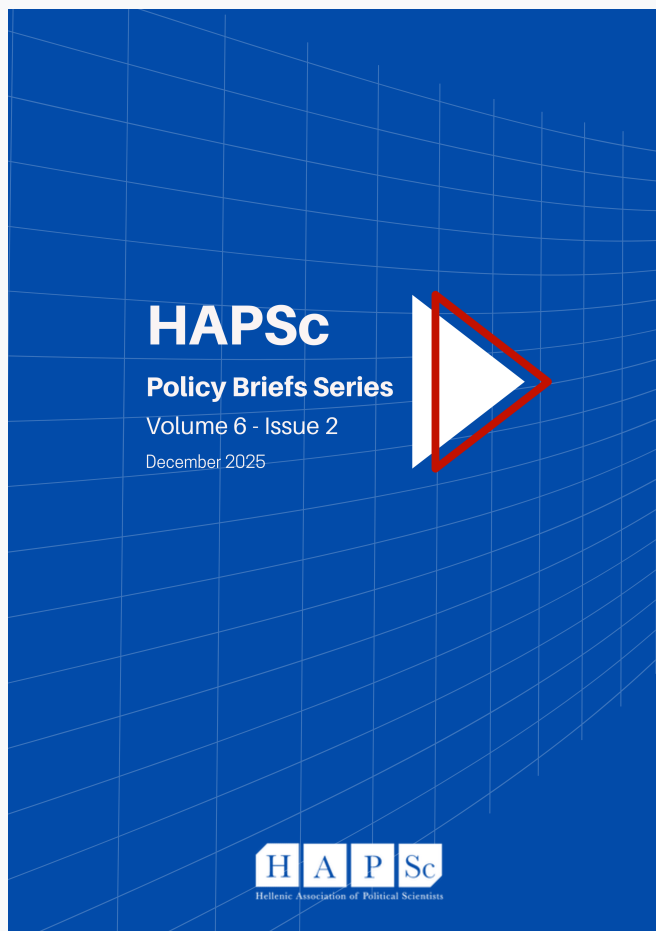


HAPSc Policy Briefs Series

Vol 6, No 2 (2025)

HAPSc Policy Briefs Series



Governing Attention: Politics, Algorithms, and Permanent Conflict

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doi: [10.12681/hapscpbs.45372](https://doi.org/10.12681/hapscpbs.45372)

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To cite this article:

Battista, D. (2025). Governing Attention: Politics, Algorithms, and Permanent Conflict. *HAPSc Policy Briefs Series*, 6(2), 81–89. <https://doi.org/10.12681/hapscpbs.45372>

Governing Attention: Politics, Algorithms, and Permanent Conflict¹

Daniele Battista²

Abstract

This study examines the transformation of political communication in the context of the platform society, focusing on the growing centrality of social media within the hybrid media system. It explores two key dynamics of contemporary politics: the increasing personalization of political competition and the consolidation of the permanent campaign as a dominant mode of political action. The research aims to understand how political leaders use digital platforms to maintain continuous engagement with citizens, strengthen their symbolic capital, and shape the algorithmic reconfiguration of the public sphere. The main research questions address the role of social media in the construction of political leadership and the emergence of disinformation practices within a conflict-driven communication environment. The findings point to a significant relationship between the intensity of leaders' digital presence and the escalation of political conflict, both within and between coalitions, often accompanied by opaque and disinformative strategies. The study concludes by proposing guidelines for more responsible political communication, aimed at promoting transparency, public trust, and the quality of democratic processes in the digital ecosystem.

Keywords: Community participation, MOA model, Sustainable tourism, Tourism governance

Introduction

The evolution of digital technologies has profoundly reshaped political communication, fostering the emergence of a platform-based society in which interactions among political leaders, media, and citizens are increasingly mediated by algorithmic infrastructures controlled by global private actors (Van Dijck, 2013). In this context, political communication is no longer confined to electoral phases but takes on a permanent, continuous, and highly performative character (Battista, 2024a). This transformation is further reinforced by the growing personalization of politics, which places political leaders at the centre of public representation.

These dynamics intersect with the participatory, viral, and polarizing logics of social media (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018) and unfold within a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2017), where boundaries between institutional and political communication are increasingly blurred. Digital visibility thus becomes a crucial resource for consolidating reputational capital, while political discourse is often oriented more toward engagement than democratic deliberation, contributing to polarization and disinformation (Tucker et al., 2018). In this scenario, leaders' ability to maintain a constant online

¹ To cite this paper in APA style: Battista, D. (2025). Governing Attention: Politics, Algorithms, and Permanent Conflict. *HAPSc Policy Briefs Series*, 6(2), 81-89. <https://doi.org/10.12681/hapscpbs.45372>

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presence is central to building a continuous personal narrative, fostering voter loyalty and bypassing traditional intermediaries (Battista & Salzano, 2022). Political leaders increasingly act as “visibility entrepreneurs,” shaping their public image through branding strategies that emphasize authenticity, emotional appeal, and spectacle (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). This process supports forms of mediatized presidentialism and direct communication with the electorate, while engagement becomes a source of symbolic and participatory legitimation (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2018).

Within this framework, the study investigates how political leaders use social media to construct and reinforce their public image, sustain ongoing engagement, and contribute—intentionally or not—to conflictual dynamics and the circulation of disinformation (Battista & Uva, 2025). Positioned within critical algorithm studies, the research examines how algorithmic governance shapes political visibility and public discourse, questioning the presumed neutrality of data-driven communication and highlighting the need for ethical frameworks that safeguard pluralism and democratic participation in the digital era.

Theoretical Context

The contemporary public sphere increasingly takes shape within a hybrid communicative ecosystem, where digital and traditional media interact through relationships of interdependence, influence, and competition. As Chadwick (2017) argues, this interaction is dynamic rather than hierarchical, unfolding through continuous processes of fragmentation, adaptation, and reintegration of informational flows. No medium operates autonomously: digital content often relies on the visibility and legitimacy of traditional media to reach broader audiences, while legacy media content gains renewed circulation and participation through digital platforms. This hybridization extends public communication, diversifies participants, and amplifies its influence on citizens’ attitudes and behaviours, while simultaneously requiring greater strategic awareness from political and institutional actors.

Communication strategies increasingly follow a model of interchange (Battista, 2023), based on the convergence of production and consumption and the blurring of sender–receiver roles. As a result, a structural continuity emerges between online and offline spheres, within an environment marked by personalization and algorithmic profiling (Metz et al., 2020). The internet thus functions not merely as infrastructure but as a socio-relational space that reshapes public participation. Within this evolving media ecology, political narratives develop according to transmedia logics, assuming distributed and networked forms across multiple platforms. Political actors must therefore navigate a new grammar of public communication, in which meaning and consensus are constructed through the circulation

and remediation of content across heterogeneous media and audiences. At the same time, Web 2.0 processes of disintermediation enable political actors to bypass traditional journalistic filters and act as autonomous broadcasters (Eldridge et al., 2019). While this shift appears to foster more direct and personalized relationships with citizens, it also exposes political communication to risks of polarization, trivialization, and misinformation. Rather than eliminating mediatization, social platforms reconfigure it. Traditional media remain crucial sources of legitimacy and amplification, as illustrated by cases such as Donald J. Trump, Volodymyr Zelensky, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, whose digital visibility gains full political impact only when reinforced by mainstream media coverage. Communicative success thus depends on the capacity of content to circulate effectively across media environments.

Finally, digital platforms introduce new forms of neo-intermediation through algorithmic selection, profiling, and content prioritization, fostering filter bubbles and echo chambers (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2017) and reproducing asymmetries of influence (Battista & Gaeta, 2023). These dynamics contribute to a renewed form of mediatization, in which political visibility, authority, and legitimacy are increasingly shaped by algorithmic governance. Understanding this transformation requires a critical and ethical approach that recognizes algorithms as political actors and addresses their implications for democratic participation in the digital public sphere (Battista, 2023a).

Approach and Outlook

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretative approach to examine the transformations of political communication within the contemporary hybrid media ecosystem. Grounded in an interdisciplinary framework drawing on political communication studies, media sociology, and mediatization theory, the analysis focuses on the logics shaping the production, circulation, and reception of political content in digital environments. Particular attention is paid to communicative formats, discursive practices, and dynamics of visibility. Through a critical review of the literature and direct observation of political leaders' media practices, the study explores how traditional and digital media interact and the implications of this relationship in terms of personalization, spectacularization, and disintermediation. Rather than aiming at statistical generalization, the research seeks an in-depth, contextual understanding of contemporary political communication. In representative democracies, politics is inseparable from ongoing public communication processes that enable citizens' political agency beyond electoral moments, contributing to what Urbinati (2014) defines as the democratic diarchy of will and opinion.

These processes unfold within a mediated public sphere (Couldry et al., 2007), where media institutions play a structural role in shaping both deliberation and consensus (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014). Media are not merely technologies, but institutions governed by professional and commercial logics that define formats, communicative norms, and criteria of relevance (Hepp et al., 2015). The growing influence of media institutions has intensified the mediatization of politics, leading political actors to adapt their language, narratives, and strategies to media formats oriented toward spectacle and audience attention. This has fostered phenomena such as personalization, simplification, and permanent campaigning, as well as the blurring of boundaries between political information and entertainment. In this context, political leaders increasingly perform multiple roles (as institutional representatives, party figures, and media personalities), while adopting strategies associated with celebrity, intimacy, and lifestyle politics (Street, 2019).

The increasing visibility of politicians' private lives reflects a broader privatization of politics, reinforced by social media and the decline of traditional forms of political engagement. While such "pop" communication styles may risk trivializing public debate, mediatization itself is a descriptive, not normative, process. It can also expand access, visibility, and participation within the public sphere, depending on the capacity of institutions and civil society to sustain inclusive, dialogic, and representative democratic practices.

Results and Discussions

Although the rhetoric of digital disintermediation associated with Web 2.0 evokes a horizontal and participatory communication environment, the reality of digital platforms reveals new and sophisticated forms of remediation. As Van Dijck and Poell (2013) argue, social platforms are not neutral spaces, but environments governed by technical, economic, and cultural logics that shape the production, circulation, and reception of content. Algorithmic infrastructures represent a powerful form of invisible intermediation, determining what users see, read, and share through automated, personalized selection processes based on data and past interactions (Gillespie, 2014). These mechanisms actively shape conditions of visibility (Couldry & Hepp, 2017), influencing agenda-setting and access to information. Consequently, disintermediation appears partial or illusory: while politicians may bypass journalists, platforms replace traditional gatekeepers with new "architects" of information flows (Battista, 2023b).

Algorithms impose formal constraints and are not neutral, embedding commercial priorities and value systems oriented toward maximizing engagement. This logic privileges spectacularized and emotionally charged content over deliberative communication, fostering filter bubbles and echo

chambers that reinforce existing beliefs (Spohr, 2017). Moreover, communicative inequalities persist, as a limited number of highly visible actors dominate online debate, functioning as digital opinion leaders in a renewed two-step flow model (Marwick & Boyd, 2010). Political actors strategically exploit these dynamics through profiling and microtargeting, as illustrated by Obama's campaigns and the Cambridge Analytica case (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018). In this context, platforms act as political actors, reshaping mediatization through algorithmic governance (Helmond et al., 2019).

Visibility is increasingly produced by computational logics rather than editorial criteria, marking a shift toward algorithmic politics. Algorithms function as cultural intermediaries, governing relevance, legitimacy, and attention. Within this algorithmic culture, political communication becomes embedded in data-driven systems that transform participation into behavioural surplus (Zuboff, 2019). Platforms privilege affective and polarizing content, sustaining emotional publics and permanent campaigning (Wahl-Jørgensen, 2019). Political leaders thus emerge as visibility entrepreneurs and algorithmic leaders, compelled to optimize their presence through metrics, personalization, and performative authenticity, becoming hybrid figures situated between influencer culture and institutional politics.

Conclusions

The study demonstrates that the mediatization of politics (significantly intensified by the rise of digital and social platforms) has profoundly reshaped not only communicative processes but also the very foundations of democratic participation and political representation. While the dominant rhetoric of digital disintermediation promotes the idea of a more horizontal, open, and inclusive communicative environment where citizens and political actors can interact directly without mediation the empirical reality proves far more complex. Rather than eliminating intermediaries, contemporary digital environments have introduced new and highly sophisticated forms of re-mediation. Social platforms are not neutral arenas of political exchange; instead, they are socio-technical environments structured by intertwined technical, economic, and cultural logics. These logics decisively shape the production, circulation, and reception of political content, replacing traditional media gatekeepers with algorithmic systems that exercise new forms of control and selection.

Algorithms function as powerful, largely invisible mediators that actively determine content visibility by filtering and personalizing information according to users' browsing behaviors, interaction histories, and demographic profiles (Bucher, 2018). This process is inherently non-neutral, as it

reflects commercial priorities and engagement-driven strategies designed to maximize user attention, often encouraging the spectacularization and polarization of political communication. Consequently, online political participation does not take place within a free and egalitarian public sphere but within a structured environment where algorithmic governance and commercial imperatives significantly influence opinion formation.

The promise of disintermediation associated with Web 2.0 thus appears more accurately as a reconfiguration of earlier mechanisms of control, with platforms emerging as new “architects” of information flows capable of deeply shaping democratic processes (Gallo et al., 2022). These dynamics have far-reaching implications for citizens’ relationships with politics and institutions. Processes such as audience fragmentation, filter bubbles, and echo chambers limit the circulation of heterogeneous viewpoints and reinforce existing attitudes, thereby undermining pluralism and democratic deliberation. These effects are further intensified by the personalization of political messaging and the growing spectacularization of politics, which tends to reduce complex public issues to simplified narratives and emotionally charged frames (Auriemma et al., 2023). Importantly, these mediatization processes are neither homogeneous nor automatic. They vary according to platform-specific affordances, the strategies adopted by political actors, and the cultural, institutional, and regulatory contexts in which communication occurs. As such, the digital transformation of politics constitutes a multidimensional challenge that calls for a critical reassessment of communicative practices, institutional roles, and forms of democratic participation. Rather than signaling an inevitable democratic decline, these transformations suggest a reconfiguration of democratic practices and modes of engagement. Mediatization, therefore, should not be understood in purely normative or deterministic terms: it can simultaneously represent a risk of trivialization and an opportunity for the renewal of the public sphere (Battista, 2024b).

To capture this complexity, the study proposes an integrated model of political mediatization structured around four interrelated dimensions. The algorithmic dimension concerns automated mechanisms of content selection and visibility that influence agenda-setting processes. The cultural-symbolic dimension addresses communicative practices and the construction of political identities within digital environments. The institutional dimension highlights how platforms increasingly assume functions traditionally associated with political actors, reshaping power relations and governance structures. Finally, the participatory dimension focuses on emerging forms of civic engagement, visibility, and activism within the digital public sphere. Together, these dimensions offer a comprehensive framework for understanding the evolving relationship between media, politics, and democracy in the platform era (Battista, 2025). Political communication is thus conceptualized not as

a linear transmission of information but as a dynamic and relational process in which technology, culture, power, and participation intersect in novel and often unpredictable ways. Only through a multilevel analytical perspective is it possible to develop strategies aimed at fostering a more pluralistic, inclusive, and resilient democratic ecosystem in the face of digital challenges.

Furthermore, the study underscores that algorithmic systems of visibility are not neutral with respect to gender, ethnicity, or political orientation. Research by Noble (2018), O'Neil (2016), and Eubanks (2017) demonstrates how ranking and recommendation algorithms tend to reproduce and amplify existing social inequalities. In political contexts, this results in forms of algorithmic visibility injustice, whereby certain actors, issues, or discourses are systematically marginalized because they do not conform to dominant platform aesthetics or virality-driven metrics. Addressing these asymmetries requires a critical engagement with the principles of algorithmic justice to safeguard pluralism and democratic quality.

Considering these considerations, the mediatization of politics can be more precisely defined as algorithmic mediatization: a multidimensional process articulated along four key axes. The technological-algorithmic axis concerns the infrastructures that select, order, and amplify political content; the cultural-symbolic axis examines how dataism legitimizes technical authority and depoliticizes code; the affective-participatory axis explores how engagement logics transform politics into an affective economy; and the ethical-democratic axis emphasizes transparency, accountability, and fairness as prerequisites for pluralistic visibility. This model highlights that algorithmic politics is not merely a technological evolution but a profound cultural and symbolic transformation of democratic power. Addressing this challenge requires the coordinated efforts of scholars, institutions, media organizations, and citizens to develop a renewed paradigm of political mediatization capable of reconciling technological innovation with democratic values.

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