war in Ukraine (Bösch and Divon, 2024).

Online conspiracy theories have succeeded in shaping segments of public consciousness, generating a false consensus around issues such as COVID-19 vaccines or the 2020 U.S. elections (Skafle et al., 2022). This manipulation no longer requires state censorship; it is enough to flood social media feeds with algorithmically targeted narratives. Through calculated amplification, digital platforms enable a form of "manufactured consent" under a new guise. A fragmented public self-organizes around engineered narratives, bypassing deliberation and critical scrutiny.

Platforms such as Meta, Google, and YouTube operate according to a consistent logic: the more they understand users, the longer they can retain their attention, and, consequently, the greater the economic value they can extract. The paradox lies in the fact that this very capacity for "perfect service" also signals an increasingly deep form of dependence.



The more personalized the content and the smoother the experience, the more individuals become integrated into an invisible system of behavioral extraction and modulation. On a cognitive level, this mechanism produces a form of “voluntary orientation,” in which individuals believe they are choosing freely, while the range of available options has already been structured by algorithms optimized for engagement. The result is the gradual erosion of autonomy, as the boundary between authentic needs and artificially constructed desires becomes increasingly blurred. Human beings no longer appear as self-reflective subjects but are reduced to sets of behavioral signals that can be measured, predicted, and exploited within an ever-expanding cycle of data accumulation.

The profits of digital platforms depend directly on their ability to retain users’ attention for as long as possible. Consequently, these platforms have developed an addictive architecture based on psychological mechanisms such as instant rewards and dopamine feedback loops. In other words, the platforms deliberately construct psychological cycles that encourage users to continually seek immediate stimulation, thereby maintaining uninterrupted engagement. This helps explain why many forms of digital psychological distress should not be understood as accidental side effects but rather as predictable outcomes of intentional design. A transnational study conducted by Cheng et al. (2021) across 32 countries revealed that approximately 24% of users show signs of social media addiction. Similarly, a report by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2023) indicated that adolescents who spend more than three hours a day on social media face approximately double the risk of experiencing mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression. These figures reveal the magnitude of the problem and demonstrate the connection between platform structures and the psychological transformation of users.

Paradoxically, while AI chatbots are becoming increasingly intelligent thanks to the data generated by billions of users, humans face a growing risk of what digital culture often describes as “brainrot”—a colloquial term referring to the deterioration of concentration and critical thinking caused by the excessive consumption of brief, repetitive, and low-value digital content, especially on social media platforms, which fosters addictive behavior patterns and reduces people’s ability to engage with more in-depth forms of information. At the same time, the commodification of images, emotions, and online self-presentation increasingly reduces personal value to engagement metrics such as “likes,” “shares,” and “followers.” In this sense, individuals are not only subjected to surveillance but are also valued and quantified within a digital marketplace, contributing to a broader iden-



tity crisis in contemporary society. These developments reflect the widespread nature of the problem and reveal the profound relationship between platform structures and the psychological transformation of users.

The result is troubling: truth becomes fragile and public reason collapses. As Hannah Arendt warned, a society inundated with distorted media loses the foundations of shared reality and, with it, the conditions for sound judgment. Truth, she argued, is “extremely fragile” and can be “manipulated and eliminated from the world by political power” (Arendt, 1972). In such a climate, citizens overwhelmed by contradictory messages are less likely to seek clarity. Instead, they retreat into passivity, becoming vulnerable to carefully designed disinformation campaigns. Algorithms, as discussed earlier, serve as mechanisms for disseminating these campaigns, whether driven by political or commercial objectives. Social media bots further amplify falsehoods, reinforcing cognitive biases and accelerating the spread of unverified claims. Gombar (2025) aptly describes this as a cognitive war, in which public perception is manipulated through digital media ecosystems.

This environment produces a “virtual consensus,” not based on rational debate, but shaped by the control of information. The goal of disinformation is no longer merely deception but disorientation, emotional disengagement, and passive acceptance. The long-term danger is the gradual erosion of the public’s intellectual vitality. Surrounded by personalized content streams, users increasingly consume content without reflection, clicking “like” on entertainment content while disengaging from substantive issues. Over time, this weakens the habits of civil discourse and critical inquiry.

As Van Badham (2024) observes, young people—who are most immersed in digital environments—show early signs of a decline in critical thinking and a decrease in autonomy in their responses to online content. Their social realities are confined to screens where manipulated information is conflated with the truth. In such a world, as O’Hara (2022) warns, digital environments can either enhance or erode human rationality, depending on how they are structured and regulated. In fact, the very process of identity formation is increasingly shaped by these environments. As Alegría Morán (2025) points out, “young people, by shaping the spaces they occupy, also mold their expressions of identity, shaping their virtues, beliefs, and meanings” (p. 274), which highlights that digital spaces are not neutral arenas but rather environments that actively participate in the construction of subjectivity.



The Suppression of Divergent Thinking and the Rise of Polarized Consensus

The algorithmic structuring of digital environments increasingly suppresses divergent thinking and fosters the illusion of consensus through polarization. Arguedas et al. (2022) describe how algorithms trap users in echo chambers or filter bubbles, selectively reinforcing preexisting opinions while excluding opposing perspectives. Under this regime, individuals are no longer exposed to difference but encounter only algorithmically selected affirmations of what they already believe. Traditional gatekeepers—such as editors, journalists, and public intellectuals—have been largely displaced by algorithmic logics that determine visibility based not on truth but on engagement. Platform algorithms increasingly rely on users' immediate behavioral responses, often encouraging forms of engagement that do not necessarily reflect their more profound interests, long-term intentions, or genuine preferences.

Following this logic, personalization fragments the public sphere; algorithms such as Facebook's News Feed and TikTok's "For You" page select content based on behavioral profiles (Mittelstadt et al., 2016), producing what has been described as a "mirror of the self." On TikTok, this process reaches extreme levels: the platform quickly learns users' preferences and offers them a constant stream of content that reinforces them. As *The Verge* noted, TikTok functions as "a TV channel perfectly calibrated to the user's brain" (Sato, 2024). While this hyper-personalization maximizes user engagement, it also limits cognitive exposure and stifles the development of divergent or critical thinking. The 2024 U.S. presidential election vividly illustrated this danger. In the run-up to the election, TikTok became an "optimistic bubble" for Harris supporters, feeding them only content that reinforced her likely victory, which led many to ignore conflicting signals (Sato, 2024).

Such environments foster ideological isolation. People are drawn to like-minded communities, which become isolated enclaves of affirmation rather than spaces for dialogue. In these environments, sensational or emotionally charged content is more likely to spread than measured, fact-based discourse (Dunaway, 2024). The logic of participation favors the provocative over the reflective. Zollo et al. (2017) observe that, within echo chambers, even attempts to correct false beliefs fail because users prioritize identity over evidence.

Polarization is not limited to a single platform. It unfolds in parallel across all digital spaces—including X, YouTube, and Reddit—each of which



cultivates its own internal consensus. Users who express minority opinions face algorithmic invisibility, reduced reach, and, ultimately, self-censorship (Kaiser et al., 2020). As Gearhart and Zhang (2015) point out, this dynamic reflects the “spiral of silence,” in which opinions perceived as minority views are suppressed, allowing dominant narratives to appear hegemonic. The absence of visible dissent should not be confused with genuine agreement; it often reflects the silencing effects of algorithmic control.

Beyond personalization, algorithms actively shape the visibility and popularity of content. Major platforms highlight posts based on engagement metrics, creating an implicit attention economy. Content that performs well—regardless of its factual basis—receives algorithmic rewards, while nuanced or unpopular truths are marginalized. Pennycook et al. (2018) point out that this model prioritizes sensationalism over accuracy, making truth a casualty of the digital competition for attention. The epistemic landscape becomes distorted: what circulates widely is not what is true, but what provokes a reaction.

The political implications are serious. In deeply polarized environments, different communities live in incompatible realities. The absence of shared facts erodes the common ground necessary for rational deliberation. Ecker et al. (2024) warn that this fragmentation fosters mistrust and radicalization. Individuals increasingly perceive their own group as morally correct and numerically dominant, while dissenters are viewed as aberrant or manipulated. When political outcomes challenge these insular expectations, the resulting disillusionment can lead to a breakdown of trust—and even to violent backlash.

The decline of reason does not manifest as overt coercion but rather as the silent disappearance of dissent. Digital publics may appear harmonious, but beneath the surface lies a deeply fragmented epistemic order. The algorithmic suppression of minority opinions creates an artificial consensus, concealing the absence of pluralism (Arguedas et al., 2022). As Marx and Engels (2000) foresaw, modern progress often results in the externalization of the intellect into systems, while human subjectivity is reduced to mechanical responsiveness. In today’s digital age, algorithmic systems seem to possess intellectual life—selecting, predicting, and optimizing—while human reason is reduced to passivity, eroded by patterns it no longer shapes (Marx and Engels, 2000).



From Epistemic Passivity to Democratic Fragility

The erosion of critical reason in digital environments eventually extends beyond the sphere of individual cognition and begins to affect the very foundations of democratic life itself. As citizens become increasingly dependent on algorithm-mediated information systems, epistemic passivity gradually transforms into democratic fragility. This process manifests itself not only in the manipulation of public reason through algorithmic control and disinformation but also in the weakening of democratic agency and moral responsibility in contemporary society.

Algorithmic Power and the Manipulation of Public Reason

Hannah Arendt (1951) famously warned that the blurring of the boundaries between truth and falsehood is one of the most insidious tools of totalitarian control. In her view, the ideal subject of a totalitarian regime is not the committed ideological fanatic, but rather those for whom the distinction between reality and fiction—between the true and the false—no longer exists. This epistemological confusion marks a critical rupture in public reason.

When reason quietly declines, society loses its ability to question, verify, and judge. The result is an epistemologically vulnerable public, highly susceptible to fake news, populist rhetoric, and conspiracy theories. Extremist groups, armed with microsegmentation tools on social media, exploit this vulnerability to spread propaganda tailored to specific psychological and demographic profiles, thereby shaping behavior and influencing election results. Neudert (2017), for example, documented the coordinated use of political bots and German fake news during the country's federal elections, demonstrating how algorithmic agents can be deployed to systematically manipulate democratic processes.

Algorithmic systems trained on biased data further perpetuate structural discrimination. Buolamwini and Gebru (2018) demonstrated how facial recognition systems exhibit severe racial and gender biases, revealing how technological rationality can reinforce existing inequalities rather than dismantle them.

The paradox of digital modernity is that, while information is abundant, public discourse is impoverished. In this post-truth era, noise drowns out the signal, critical perspectives are silenced, and clarity gives way to confusion. McIntyre (2018) described this as a social shift in which truth no longer carries normative weight in public debate. The weaken-



ing of critical reason, accelerated by algorithmic amplification, opens the public sphere to cognitive domination by corporate and political elites.

The philosopher Herbert Marcuse (2013) foreshadowed this dynamic in his analysis of “sublimated slavery”—a state in which individuals internalize domination and confuse coercion with freedom. In today’s digital context, control is no longer exercised openly but is disseminated through algorithmic logics that push, influence, and condition choice. In this way, public reason is not only silenced but also subtly reprogrammed.

The Loss of Democratic Agency and the Crisis of Moral Responsibility

The manipulation of public reason inevitably leads to the erosion of democratic agency. Consent no longer stems from deliberation and understanding but rather from a manipulated perception and an emotional response. As Zuboff (2019) points out, surveillance capitalism introduces “a new form of power that is not based on democratic oversight, but on unilateral knowledge, asymmetry, and behavioral control” (p. 8). Individuals, increasingly influenced by micro-targeted messages, begin to act not as autonomous citizens but as behavioral subjects responding to invisible stimuli.

This situation undermines the ethical foundations of democracy. Nyhan (2020) argues that political advertising often reinforces voters’ misperceptions, while Ranjan and Upadhyay (2024) observe that such advertising tends to oversimplify complex issues, thereby distorting the public’s understanding. Far from empowering citizens, algorithmically curated content narrows their interpretive frameworks and amplifies biases, producing a kind of informational despotism disguised as freedom of expression. The illusion of choice replaces autonomy.

Fragmented audiences, each living in their own personalized information environment, are becoming increasingly polarized. Social media platforms function as polarization machines, eroding common ground and fostering epistemic tribalism. Ecker et al. (2024) warn that such environments foster the illusion that one’s own group is dominant and morally correct, while opponents are perceived as irrational or dangerous. When expectations clash with electoral realities, the result is not reflection but outrage, which fuels political instability.

The consequences are not limited to discourse alone. Digital incitement can translate into real-world violence. Müller and Schwarz (2020) document how far-right propaganda on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter has contributed to hate crimes against immigrants and Muslims. This breakdown of epistemic and social trust weakens society’s ability to

respond collectively to crises such as pandemics, climate change, and economic inequality.

The global dominance of a few digital corporations also threatens national information sovereignty. The case of Meta's (Facebook) 2023 decision to block Canadian media outlets in response to regulatory measures (Patterson, 2024) demonstrates the extent to which corporate power can prevail over democratic governance. This is no longer simply a matter of media bias, but of supranational platforms exercising unilateral control over access to information.

Today, the decline of democracy is less a matter of authoritarian repression than of algorithmic normalization. Digital oligarchs—armed with vast datasets and insights into behavior—exercise subtle control over the public consciousness. They shape not only what people see and believe, but also how they interpret reality and relate to one another. This power, though largely invisible, is deeply political—and deeply moral.

The Enlightenment ideal of democracy is based on the premise that free individuals, guided by reason and capable of exercising moral judgment, can shape their collective destiny. In a world where public opinion is manufactured and moral agency is eroded, that ideal becomes increasingly fragile. The decline of reason, accelerated by algorithmic governance, thus signals not only a crisis of knowledge but also a crisis of moral and democratic responsibility.

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Revitalizing Reason and Responsibility in the Digital Age

Revitalizing reason and responsibility in the digital age requires more than just technological regulation; it demands the reconstruction of the ethical, epistemic, and educational foundations of democratic life. This renewal involves both reclaiming individual epistemic agency in the face of algorithmic manipulation and fostering a democratic culture based on critical thinking, moral responsibility, and communicative rationality.

Reclaiming epistemic agency through ethics, truth, and pedagogical commitment

Revitalizing reason in the digital age requires a collective commitment to restoring critical reflection and epistemic agency. The first imperative lies in the ethical governance of data and algorithms. As O'Hara (2022) notes, "digital modernity is a subjective world in which reflexivity and choice are externalized to the ambient data infrastructure" (p. 53). In such a world,

individuals lose their autonomy unless mechanisms are put in place to reaffirm control over the infrastructures that shape their cognition.

Big data, now considered the “oil” of the digital economy, is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few powerful corporations. However, unlike traditional resources, data is intangible, infinitely replicable, and flows at an unprecedented speed. According to Couldry and Mejías (2019), digital capitalism transforms users into unpaid laborers whose behavioral data is collected for profit. Under this regime, democratic oversight is replaced by algorithmic governance, and user autonomy is undermined by opaque infrastructures.

To reverse this dynamic, legal and institutional mechanisms must be strengthened. The UNDP (2019) highlights the need for antitrust regulation and data-sharing obligations to limit monopolistic power and promote democratic transparency. Lessons drawn from the European Union’s (EU) Digital Services Act (DSA) and Digital Markets Act (DMA) suggest that reining in the power of platforms is not only necessary but also possible. Governments must enact robust data legislation, enforce algorithmic transparency, and ensure citizens’ access to pluralistic information.

However, the challenge of regulating algorithmic power cannot be reduced solely to issues of legal transparency or institutional oversight. It also concerns the structural asymmetry inherent in the very forms of “consent” that govern contemporary digital life. In practice, clicking the “I Agree” button has become a mandatory condition for accessing services within the ecosystem of big tech—a vast network of interconnected digital platforms, infrastructures, and services that includes search engines, social media, e-commerce, cloud computing, and AI systems. Formally, these agreements are presented as consensual arrangements between users and platforms. However, they operate according to a coercive “take it or leave it” contractual logic: users must accept the terms or forfeit their participation in essential digital environments.

In contemporary society, where daily life has become deeply dependent on the internet and digital services, people are effectively forced to click “accept” as a procedural necessity rather than as an expression of genuine voluntary choice. Even assuming that users could read these agreements in their entirety, the complexity of the legal structures and specialized technical language makes it difficult for them to understand or critically assess the implications of what they are consenting to. These agreements allow technology companies to unilaterally establish rights to access, extract, analyze, and reuse behavioral data without meaningful negotiation or genuine democratic consent. In this sense, the power



of platforms often sets normative practices before citizens—and even governments—are fully aware of the transformations taking place. The phrase “I Agree,” therefore, does not mark the beginning of a transparent relationship but rather functions as a legal gateway that legitimizes a preconfigured system of power and data surveillance. For this reason, the question of how democratic societies can regulate surveillance capitalism and limit the exploitative extraction of user data has become one of the major legal and political challenges of the digital age.

In the context of data capitalism and the expanding power of global digital platforms, the EU’s General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) has been regarded as a significant step toward protecting privacy and human dignity in digital spaces. The GDPR asserts that personal data should not be treated merely as an economic resource but as an issue closely tied to citizens’ fundamental rights. Consequently, it establishes strict principles regarding transparency, informed consent, and accountability in data processing. At the same time, the regulation reflects the EU’s broader effort to limit the commercialization and exploitation of behavioral data by transnational technology companies (EU, 2016).

In light of the rapid development of AI, big data, and the platform economy, the GDPR also faces new challenges. In 2025, the EU continued to introduce regulations such as the Data Act and the AI Act, demonstrating that the power of data is no longer limited to the issue of individual privacy but has evolved into a strategic issue involving digital sovereignty, algorithmic power, and social control. This evolution reflects Europe’s broader effort to build a human-centered model of digital governance, aimed at limiting the widespread commodification of human life under the logic of data capitalism and the growing dominance of transnational technology companies (EU, 2016). Although the GDPR and the EU’s most recent data regulations are generally considered significant advances in protecting privacy and limiting the power of digital platforms, their practical effectiveness remains constrained by enforcement challenges and uneven regulatory capacities among EU member states. While regulatory agencies often lack sufficient resources and must contend with lengthy legal proceedings, large tech companies continue to hold significant advantages in terms of financial resources, algorithmic infrastructure, and control over global data ecosystems. As a result, existing regulations serve primarily to restrict and partially regulate data extraction practices, rather than fundamentally transforming the logic of behavioral data accumulation that underpins surveillance capitalism.





Recent analyses of data legislation in 2025 indicate that the United States still lacks a comprehensive federal data protection law comparable to the EU's GDPR: "The United States lacks a comprehensive federal data privacy law comparable to the GDPR. Instead, the responsibility for protecting personal data falls to individual states, many of which have enacted their own privacy laws. Although there have been several attempts to introduce a comprehensive national data privacy law, no such legislation has been enacted to date" (EU, 2016). Precisely because of the absence of a unified federal legal framework, control over personal data in the United States remains largely concentrated in the hands of major digital platforms, making it more difficult to protect personal data compared to the EU's data governance model. These examples demonstrate that personal data protection systems continue to evolve and are far from achieving global coherence or consistency. In this ongoing process, education remains one of the most important solutions.

Equally important is the role of education. Regaining epistemic agency requires a pedagogical transformation. Schools and universities must instill digital literacy, critical thinking, and algorithmic awareness. Citizens must be trained not only to detect fake news but also to question the very structures that mediate the truth. As Nobel laureate Maria Ressa warns (ITN Business, n.d.), exposure to disinformation acts like a slow-acting poison, ultimately reshaping users' perceptions and cognition. Only an educational approach grounded in epistemic vigilance can inoculate people against this erosion. Education enables modern individuals to develop an internal protective shield rooted in each person's cultural values. While legal frameworks continue to evolve, defending reason against algorithmic manipulation ultimately requires recognizing that "culture is the system that regulates development itself" (Partido Comunista de Vietnam, 2026). Culture plays a fundamental role in establishing norms, guiding values, and regulating behavior. In this sense, culture functions as a self-regulatory mechanism for both society and the individual, contributing to the formation of a generation of digitally resilient citizens, endowed with critical awareness, cognitive autonomy, and the ability to resist algorithmic power. These individuals are less likely to become caught up in endless cycles of consumption and entertainment; they can distinguish truth from falsehood, recognize how digital platforms exploit their data, and know when to set limits against the temptations generated by digital conveniences.

Finally, scholars and journalists play a crucial role in deciphering the black-box mechanisms of algorithmic systems. Transparency and ac-

countability must become democratic standards, not technical luxuries. Algorithmic fairness, as Mittelstadt et al. (2016) argue, must be based on ethical and political norms, not merely on computational optimization. The future of democratic life depends on the restoration of public reason through reflective, inclusive, and rules-based digital governance.

Toward a Democratic “Ethos” of Critical and Moral Education

There can be no strong democratic society without citizens capable of exercising reasoned judgment, assuming moral responsibility, and achieving mutual understanding. The Enlightenment legacy of democracy as a project of rational autonomy must be reaffirmed through education and public discourse. As Habermas (1996) states, “democracy depends on the communicative power generated through discourse that approximates the ideal speech situation, thereby guaranteeing the legitimacy of collective decisions” (p. 305). Therefore, education must cultivate the capacities necessary for democratic action. As Durkheim (1951) warned, without moral cohesion, societies sink into anomie and individuals drift away from collective norms (p. 241). Public education must foster a democratic ethos rooted in reason, empathy, and ethical deliberation. This requires that institutions provide not only information but also spaces for discursive participation where conflicting viewpoints can be debated on an equal footing and with mutual respect. Empirical studies underscore that effective democratic education goes beyond rote learning, emphasizing critical thinking, open dialogue, and civic participation (Burbules, 2023; Teegelbeckers et al., 2023). For example, Burbules (2023) observes that the lack of critical thinking skills among a large proportion of citizens leaves democracies “vulnerable to demagoguery and blatant deception” (p. 189). Furthermore, he argues that fostering a commitment to critical inquiry requires not only individual skills but also “networks of social support and encouragement,” so that when one “asks difficult questions or challenges orthodoxies” (p. 189), one is not entirely alone. In practice, this means that educational policies must prioritize curricula and teaching methods that foster debate, ethical reasoning, and collaborative problem-solving. Recent studies on citizenship education suggest that participatory, debate-oriented teaching methods—such as small-group work, civic projects, and democratic decision-making activities—can effectively promote democratic knowledge, political engagement, critical thinking skills, and students’ ability to deal with differences (Teegelbeckers et al., 2023). Therefore, educational systems should aim not only to produce



academically competent graduates but also citizens capable of engaging in rational public dialogue, reflective judgment, and ethical deliberation within the framework of democratic life.

In the digital age, democratic citizenship can no longer be understood solely in legal or institutional terms. Increasingly, citizens are required to navigate complex information ecosystems shaped by algorithms, data mining, and platform governance. Consequently, democratic participation now depends not only on political rights but also on epistemic competencies: the ability to critically evaluate information, recognize manipulation, and participate responsibly in digital public spaces. This transformation requires a redefinition of civic education itself. Schools and universities must cultivate forms of digital citizenship based on ethical responsibility, communicative rationality, and critical self-reflection. Citizens should not limit themselves to passively consuming information but should actively participate in shaping democratic discourse. In this sense, democratic education becomes inseparable from epistemic empowerment. Without these capabilities, individuals risk becoming vulnerable to algorithmic influence, emotional polarization, and manufactured consensus. The defense of democracy depends, therefore, not only on institutional reforms but also on the formation of citizens capable of resisting epistemic manipulation and upholding public reason in increasingly complex technological conditions.

Habermas (1984, 1987, and 1989) developed the concept of communicative rationality as the foundation of democratic legitimacy. In his view, only discourse governed by the force of the best argument—and free from coercion—can generate a legitimate consensus. In an era of algorithmic manipulation, this model is more relevant than ever. Modern societies face a deluge of fragmented information and opinions, often selected by opaque algorithms that amplify sensationalism or reinforce biases. Digital media environments, structured around personalization and microsegmentation, tend to create “echo chambers” and filter bubbles that can erode the common ground of public debate. If left unchecked, these systemic imperatives threaten to colonize the lifeworld, undermining citizens’ ability to engage in genuine dialogue. Algorithmic communication poses profound challenges to democracy. Practices such as filtering, “hyper-boosting,” and microsegmentation on social media increasingly polarize the electorate and weaken the deliberative foundations of democratic society through the large-scale circulation of disinformation. These processes distort the public’s epistemic environment and also create inequalities of influence, as certain actors use data and algorithms to shape



public opinion, while many citizens lack the ability to recognize or resist such manipulation. To counter these trends, institutional spaces dedicated to communicative reason must be strengthened. This involves both reinforcing normative commitments (ensuring that public discourse adheres to the pursuit of truth and respect for individuals) and implementing structural safeguards in the media and technology sectors.

To safeguard democracy, we must move beyond fragmented, algorithm-shaped opinion toward a shared deliberative understanding. This means building infrastructures that support public reasoning: independent journalism, civil society forums, transparent media regulation, and inclusive educational systems. A free and pluralistic press and public-interest media provide forums for the deliberative exchange of ideas and act as a counterweight to disinformation. Similarly, fostering regular civic forums or citizens' assemblies can enable diverse groups to reason together on an equal footing. In the digital sphere, policy interventions are needed to ensure that technology serves democratic ends. This includes greater oversight of social media algorithms and data practices—for example, requiring algorithmic transparency and restrictions on micro-targeted propaganda—as well as robust measures against online disinformation. Emerging AI technologies have the capacity to flood digital media environments with low-quality content, manipulation, and disinformation on a massive scale, thereby undermining social trust and democratic accountability. In response to these risks, increasingly robust measures are needed, including reliable systems for detecting AI-generated content, greater platform accountability, and broader forms of digital and media literacy among citizens. Indeed, media and information literacy must be improved so that citizens can critically evaluate news sources, recognize manipulation, and engage responsibly online. Ultimately, defending democracy in the digital age demands more than reactive regulation: it requires a cultural and philosophical commitment to human dignity, epistemic justice, and moral autonomy. The collective task is to prioritize reason over automation, reaffirm the ethical essence of civic life, and ensure that digital technologies serve the ideals of democratic discourse rather than subverting them. Only through progressive educational policies and resilient communication infrastructures can we equip citizens with the reasoning skills necessary to maintain a truly democratic spirit in the 21st century.



Conclusions

In the digital age, algorithms, big data, and platform infrastructures are no longer limited to mediating communication; they are actively reshaping the cognitive, moral, and political architectures of democratic life. Today, the manipulation of information rarely takes the form of overt censorship. Instead, it is embedded in algorithmic recommendation systems, personalization engines, and predictive analytics that subtly govern visibility, engagement, and beliefs. The rise of filter bubbles, echo chambers, manufactured consensus, and data-driven behavioral control signals a profound epistemic shift: algorithmic power—rooted in instrumental reason and sustained by biopolitical mechanisms—now penetrates the very heart of public reason and political autonomy.

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This algorithmic colonization marks a technological evolution and a philosophical regression: the decline of reason itself. Modern democracy, which was once founded on critical thinking, communicative action, and rational consensus, now faces an erosion that stems not from dramatic ruptures but from the gradual normalization of irrationality. As transparency gives way to opacity and deliberation is displaced by manipulated participation, the foundations of democratic legitimacy begin to crumble.

However, this decline is not inevitable. It is neither irreversible nor immune to resistance. The challenge before us is not merely normative or technological but deeply philosophical and civic: to reaffirm human reason as the guiding principle of digital society. This means confronting the instrumental rationality underlying algorithmic systems and replacing it with a normative commitment to truth, justice, and democratic accountability.

Reversing this trajectory requires a multifaceted strategy. It calls for legal mechanisms to curb monopolistic data power and enforce algorithmic transparency. It demands that public institutions and educational systems foster digital literacy, moral judgment, and epistemic vigilance.

In this collective effort, communicative rationality must be restored as the cornerstone of public life. In the face of the pressures of algorithmic governance, citizens must be empowered to deliberate, dissent, and decide together. Only by restoring the primacy of reason over code—of human agency over algorithmic determinism—can we hope to safeguard the moral integrity of democracy. The future of freedom in the digital age depends on our willingness to defend reason itself.

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Author	Contribution
Van Hanh Nguyen	Conceptualization, research, drafting of the original manuscript, review, and editing. As this is a single-authored document, the author bears sole responsibility for the entire research presented herein.

Statement on the Use of Artificial Intelligence
The author, Van Hanh Nguyen, of the article titled “The Decline of Reason Under Algorithmic Power in Contemporary Democracy,” declares that artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used to a limited extent (less than 5%) during the preparation of the manuscript. AI was used exclusively for: 1. Assist in searching for and consulting academic references related to the article’s topic. 2. Support the translation of the abstract and keywords into Spanish. All results generated with the help of AI were critically reviewed, verified, and edited by the author. AI was not used in the development of the main arguments, the theoretical framework, the analysis, or the fundamental academic content of the article.

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