



# Digital Hegemony: Social Media, Power Relations, and the Architecture of Division in the Attention Economy

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## Abstract

This paper advances the concept of digital hegemony to theorise social media as a structured system of power that operates through algorithmic governance, data commodification, and engineered attention. Moving beyond celebratory narratives of connectivity and democratisation, the current study postulates that contemporary social media platforms function as hegemonic apparatuses that normalise specific epistemologies, privilege dominant economic interests, and reproduce asymmetrical power relations within digitally mediated societies. Drawing on Gramscian theory of hegemony, Foucauldian analytics of power, and critical political economy of communication, this paper conceptualises the “architecture of division” as a deliberate structural outcome of engagement-maximising algorithms that amplify affective polarisation, identity segmentation, and epistemic fragmentation. The analysis further introduces the notion of foci deception within the attention economy, describing the strategic engineering of public salience through algorithmic curation, trend manipulation, and targeted amplification. By commodifying user data and behavioural surplus, platforms transform attention into capital, incentivising divisive and emotionally arousing content that sustains user engagement while deepening social fragmentation. This structural configuration redistributes communicative power from publics to platforms, reconstituting governance through opaque algorithmic systems that operate beyond traditional democratic oversight. The current paper concludes that digital hegemony represents a new modality of control, one that is subtle, participatory, and self-reinforcing. Rather than coercing compliance, it shapes perception, channels discourse and normalises division through infrastructural design. Recognising these dynamics is essential for advancing regulatory reform, enhancing digital literacy, and safeguarding democratic deliberation in the platform era.

**Keywords:** Digital hegemony, algorithmic governance, attention economy, platform capitalism, affective polarisation, foci deception.

## Introduction

The exponential expansion of social media platforms over the past two decades has fundamentally altered the architecture of communication, governance, and social interaction across societies (Kemp, 2025; Ortiz-Ospina, 2019; Pew Research Center, 2025; Statista, 2024; University of Maine, n.d). Platforms such as Meta Platforms, X Corp., and TikTok now operate as central infrastructures through which political discourse, cultural production, and identity negotiation occur. While early scholarship celebrated these platforms as democratising forces capable of decentralising information and amplifying marginalised voices, contemporary evidence reveals more ambivalent and structurally complex consequences (Benkler, 2006). Increasingly, researchers observe that algorithmic curation systems privilege emotionally arousing and polarising content, thereby intensifying affective divisions within and across communities (Iyengar et al., 2019; Metzler & Garcia, 2024; Serttaş et al., 2025). At the same time, data extraction and behavioural profiling have become foundational to platform business models, embedding surveillance within everyday digital participation (Zuboff, 2019). These developments raise pressing concerns regarding how communicative power is distributed, how public consciousness is shaped, and how division may be structurally incentivised within the attention economy. Consequently, social media must be analysed not merely as communication tools but as socio-technical systems that mediate power relations and reorganise the conditions of democratic deliberation.

Despite the growing body of scholarship on misinformation, algorithmic bias, and online polarisation (Eriksson, 2025; Farshana & Namrata, 2025; Hook & Verdeja, 2022; Marino et al., 2024; Olaniran & Williams, 2020; Wang et al., 2025), a significant conceptual gap persists in theorising social media as an integrated hegemonic system of power. Much of the literature isolates phenomena such as echo chambers, fake news, or digital surveillance without situating them within a broader framework of structural domination and consent formation (Pariser, 2011). While Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony has been widely applied to traditional media institutions, its systematic adaptation to algorithmically governed digital platforms remains underdeveloped (Gramsci, 1971). Similarly, Michel Foucault's insights into surveillance, discipline, and governmentality have informed discussions of data monitoring but have not been fully synthesised with the political economy of platform capitalism (Foucault, 1977). The absence of an integrative theoretical model limits the ability of scholars to conceptualise how consent, surveillance, commodification, and division operate simultaneously within digital environments. Furthermore, the strategic manipulation of public attention, what this paper terms foci deception, has not been sufficiently theorised as a structural rather than episodic phenomenon. Addressing this gap requires a comprehensive framework that unites critical theory, political economy, and algorithmic governance into a coherent analytical construct capable of explaining the architecture of division within contemporary social media ecosystems.

The primary objective of this study is to advance the concept of digital hegemony as a theoretical lens through which social media platforms can be understood as structured systems of power operating within the attention economy. Specifically, the current paper seeks to (a) conceptualise how algorithmic governance functions as a mechanism of consent production and behavioural modulation, (b) examine how data commodification transforms attention into capital, and (c)

analyse how engagement-maximising architectures systematically amplify social division. Drawing upon Gramscian theory, Foucauldian analytics of power, and critical political economy perspectives, the study aims to synthesise these traditions into a unified explanatory model. In doing so, it introduces the notion of foci deception to describe the strategic engineering of public salience through algorithmic curation and trend amplification. The study further interrogates how these processes reconfigure communicative power by shifting agenda-setting authority from publics to privately governed platforms. By situating algorithmic mediation within broader socio-economic structures, the research seeks to illuminate the reciprocal relationship between technological design and political rationality. Ultimately, the study aspires to contribute both theoretical refinement and normative clarity to debates concerning democracy, regulation, and digital governance.

This paper proceeds in several interconnected sections designed to build a comprehensive analytical framework. The first section elaborates the theoretical foundations of digital hegemony, integrating Gramscian consent theory with Foucauldian governmentality and the political economy of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019). The second section examines algorithmic governance and the architecture of division, analysing how engagement metrics and personalised feeds intensify affective polarisation and epistemic fragmentation (Iyengar et al., 2019). The third section develops the concept of foci deception, exploring how attention is engineered and monetised within platform capitalism. The fourth section discusses the implications of digital hegemony for democratic deliberation, institutional accountability, and regulatory reform. Throughout the analysis, the study emphasises that digital control is participatory and infrastructural rather than overtly coercive, operating through design logics that incentivise division while presenting neutrality. The conclusion synthesises the theoretical contributions and proposes directions for future empirical and policy-oriented research. In this manner, the current paper offers a coherent and integrative account of how social media functions as a hegemonic system shaping power relations and social cohesion in the twenty-first century.

## **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework of this study positions digital hegemony as an emergent structural outcome of platform capitalism, algorithmic governance, and attention commodification operating within interconnected digital ecosystems. Social media infrastructures embed economic imperatives into algorithmic design, whereby engagement maximisation becomes the primary logic guiding content visibility and interaction patterns (Srnicsek, 2017; Zuboff, 2019). Within this system, algorithms function as mediating mechanisms that translate corporate profitability objectives into behavioural incentives shaping user participation and discourse formation (Gillespie, 2014). The framework assumes that power is not exercised solely through overt control but through infrastructural arrangements that regulate what is visible, amplified, and suppressed in digital spaces (Foucault, 1977). As attention is transformed into a monetisable commodity, platforms prioritise emotionally salient and interaction-generating content that sustains revenue streams while intensifying social differentiation (Goldhaber, 1997). This process generates feedback loops in which engagement increases visibility, visibility increases polarisation, and polarisation further enhances engagement metrics. Consequently, digital hegemony emerges as a recursive system in which economic incentives, technological

architectures, and communicative practices collectively structure power relations within the attention economy.

Building on this structural foundation, the framework conceptualises the architecture of division as the systemic by-product of algorithmic ranking, foci deception, and platform-driven salience construction. Personalised recommendation systems reduce cross-cutting exposure and reinforce ideological homophily, thereby contributing to affective polarisation and network fragmentation (Pariser, 2011; Iyengar et al., 2019). Through algorithmic curation, platforms also manufacture public visibility by elevating selected narratives to trending status, creating perceptions of collective importance that may reflect computational amplification rather than organic consensus (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). This engineered visibility constitutes what this study terms foci deception, whereby attention is strategically steered toward particular issues within digitally mediated publics. Such mechanisms consolidate communicative power within platform infrastructures that operate with limited transparency and accountability (Van Dijck et al., 2018). Over time, these processes stabilise structural divisions that become embedded in online interaction patterns and identity formation. The framework, therefore, posits that digital hegemony is sustained through iterative interactions among algorithmic governance, attention commodification, and social polarisation, producing durable asymmetries in informational power.

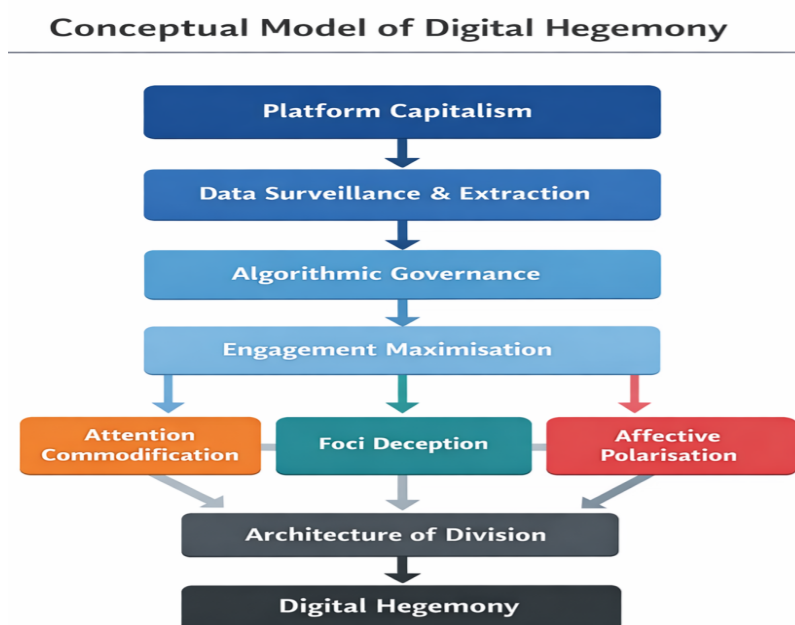


Figure 1: Current Conceptual Framework

## Literature Review

### *Social Media, Algorithmic Governance, and the Attention Economy*

Research on social media has increasingly foregrounded the role of algorithmic systems in shaping information environments and user engagement. Algorithms on platforms such as Facebook, X, and TikTok are designed to maximise user attention by personalising content

delivery based on behavioural data patterns (Gillespie, 2014). This process creates what some scholars describe as an “attention economy,” where human attention becomes a scarce commodity that platforms seek to capture and monetise (Goldhaber, 1997). Within this economy, engagement metrics such as likes, shares, and comments function as proxies for relevance, often privileging sensational or emotionally provocative content over substantively informative material (Tufekci, 2015). Research shows that algorithmic optimisation for engagement can inadvertently amplify polarising and affectively charged content, creating digital environments that magnify conflict rather than deliberation (Cinelli et al., 2021). Moreover, platforms’ proprietary algorithmic design remains largely opaque, limiting public understanding of how visibility and salience are determined (Bucher, 2018). While this body of work elucidates the mechanisms of algorithmic curation and attention capture, it has yet to cohere these insights into an integrated analysis of how such systems constitute structural power in digitally mediated societies.

### ***Hegemony, Consent, and Digital Mediation***

The concept of hegemony, as articulated by Gramsci (1971), emphasises how dominant groups secure cultural and ideological ascendancy through consent rather than coercion. In media studies, this concept has been applied to understand how mass media can normalise particular worldviews and marginalise counter-hegemonic discourses (Hall, 1980). However, traditional applications of Gramscian hegemony have mostly addressed broadcast and print media, leaving its adaptation to algorithmically mediated digital platforms underdeveloped. Recent scholarship suggests that social media platforms extend hegemonic mechanisms by embedding selection and prioritisation within computational architectures that shape user attention and interpretation (Coudry & Mejias, 2019). This means that consent in digital spaces is not simply manufactured through persuasive messaging but is structurally engineered through interface design, visibility regimes, and engagement incentives. Furthermore, platforms reconfigure public discourse by determining which voices gain amplification and which are obscured, thus shaping common sense notionally through technological mediation (Van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018). These developments call for an expanded conceptualisation of hegemony that accounts for algorithmic agency and infrastructural power, tying digital design choices to broader sociopolitical effects.

### ***Polarisation, Echo Chambers, and Identity Fragmentation***

A large and interdisciplinary body of research investigates the relationship between social media and political polarisation, often invoking concepts like echo chambers and filter bubbles to describe informational self-segregation. According to Pariser (2011), personalised recommendation algorithms trap users within informational silos that reinforce pre-existing beliefs and reduce exposure to diverse viewpoints. Subsequent empirical studies indicate that these dynamics can contribute to affective polarisation, where antagonism toward opposing groups grows stronger than mere political disagreement (Iyengar et al., 2019). Network analysis research further demonstrates that social media environments facilitate homophily, the tendency of individuals to associate with like-minded users, thereby reinforcing identity-based segmentation and collective hostility toward out-groups (Conover et al., 2011). However, some scholars caution against overly deterministic interpretations of echo chambers, noting that users

may nonetheless encounter heterogeneous information depending on cross-cutting social ties and platform affordances (Dubois & Blank, 2018). Nevertheless, the consensus remains that algorithmic amplification of high-arousal narratives can intensify social division even when individual choices play a role. What remains underexplored in the literature is how these polarisations mechanisms function within broader political and economic systems that both shape and exploit them.

### ***Surveillance Capitalism and Data Commodification***

The rise of social media platforms has been accompanied by the emergence of what Zuboff (2019) terms “surveillance capitalism,” a regime in which user behaviours are continuously monitored to generate predictive data products for commercial use. Under this model, behavioural surplus, the data produced as users engage with digital environments, is extracted, analysed, and monetised through targeted advertising and micro-targeting (Zuboff, 2019). This process not only commodifies attention but also reshapes the power dynamics between users and platform corporations, turning personal expressions into economic assets without proportional compensation or user autonomy (Srnicsek, 2017). Scholars argue that the imperative to maximise engagement and data capture leads platforms to prioritise content that triggers strong emotional reactions, often at the expense of public deliberation and well-being (Napoli, 2019). Research also points to differential effects across socio-racial and economic groups, with marginalised communities disproportionately targeted for behavioural influence (Noble, 2018). Despite these insights, there remains a need for conceptual integration that links surveillance capitalism with hegemonic power and division as structural outcomes rather than incidental by-products. Addressing this integration can illuminate how economic imperatives intersect with algorithmic governance to shape social realities at scale.

### ***Foci Deception and Agenda-Setting in the Digital Era***

Agenda-setting theory posits that media can influence what audiences think about by prioritising certain issues over others (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In the context of social media, platforms do not simply select topics; they algorithmically design visibility gradients that determine the temporal and spatial prominence of issues on user feeds. Emerging research suggests that this process, which may be described as foci deformation or engineered salience, can strategically steer public attention toward specific topics, narratives, or events (Bruns & Highfield, 2016). Algorithmic amplification mechanisms can transform relatively obscure content into trending topics, thereby creating the appearance of grassroots salience while masking underlying design decisions. Simultaneously, coordinated networks of automated accounts and influencers can manipulate these systems to manufacture collective attention around ideological or commercial objectives (Ferrara et al., 2016). While studies have examined individual instances of trend manipulation or misinformation campaigns, less attention has been paid to foci deception as a systemic characteristic of social media architectures with structural consequences. Bridging this gap requires a deeper theoretical account of how agenda-setting functions in digitally mediated environments where algorithmic and economic incentives interact to shape public salience.

## Methodology

### *Research Design*

This study employs a qualitative theoretical-analytical research design grounded in critical social theory and interdisciplinary literature synthesis. Rather than relying on primary quantitative datasets, the research integrates conceptual analysis with systematic engagement of peer-reviewed scholarship in media studies, political communication, sociology, and digital governance. The design is interpretivist in orientation, seeking to uncover the structural logics embedded within algorithmically mediated communication systems rather than merely documenting observable behavioural trends. A theoretical synthesis approach was adopted to integrate Gramscian hegemony, Foucauldian governmentality, and platform political economy into a unified explanatory framework. This integrative design allows for the conceptual development of digital hegemony as a structured system rather than an isolated phenomenon. By examining patterns across existing empirical studies on polarisation, surveillance capitalism, and algorithmic governance, the study constructs a meta-analytical theoretical model. Such a design is appropriate for addressing complex socio-technical systems where power operates diffusely and infrastructurally rather than through discrete measurable variables.

### *Data Sources and Selection Criteria*

The study draws upon peer-reviewed journal articles, academic monographs, and policy reports published between 2000 and 2024 that address social media governance, algorithmic power, polarisation, surveillance capitalism, and agenda-setting theory. Databases consulted included Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and JSTOR to ensure comprehensive disciplinary coverage. Inclusion criteria required that sources demonstrate methodological rigour, theoretical relevance, and direct engagement with social media's structural or political implications. Foundational theoretical works, including those by Gramsci (1971) and Foucault (1977), were incorporated due to their enduring relevance to power and consent analysis. Contemporary works addressing platform capitalism and algorithmic mediation were prioritised to ensure analytical currency (Srnicek, 2017; Zuboff, 2019). Sources focused solely on descriptive social media usage trends without theoretical engagement were excluded from primary analysis. This systematic selection process ensured both historical grounding and contemporary applicability in constructing the digital hegemony framework.

### *Analytical Framework*

The analytical strategy consisted of three sequential stages designed to build theoretical coherence. First, foundational theories of hegemony and governmentality were examined to extract core principles related to consent formation, surveillance, and behavioural modulation. Second, empirical findings from studies on algorithmic amplification, affective polarisation, and data commodification were analysed to identify recurring structural patterns (Iyengar et al., 2019; Napoli, 2019). Third, these theoretical and empirical strands were synthesised into the conceptual construct of digital hegemony, with particular attention to the architecture of division and foci of deception. The process involved iterative thematic coding of key concepts, including attention commodification, algorithmic opacity, identity segmentation, and manufactured salience.

Through this synthesis, the study moves beyond isolated findings to demonstrate how engagement-maximising infrastructures systematically produce division as a structural outcome. The resulting framework thus integrates economic incentives, technological design, and sociopolitical consequences into a cohesive explanatory model.

### ***Conceptual Model Development***

The conceptual model of digital hegemony was developed through deductive reasoning informed by critical political economy and sociological theory. The model posits that platform capitalism incentivises continuous data extraction, which in turn necessitates algorithmic optimisation for engagement. Engagement optimisation structurally privileges emotionally charged and polarising content because such material sustains user attention for longer durations (Cinelli et al., 2021). Sustained engagement increases advertising revenue, thereby reinforcing the economic incentive to amplify divisive discourse. This cyclical relationship produces what the study conceptualises as the architecture of division—an infrastructural arrangement that normalises antagonistic discourse while presenting itself as neutral. Within this architecture, foci deception operates as a mechanism of engineered salience, steering collective attention toward strategically amplified narratives. The model was evaluated for internal consistency by cross-referencing empirical evidence and theoretical propositions across multiple disciplines.

### ***Limitations***

As a theoretical-analytical study, this research does not provide original quantitative measurements of algorithmic effects or behavioural outcomes. The conclusions are derived from secondary empirical literature and conceptual synthesis, which may be influenced by the interpretive lens adopted by the authors. While the interdisciplinary integration strengthens explanatory depth, it also introduces the challenge of reconciling differing methodological traditions. The absence of primary experimental or longitudinal data limits causal inference regarding the direct impact of specific algorithmic mechanisms. Additionally, platform architectures evolve rapidly, meaning theoretical models must remain adaptable to technological shifts. Nevertheless, theoretical research remains essential for clarifying structural relationships that empirical studies alone may fragment or overlook. Future research should incorporate mixed methods designs, computational modelling, and longitudinal analysis to empirically test and refine the digital hegemony framework proposed herein.

## **Findings and Analytical Discussion**

### ***Algorithmic Governance as a Mechanism of Structural Power***

The findings indicate that algorithmic governance operates as a central mechanism through which digital platforms structure visibility and regulate communicative power within social media ecosystems. Recommendation systems embedded within platforms such as Meta Platforms and TikTok prioritise content based on predicted engagement rather than epistemic accuracy or democratic value. Empirical evidence suggests that engagement-maximising algorithms disproportionately amplify emotionally charged and polarising material, thereby shaping discourse at scale (Cinelli et al., 2021). This amplification reflects what scholars describe

as algorithmic power, the capacity to determine what becomes visible and consequential in digital public spheres (Gillespie, 2014). Such systems do not overtly censor participation but instead hierarchise attention through computational ranking mechanisms. The resulting visibility regimes produce asymmetries between content producers, privileging actors who generate high engagement over those who promote nuanced deliberation. Consequently, algorithmic governance functions as an infrastructural form of power that subtly conditions collective perception and interaction.

### ***Attention Commodification and Platform Capital Accumulation***

A second major finding concerns the transformation of attention into a monetisable asset within platform capitalism. Social media corporations extract behavioural data from user interactions and convert this data into predictive products for targeted advertising (Zuboff, 2019). Platforms structurally depend on prolonged user engagement to increase advertising revenue, thereby incentivising design features that maximise time-on-platform. This economic logic reinforces the prioritisation of sensational, controversial, or emotionally stimulating content because such material sustains attention cycles (Srnicsek, 2017). The commodification process effectively converts everyday social interaction into economic value without explicit user compensation. As a result, digital participation becomes embedded within circuits of surveillance and profit extraction. These findings demonstrate that power relations within social media are inseparable from economic structures that incentivise division as a profitable outcome.

### ***Architecture of Division and Affective Polarisation***

The analysis reveals that platform infrastructures contribute to the systematic production of social division through algorithmically amplified polarisation. Personalised feeds create informational environments that reinforce ideological homophily and limit exposure to countervailing perspectives (Pariser, 2011). Over time, repeated exposure to like-minded content intensifies affective polarisation, defined as emotional hostility toward opposing groups rather than mere policy disagreement (Iyengar et al., 2019). Empirical research demonstrates that network clustering and engagement-based ranking systems facilitate echo chamber formation, although such effects vary across user populations (Dubois & Blank, 2018). The structural design of engagement optimisation indirectly rewards conflict-driven discourse because disagreement and outrage generate measurable interaction. Thus, division emerges not solely from user preference but from algorithmic incentives embedded within platform architecture. This pattern substantiates the concept of an architecture of division as a systemic outcome of platform design rather than an incidental phenomenon.

### ***Foci Deception and Manufactured Salience***

The findings further indicate that algorithmic systems contribute to the strategic engineering of public attention through processes conceptualised as foci deception. Platforms dynamically elevate certain topics to trending status, thereby constructing perceptions of collective importance around algorithmically selected narratives. These mechanisms align with agenda-setting theory, which posits that media influence what audiences perceive as salient issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), but they extend it through automated and data-driven amplification.

Coordinated networks of automated accounts and human actors can manipulate visibility systems to artificially inflate issue prominence (Ferrara et al., 2016). Such practices blur the boundary between organic public discourse and engineered attention structures. As visibility becomes algorithmically mediated, the distinction between genuine consensus and manufactured salience becomes increasingly opaque. Accordingly, foci deception operates as a structural feature of attention economies, reinforcing hegemonic control through controlled exposure.

### ***Reconfiguration of Power Relations and Digital Hegemony***

The cumulative findings demonstrate that social media platforms reconfigure power relations by centralising infrastructural authority over discourse while decentralising content production. In this system, platforms determine the parameters of participation, moderation, and visibility, thereby exercising quasi-sovereign control over communicative environments. Drawing on Gramscian theory, digital platforms manufacture consent by embedding normative assumptions within technological design rather than overt ideological messaging (Gramsci, 1971). Simultaneously, surveillance practices reflect Foucauldian modalities of governance in which monitoring and behavioural prediction guide user conduct (Foucault, 1977). The interaction between economic incentives, algorithmic ranking, and attention commodification produces a stable yet adaptive regime of digital hegemony. Power is exercised not through direct suppression but through infrastructural conditioning that normalises division and engagement dependency. These dynamics suggest that contemporary platform societies require regulatory and theoretical frameworks capable of addressing power embedded in code and data architectures.

### ***Analytical Synthesis***

Collectively, the findings confirm that digital hegemony operates as an integrated system linking algorithmic governance, attention commodification, and structural division. Platforms sustain profitability by maximising engagement, and engagement maximisation structurally incentivises polarising content. This incentive structure generates feedback loops in which division increases visibility, visibility increases interaction, and interaction increases revenue. The architecture of social media, therefore, functions as both an economic engine and a political mechanism shaping public consciousness. Rather than conceptualising social media as a neutral communication infrastructure, the evidence indicates that it constitutes an active site of power production. Understanding these interlocking dynamics is essential for developing policy interventions aimed at increasing transparency, accountability, and democratic oversight in digital ecosystems.

## **Discussion**

### ***Theoretical Implications of Digital Hegemony***

The findings of this study reinforce the argument that social media platforms operate as hegemonic infrastructures embedded within broader political-economic systems. By integrating Gramscian theory with algorithmic governance, the analysis demonstrates that consent in digital environments is structurally mediated rather than purely discursive (Gramsci, 1971). Platforms such as Meta Platforms and TikTok embed value-laden ranking systems that normalise engagement-driven visibility regimes. These regimes privilege content that maximises interaction, often at the expense of deliberative or fact-based communication (Gillespie, 2014).

From a Foucauldian perspective, such systems reflect digital governmentality in which surveillance and behavioural prediction guide user conduct (Foucault, 1977). Power is thus exercised through infrastructural design rather than overt coercion. The concept of digital hegemony, therefore, advances theory by illustrating how algorithmic mediation operationalises consent, control, and division simultaneously within attention economies.

### ***Political Economy and Platform Capitalism***

The analysis further underscores that platform profitability depends on sustained data extraction and attention monetisation, situating the division within economic incentives. Surveillance capitalism transforms behavioural surplus into predictive commodities sold to advertisers, thereby converting social interaction into revenue streams (Zuboff, 2019). In this context, engagement-maximising algorithms are not neutral tools but strategic mechanisms for capital accumulation (Srnicek, 2017). Empirical research demonstrates that emotionally charged content increases interaction rates, reinforcing algorithmic amplification of polarising material (Cinelli et al., 2021). This dynamic creates feedback loops in which divisive discourse becomes economically productive. As attention becomes the primary commodity, platforms structurally incentivise controversy over consensus (Goldhaber, 1997). Consequently, economic imperatives and political fragmentation become intertwined within the architecture of digital platforms.

### ***Architecture of Division and Democratic Consequences***

The findings indicate that algorithmic personalisation contributes to the formation of segmented publics and affective polarisation. Personalised recommendation systems reduce cross-cutting exposure and reinforce ideological homophily among users (Pariser, 2011). Such segmentation intensifies emotional hostility toward opposing groups, producing what scholars describe as affective polarisation (Iyengar et al., 2019). While some research suggests that echo chamber effects may be context-dependent, evidence indicates that algorithmic ranking systems amplify content that sustains engagement within homogeneous clusters (Dubois & Blank, 2018). This structural configuration reshapes democratic deliberation by privileging visibility over veracity. Platforms, therefore, function as arenas where political identities are continuously reproduced through algorithmic feedback. The democratic implication is clear: infrastructural design directly influences the quality and inclusiveness of public discourse.

### ***Foci Deception and Manufactured Salience***

The study's conceptualisation of foci deception contributes to understanding how attention is strategically engineered within digital environments. Algorithmic trending systems elevate specific narratives, producing perceptions of public importance that may not reflect organic consensus. Agenda-setting theory suggests that media shape issue salience (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), but digital platforms automate and accelerate this process through computational amplification. Coordinated inauthentic behaviour and automated accounts further distort visibility metrics by artificially inflating engagement around targeted topics (Ferrara et al., 2016). These mechanisms blur the distinction between authentic public interest and engineered prominence. As a result, users interpret algorithmically curated trends as spontaneous expressions of collective concern. Foci deception thus represents a structural feature of attention economies that reinforces hegemonic power through controlled visibility.

### ***Policy Implications and Regulatory Considerations***

The evidence suggests that addressing digital hegemony requires regulatory interventions targeting algorithmic transparency and accountability. Current governance frameworks often fail to scrutinise how ranking systems determine visibility and influence public opinion. Mandatory disclosure of algorithmic criteria and independent auditing mechanisms could increase institutional oversight over platform governance. Antitrust enforcement may also reduce excessive concentration of communicative power within a small number of corporations (Napoli, 2019). Furthermore, data protection regulations should limit exploitative behavioural surveillance practices embedded in platform business models. Public-interest technology design, including alternative platform architectures prioritising deliberation over engagement, may mitigate structural incentives for division. Without structural reform, digital hegemony is likely to persist as a self-reinforcing system of power embedded in code.

### **Conclusion**

This study developed the concept of digital hegemony to explain how social media platforms operate as infrastructural systems that structure power relations, attention, and division. By synthesising Gramscian theory, Foucauldian governmentality, and platform political economy, the analysis demonstrated that algorithmic governance functions as a mechanism of consent production and behavioural modulation (Gramsci, 1971; Foucault, 1977). Empirical scholarship indicates that engagement-maximising systems amplify polarising content, reinforcing affective division while increasing profitability for platform corporations (Zuboff, 2019; Cinelli et al., 2021). The architecture of division emerges as an unintended yet economically rational outcome of attention commodification. Moreover, the concept of foci deception highlights how algorithmic systems manufacture salience and shape public perception through controlled visibility. Recognising these dynamics reframes debates about misinformation and polarisation by situating them within structural power arrangements. Future research should empirically test the digital hegemony framework using computational modelling and longitudinal data analysis to quantify its systemic effects.

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## Appendix 1

**Table 1: Operationalisation of Core Constructs (For Empirical Extension)**

<b>Construct</b>	<b>Operational Indicators</b>	<b>Potential Data Source</b>	<b>Measurement Approach</b>
Platform Capitalism	Revenue from targeted ads; user data monetisation rate	Corporate financial reports	Financial ratio analysis
Algorithmic Governance	Engagement-based ranking; content prioritisation score	Platform API data	Computational content analysis
Attention Commodification	Average time-on-platform; click-through rate	Platform analytics	Descriptive statistics
Foci Deception	Artificial trend amplification; bot-driven engagement	Network data; bot detection tools	Network analysis
Affective Polarisation	Hostility sentiment score; ideological clustering	Social media text mining	Sentiment & network modelling
Architecture of Division	Community modularity; echo chamber density	Graph data	Social network analysis
Digital Hegemony	Composite index of power concentration	Integrated metrics	Structural equation modelling