



Algorithmic Attention and the Transformation of Strategic Communication

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Abstract

This conceptual essay proposes Algorithmic Attention as a core organisational feature of changing strategic communication. It defines algorithmic attention as the process through which algorithms influence what is seen, deemed relevant, and the types of audiences engaged within communication environments. Based on a conceptual narrative design, a sample of academic literature on Algorithmic Communication, Strategic Communication, Digital Platforms, and Audience Attention was critically analysed, and themes were developed to uncover relationships between key concepts: algorithms, communicators, platforms, data, and users. Drawing on Actor-Network Theory (ANT), the study treats algorithms as actants within a communicative environment rather than merely as technological tools. This study posits that algorithmic attention alters and reconstitutes strategic communication, shifting its emphasis from message production to algorithmically amplified visibility, which engenders challenges related to transparency, manipulability, privacy, and ethical responsibility.

Keywords: algorithmic attention, strategic communication, digital platforms, Actor-Network Theory, audience engagement

Introduction

Structural changes in strategic communication are leading to a shift in persuasion from broadcast control towards platform-centred ecologies. Communication influence is no longer an extension of top-down broadcast flows of messages; rather, it unfolds in participatory arenas in which audience control interacts with the logic of platforms (Shin, 2025). In this context, attention has become the central currency for defining communication effectiveness (Arijeniwa & Asemah, 2025). However, existing academic works have largely adopted a discrete inventory approach to digital phenomena, thereby failing to theorise the structural architecture that dictates visibility. To address this gap, this study conceptualises platform visibility architecture as the sociotechnical apparatus that determines communicative power by providing channels through which visibility is filtered, mediated, and commodified on digital platforms.

Conceptualising this interplay requires establishing a hierarchical relationship among the processes rather than treating them as an isolated list of equivalent components. Algorithmic gatekeeping is the primary structural process that continuously shapes these mechanisms by sorting and orchestrating the content available on platforms (Marn-Rodriguez et al., 2025). This process directly generates personalisation, thereby producing a distinctive communication environment characterised by personalised and often information-rich online streams. Behavioural nudging, in turn, is conceptualised as a strategic intervention that builds on personalisation and



leverages psychological mechanisms to influence and regulate audience behaviour towards specific goals (Yao & Chang, 2026). These relationships suggest a conceptual sequence in which algorithmic gatekeeping shapes personalisation, which subsequently enables the application of behavioural nudging within a campaign.

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) is employed to frame this phenomenon because prevailing understandings of communication tend to conceptualise technology as a medium while placing excessive emphasis on human intentionality. ANT addresses this limitation by conceptualising human strategists and non-human algorithms as actants whose interactions jointly shape strategic persuasion in digital environments (Kargbo et al., 2025). This sociotechnical framework provides vital conceptual clarity for examining critical ethical dilemmas concerning user manipulation and transparency in democratic processes (Yusnaini et al., 2025). The major contribution of this study is to propose a model that articulates how strategic communication effectiveness is neither merely a product of human message construction nor an inherent capacity of technology. Rather, it emerges from the performativity of sociotechnical networks, within which algorithmic power interacts with strategically organised human intentionality.

Theoretical Framework

Actor-Network Theory (ANT), a sociotechnical lens for understanding platform communication grounded in the foundations established by Latour (1987, 2005), Callon (1986), and Law (1992), and the theoretical paradigm of translation it employs have become increasingly established in both media studies and digital governance scholarship (Aka, 2025). Rejecting anthropocentric perspectives, ANT argues that the success or failure of communicative processes depends on heterogeneous associations composed not only of human actants but also of non-human actants, including algorithms and other technical artefacts. The principle of generalised symmetry suggests that technological devices do not function as inert, transparent instruments but actively intervene in the flow of human interaction (Teurlings, 2025). Therefore, “communicative influence is no longer a sender-determined concept, but one co-produced through diverse alignments between social and technical entities” (Schwarz et al., 2025).

ANT establishes a densely interconnected network of previously separate platform operations within the architecture of attention. Campaigners employ processes of translation to align human objectives with the algorithmically driven requirements of particular digital environments, for instance, by optimising search content and meeting specific algorithmic criteria (Hay, 2025). Once deployed, non-human actants perform algorithmic gatekeeping through the automated selection and prioritisation of digital objects (Wang et al., 2025). Importantly, structural gatekeeping directly shapes personalised communication by creating individually tailored information environments for different audience segments. This personalisation subsequently enables behavioural nudging, which involves using continuous audience monitoring to influence user behaviour through appropriately designed interface structures. Thus, algorithmic gatekeeping does not operate in parallel with personalisation; rather, it helps produce personalised communication and, consequently, enables behavioural nudging.

Juxtaposing ANT with the concept of attention architecture shifts the focus of strategic communication research from human persuasion, traditionally centred on the source, towards the co-production of communicative outcomes by human and non-human actants within networks. Algorithmic gatekeeping demonstrates how code actively negotiates visibility rather than merely implementing human intentions. This human–machine feedback loop is reinforced as user data



generated through engagement with nudged interfaces are fed back into the system to re-enrol actants and adjust visibility. Ultimately, effective strategic communication in a networked environment resides neither solely in human expression nor necessarily in audience interpretation. Rather, it emerges as a contingent condition arising from the constantly evolving interplay between human intentions and non-human algorithmic logic across a platform ecosystem.

Research Methodology

This study employs a conceptual narrative design and integrative theoretical synthesis to explore the impact of algorithmic attention on strategic communication within digital platform ecosystems. Data were obtained through systematic searches of Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar, and Communication & Mass Media Complete. Boolean search strings were developed using the terms “algorithmic attention,” “architecture of attention,” “algorithmic gatekeeping,” “personalisation,” “behavioural nudging,” and “Actor-Network Theory” (ANT). Peer-reviewed empirical articles were identified and evaluated based on their theoretical relevance, conceptual coherence, scope, and applicability to strategic communication, alongside foundational ANT texts. The literature was coded inductively and deductively and integrated through thematic narrative analysis guided by core ANT concepts, particularly generalised symmetry, translation, and mediation. This process produced an evidence-based synthesis demonstrating how algorithmic gatekeeping structures visibility, personalised affordances shape audience exposure, and behavioural nudging is enacted through human–algorithm network relationships, thereby reshaping strategic communication.

Literature Synthesis

The literature in this research field describes a paradigm shift from a linear broadcasting-top-down model of communication toward a network hyper-connection one, where human influence needs to cope with algorithm’s gate-keeping, participatory user-generated framing, and data-informed behavior micro-targeting in a platform’s paid attention economy.

Paradigm Shifts in Media Impact and Strategic Communication

Media impact is no longer viewed as just message transmission but as a system of interaction. Early communication theories (like Hypodermic Needle Theory and agenda setting) saw the receiver of the message as passive and assumed the dominant media institutions disseminated information (Rodriguez et al, 2025). This reflects a situation when the channels of communication were newspapers, radio, and television, implying a sender-receiver directionality of communication. However, with the development of digital media, communication has shifted from a linear directionality to one based on interconnected networks where information flows from one agent to another (Olaniyi et al, 2024).

The digital age has transformed audiences from passive media recipients to active participants in the communication process. Because the growth of social networks, blogs, discussion forums, and media sharing applications has allowed users to produce, manipulate, and disseminate information autonomously (Uddin, 2026), traditional models of influence and persuasion must now be reimaged by strategic communicators. The creation of messages has therefore been substituted by how they are perceived and transmitted in the networks, with audiences in digital environments now acting as centers for communication in both meaning-making and spread of information. Strategic communication theory has responded by developing a focus on engagement, interaction and network analysis in understanding how issues become salient (Kisa & Kisa, 2024).



The shift of power away from the communicators towards the ordinary user is another important paradigm shift to consider. While corporations, governments and public relations practitioners previously exerted considerable power and control over public discourse (Verčič et al, 2024), ordinary users now wield considerable influence over the public agenda through their comments, messages, and reviews etc. It is when ordinary users start using and retweeting corporate and organizational messages as if they themselves are talking that the message gains legitimacy and starts to spread. Credibility, trust, social influence and endorsement become paramount and organizations should therefore strive for active engagement from its audience rather than simply pushing promotional content out (Silverman & Smith, 2024).

Similarly, the understanding of "reach" has been drastically recontextualized in the digital era. Where "reach" was conventionally determined by how many individuals an intended message touched via mass media (Mahoney & Tang, 2024), reach now is characterized by audience engagement and the effects of platform algorithms. It is the number of shares, reshares, and retweets (RTs), comments, likes, or remixes that contribute to how far a message will travel within the networks and within the audiences. It is also the extent to which content can be favored, or downplayed by algorithms according to how the audiences will react (Al Mahameed & Abras, 2025). Thus, strategy in contemporary communication practice needs to continually focus on interaction with the audiences, operation of the platform, and the possibility of a message to go viral (Al Yahyaei & Senani, 2026).

Algorithmic Gatekeeping and the Architecture of Choice.

Marin-Rodriguez et al. (2025) asserted that the evolution of strategic communication has been significantly influenced by algorithmic gatekeeping as control over mass communication shifts from human decision-makers to automated digital technologies. The traditional roles of journalists, editors, and media owners in determining which information should be presented to the public and which should be excluded have increasingly been supplemented or displaced by automated mechanisms on social media platforms and search engines (Esidir et al., 2025). Previously, human editors acted as gatekeepers who influenced public perception through the selection and framing of news. Today, algorithms on social media platforms and search engines filter the information presented to users based on user behaviour, platform rules, and engagement trends (Yang & Bexci, 2026).

This shift has also fundamentally altered how messages gain prominence and achieve virality in the online environment. Whereas gatekeeping in traditional media relied largely on editorial judgement, algorithmic content selection is increasingly driven by data on user interactions with particular messages, measured through likes, shares, comments, and watch time (Maccabiani, 2026). Consequently, communicators have greater incentives to design messages that attract immediate attention and stimulate rapid user interaction. When content generates substantial engagement, platforms may distribute it more widely to other audiences. As a result, engagement performance can outweigh other considerations, including the informational quality or intrinsic merit of a message, in determining its visibility.

Another significant development is the creation and reinforcement of echo chambers and information bubbles through algorithmically mediated networks. Algorithms are designed, among other objectives, to sustain user activity and engagement; consequently, platforms may recommend content that reflects users' previous behaviours, interests, and expressed preferences (Słotwiński, 2026). Repeated exposure to similar opinions and values can reduce encounters with dissenting



perspectives, potentially reinforcing existing beliefs and contributing to societal division and misunderstanding. Strategic communicators may exploit this tendency by targeting specific population segments with messages tailored to their predispositions and interests rather than addressing a heterogeneous public with a common message (Voinea, 2025).

Furthermore, effective writing and persuasion are no longer sufficient for communication in the digital era. Strategic communication also requires technical competence in understanding how to achieve visibility within digital channels (Anter & Ibrahim, 2025). This includes knowledge of how platforms rank and distribute content, as well as the strategic application of search engine optimisation (SEO), hashtags, trending topics, keywords, and short-form videos such as Reels. Without an understanding of these mechanisms, even a powerful and persuasive message may fail to reach a substantial audience. Strategic communication, therefore, involves not only the development of effective messages but also the strategic management of communication channels and an understanding of their technological possibilities and constraints (Upadhyay, 2025).

Algorithmic gatekeeping has significantly transformed information flows and reception dynamics within society. Rather than relying exclusively on editors to determine the flow of information, contemporary communication environments increasingly depend on coded rules, algorithmic processes, and engagement metrics that shape the content individuals encounter (Tække, 2025). This shift has contributed to a more data-driven and potentially less transparent communication environment than that of the traditional broadcast era. Understanding algorithmic mechanisms and their implications for user behaviour has consequently become essential for strategic communicators seeking to achieve visibility and influence (Shin et al., 2025). In an environment shaped by evolving platform systems, communicators who develop the technical expertise to navigate these systems may be better positioned to establish and sustain a significant presence in digital spaces (Garajamirli, 2025).

Networking Framing and Virality of Digital Information

This perspective can be applied to how events are constructed, reconstructed, and interpreted through continuous social interaction among internet users, rather than being determined solely by the interests of media owners (Na, 2026). Whereas framing theory traditionally emphasised the influence of journalists, editors, and media organisations in shaping messages transmitted to the public, thereby influencing audience interpretations of events (Kim & Rhodes, 2026), framing in the contemporary digital environment has evolved into a more social and interactive process. Once a message is disseminated online, it can be readily reinterpreted, re-edited, remixed, transformed into a meme, or contested as it circulates among internet users across multiple platforms and communities. Consequently, framing has become a shared and ongoing process within digital networks, where multiple voices contribute to shaping public understanding (Li et al., 2025).

Mesario et al. (2025) argued that the growing importance of memes and short-form video content represents a significant development in persuasive communication within the networked environment. Short videos, GIFs, memes, and other forms of microcontent communicate complex political, social, and economic ideas through simple, highly shareable visual formats. These forms of communication are easily consumed and often entertaining, humorous, or emotionally engaging, which may contribute to their widespread circulation. Similarly, Irwanto et al. (2025) contended that memes and other forms of short visual content expand audience participation



because users can modify existing content to create new variations. Political and social messages may sometimes achieve greater reach through memes than through lengthy articles because audiences can quickly relate to their content and share it with others. Memes have, therefore, become an increasingly significant component of mass communication.

The speed at which information circulates through contemporary media systems has also transformed communication processes and the conditions under which messages gain public acceptance (Novianto et al., 2026). Whereas traditional media systems disseminated information through print publications and broadcast channels such as television and radio, allowing audiences time to receive, process, and respond to messages, the digital era enables content to circulate widely within minutes or hours (Pamungkas, 2025). This rapid dissemination presents both opportunities and risks for communication practitioners. The opportunities lie in the ability to reach millions of people within a short period, while the risks include the rapid spread of disinformation and inappropriate content. Consequently, strategic communicators must respond promptly to public reactions, manage crises, and adjust communication strategies in real time to address emerging narratives before they gain further momentum.

Contemporary strategic communication, therefore, requires critical engagement with the role of users in constructing messages, the processes through which messages evolve through interaction, and the mechanisms through which they proliferate across digital networks (Elhosary & Elkashif, 2026). Communicative influence is no longer exclusively a stable or institutionally directed process; rather, it has become a dynamic, distributed, and potentially volatile activity involving large numbers of online participants. Communicators must consequently develop messages that are adaptable, malleable, and resilient in the face of continuous online reframing. Effective communication in this environment requires not only creativity and clarity but also speed, an understanding of online cultural norms, and the ability to engage audiences in real time across multiple platforms (Inés, 2025).

Furthermore, online influencers, content creators, and digital communities play important roles in constructing the public sphere through networked framing. Unlike established media systems, in which a relatively small number of organisations controlled much of the information dissemination process, digital platforms enable individuals with substantial followings to shape public discourse around important issues (Wilk et al., 2025). Such influencers may serve as intermediaries for institutions by translating complex subjects into accessible and shareable content, while online communities collectively influence message interpretation through comments, reactions, and discussions. These interactive environments may enhance public understanding and engagement, but they can also facilitate the circulation of misinformation and competing narratives. Understanding the influence of digital communities is, therefore, essential to contemporary strategic communication practice (Loupeisis & Intahchomphoo, 2025).

Behavioral Data, Micro-Targeting and Ethical Considerations

Behavioural data and microtargeting have revolutionised strategic communication, transforming messaging from mass communication to personalised communication. Historically, communication systems relied on broad appeals aimed at large and diverse audiences through television, radio, and print advertising (Fernández-Barrero et al., 2026). Today, vast amounts of user information are collected through digital devices and platforms, including search histories, physical locations, online behaviours, and personal preferences, and compiled to develop detailed



profiles of individuals. These profiles enable messages to be tailored to the feelings, fears, interests, and motivations of specific audience segments. This practice, known as psychographic targeting, has been described as a fundamental restructuring of persuasion in digital media, as audiences increasingly encounter individually tailored and highly specific content (Mohamed & Praveen, 2025).

Another concept shaping the contemporary communication landscape is what might be termed a surveillance economy of attention. Within this model, data on user behaviour are routinely collected, analysed, aggregated, and traded by online intermediaries and advertising technology (ad-tech) companies. Strategic communication has consequently been reconfigured, not merely as the process of communicating messages to audiences but also as the process of purchasing audience attention through the intricate machinery of the ad-tech economy, which tracks users' activities across their devices (Gahn & Kruschinski, 2026). These data streams enable organisations, governments, and businesses to monitor and record audience behaviour in real time and adapt campaigns accordingly (Macabiani, 2026). Media influence is thus intertwined with data extraction processes through which user behaviour becomes a commodity that can be exploited to enhance the reach and effectiveness of strategic communication (Dobber et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, the emergence of microtargeting and behavioural profiling has raised serious ethical concerns regarding manipulation and privacy. The capacity to influence individuals through the often-invisible operations of algorithms and personalised messages blurs the distinction between persuasion and manipulation. In some instances, these practices may contribute to the spread of misinformation and astroturfing (Wilson & Donelli, 2026), as well as the covert manipulation of public discourse in ways that are not readily apparent to individuals (Rana & Bhambri, 2026). These concerns underscore the need for greater transparency, accountability, and fairness within communication infrastructures. More importantly, many individuals remain unaware of how their personal data influence the messages they encounter, raising fundamental questions about informed consent in digital communication (Hakala, 2025).

The use of behavioural data in strategic communication has therefore created powerful means of influencing audiences while simultaneously generating complex ethical challenges. Although microtargeting may improve message relevance by tailoring communication to specific audience characteristics, it also increases the potential for abuse, deceptive persuasion, and covert behavioural nudging (Rana & Bhambri, 2026). Consequently, scholars and practitioners are increasingly concerned with developing ethical guidelines that balance communication effectiveness with respect for privacy, transparency, and democratic principles. The future development of strategic communication will likely depend on society's ability to reconcile innovations in behavioural data-driven messaging with the protection of individual rights in the digital age (Elangovan, 2026).

Conceptual Model: Algorithmic Architecture of Attention

Building on the literature on Actor-Network Theory (Akrich, 2023), this article proposes a conceptual framework that situates strategic communication within an architecture of attention. From a non-anthropocentric perspective, the model posits that persuasive power is jointly constructed through networked assemblages of human and non-human actants (Yuan et al., 2025). Rather than seeking to control audience attention solely through top-down approaches, strategists must align their communication goals with the algorithmic processes that govern digital platforms. By adopting the principle of generalised symmetry (Hashemi et al., 2026), the proposed framework



conceptualises persuasion as a phenomenon co-produced through the networked interactions of communicators, audiences, and platform code, rather than as an outcome determined exclusively by the rhetoric of strategists.

A crucial contribution of the proposed model is its theorisation of a hierarchical causal sequence among the mechanisms shaping algorithmic attention, treating them as interrelated processes rather than independent entities. The model identifies algorithmic gatekeeping, which involves the automated filtering and ordering of information exposure, as the foundational mechanism underpinning these processes (Huang et al., 2024). By determining which information becomes visible to different users, algorithmic gatekeeping facilitates personalisation, creating tailored information environments for different audience segments. In turn, personalisation establishes the conditions under which behavioural nudging, understood as the use of interaction-driven designs informed by continuously monitored user behaviour, can operate. Following this conceptual sequence, algorithmic gatekeeping facilitates personalisation, which subsequently enables the application of behavioural nudging within strategic communication campaigns.

Finally, this framework reconceptualises the effectiveness of strategic communication as an emergent property of dynamic sociotechnical networks. As audiences interact with nudged interfaces through clicks, shares, and watch time, the resulting behavioural data feed into algorithmic feedback loops, potentially reconfiguring network relationships and recalibrating message salience (Odesola et al., 2026). Consequently, persuasive power is no longer understood as an exclusively human capacity but as a contingent outcome of the ongoing interaction between human strategic intentions and non-human algorithmic logic. By specifying how platform architecture shapes users' visibility, influences the choices available to them, and affects their capacity to resist or opt out of particular forms of influence, the proposed conceptual framework advances scholarly discussions beyond descriptive literature reviews towards an integrated theoretical account of strategic communication in the platform age.

Conclusion

This study contributes to understanding algorithmic attention as a key mechanism reshaping strategic communication in the social media context. Its central argument is that the architecture of algorithmic attention provides the sociotechnical affordances through which the visibility, relevance, and impact of messages are shaped. While many studies of digital disruption offer descriptive accounts of the impact of platform media, this study explicitly theorises the processes through which algorithmic gatekeeping shapes visibility, personalised exposure, and the emergence of behavioural nudging within the network relations of digital platforms. The analysis draws on Actor-Network Theory to conceptualise these outcomes as products of the interactions among communicators, audiences, algorithms, platforms, and data. Thus, the study's principal theoretical contribution lies in conceptualising the architecture of attention as a networked mechanism of strategic communication. In terms of its ethical implications, the study highlights a fundamental tension between the algorithmic optimisation of attention and audience autonomy, as personalised systems may influence audience behaviour without adequate transparency or meaningful user control.

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AI Use Declaration:

None
