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The digital oligarchic public sphere: contesting human rights in the age of billionaires

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ABSTRACT

This article develops the concept of the *digital oligarchic public sphere* to analyze how tech billionaires, through proprietary algorithms, platform architectures, and data infrastructures, assert control over what counts as visible, credible, and contestable knowledge. Drawing on Habermasian public-sphere theory, neo-Gramscian hegemony, and surveillance capitalism literature, the analysis identifies three mechanisms: *algorithmic hegemony*, *epistemic monopolization*, and *normative capture* – which reconfigure digital spaces into regimes of engineered consent. Evidence from Gaza, the Philippines, India, the United States, and Europe reveals how these mechanisms align with authoritarian regimes to suppress dissent, reshape class formation, and violate rights of expression, privacy, and due process. By uniting sociological insights on cultural and epistemic inequality with International Relations' emphasis on transnational power dynamics and human-rights scholarship's focus on rights-in-practice, this work offers a conceptual vocabulary for understanding how digital infrastructures become sites of struggle over rights and dignity.

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Introduction

Billionaires are behaving like sovereign entities, wielding infrastructural control that has transformed the public sphere into a regime characterized by engineered legitimacy and exclusion. Since Jeff Bezos acquired *The Washington Post* in 2013, the specter of elite control over information has only grown more ominous. But Bezos is not alone (Claussen, 2025; Jin et al., 2020); Elon Musk, with his strong grip over Twitter/X, and Mark Zuckerberg, whose company Meta controls much of the global social media ecosystem, are emblematic of a deeper structural shift in how public discourse is shaped (Ledford, 2022). Across the globe, similar patterns emerge: Mukesh Ambani in India controls not just telecom infrastructure but large swathes of the media landscape, while reinforcing Hindu nationalist narratives (Fitzgerald, 2020). Patrick Drahi in France and Switzerland, Silvio Berlusconi in Italy, and Alwaleed bin Talal in the Arab-speaking world likewise fuse wealth, media, and political influence in ways that blur the line between corporate empire and political regime (Hammond, 2008; Hibberd, 2007; Renier, 2016).

The consequences of a billionaire-ruled global order are far-reaching: the super-rich can suppress dissent, amplify disinformation, manipulate elections, and enable authoritarian regimes

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(Hägel, 2020; Regilme, 2023a, 2024b). In Ukraine, Musk's temporary withdrawal of Starlink access disrupted communications for Ukrainian forces, showing how a billionaire's decision can shape war dynamics (Gerbrandy & Morozovaite, 2025). In Gaza, Meta and X have been accused of shadow-banning Palestinian voices and human rights documentation, thereby further marginalizing vulnerable populations (Nour et al., 2024). In the United States, algorithmic disinformation during the 2016 and 2020 elections fueled polarization and undermined democratic legitimacy (Aboubakr, 2025; Öztürk, 2024). In Egypt, media platforms and telecom networks have been co-opted to surveil activists, with private firms facilitating government crackdowns (AlAshry, 2023). In Turkey, the Erdoğan regime has demanded, and often received, compliance from tech firms to censor critical content, while promoting state propaganda through algorithms (Akser, 2018). Hungary under Orbán has seen pro-government oligarchs consolidate media ownership, drowning out independent journalism (Cabrera-Cuadrado & Chrobak, 2023; Sonnevend & Kövesdi, 2024; Szilágyi & Bozóki, 2015). In Myanmar, Facebook was instrumental in spreading hate speech against the Rohingya, which the UN concluded contributed to genocide (Barroso, 2024; Modok, 2023).

When digital oligarchs collaborate with repressive states, or when their infrastructures enable authoritarian ends, the impact extends beyond information distortion to reshape life itself. In this digital oligarchic sphere, transnational control operates without democratic oversight, embedded in infrastructures that structure how we communicate, move, and resist. Unelected, wealthy actors use algorithmic systems, platforms, and cloud data to dictate what people see and believe and which forms of dissent emerge. They transform political repression from overt state violence into platform governance – where domination appears as communication design and exclusion becomes algorithmic neutrality. This represents a historic consolidation of power by a transnational billionaire class monopolizing the infrastructures through which meaning, legitimacy, and contestation are organized. Control over these infrastructures is concentrated in the hands of a few private actors, who are unelected, unaccountable, and largely immune to public scrutiny despite their immense material resources (Hägel, 2020; Labio-Bernal et al., 2025; Regilme, 2023a, 2024b, 2025). By naming this phenomenon the *digital oligarchic public sphere*, we capture the fundamental transformation of global political communication – a regime where algorithmic hegemony, epistemic monopolization, and normative capture fuse to govern not only speech but thought, agency, and human dignity.

At the heart of the digital oligarchic public sphere are three interlocking mechanisms of control: (1) algorithmic hegemony, (2) epistemic monopolization, and (3) normative capture. *Algorithmic hegemony* refers to the authority exercised by private digital actors – most notably tech billionaires – through proprietary algorithms that govern the visibility, reach, and suppression of content. This form of sovereignty is infrastructural and opaque, allowing platform owners to dictate what circulates in public discourse without formal democratic oversight. Building on this, *epistemic monopolization* denotes the consolidation of power over the production and validation of knowledge. It is not simply about controlling the dissemination of knowledge about facts, but about shaping what is considered credible, relevant, or even intelligible in public consciousness. Through control of platforms, data flows, and attention economies, a small group of superrich actors curates the parameters of truth claims and contestations. Finally, *normative capture*, drawing from Gramscian theory, captures the cultural dimension of this power (Bieler & Morton, 2004; Gramsci, 1971). Here, elite values such as market logics, securitization, hierarchy are systematically presented as neutral, inevitable, or commonsensical, thereby preempting critical scrutiny. Together, these mechanisms reconfigure the public sphere into a regime not only of speech control, but of thought

governance – where what can be seen, said, believed, and disproved is increasingly determined by a small, transnational digital oligarchy.

The digital oligarchic public sphere thus extends, but also departs from, existing accounts of digital capitalism. Whereas work on the ‘social media public sphere’ and ‘networked publics’ has emphasized new forms of participation and visibility (Boyd, 2010; Fuchs, 2014, 2016), this framework foregrounds the classed concentration of infrastructural power in the hands of tech billionaires. Likewise, concepts such as ‘data colonialism’ and ‘digital colonialism’ illuminate how extraction and control reproduce North–South hierarchies (Coudry & Mejias, 2019; Kwet, 2019), yet they often treat platforms and states as monolithic actors. By contrast, the digital oligarchic public sphere specifies how a transnational billionaire fraction of capital coordinates algorithmic, epistemic, and normative power across borders, in alliance with state projects of security and accumulation. This shift in emphasis makes it possible to analyze platforms not only as sites of commodification, but as key arenas in which oligarchic class power is organized, legitimized, and contested.

In Poulantzas’s (1978) terms, digital oligarchs can be understood as a transnational ‘fraction of capital’ whose accumulation strategies are tightly interwoven with state projects in security, border control, and welfare retrenchment. Algorithmic hegemony materializes when states outsource monitoring, censorship, or welfare triage to platform infrastructures; epistemic monopolization becomes a mode of steering public consent around austerity, policing, or militarized borders; and normative capture consolidates the idea that such arrangements are inevitable or efficient rather than politically contestable. Situating the three mechanisms within a state–capitalism framework clarifies that they are not merely market outcomes but forms of delegated governance, through which states and oligarchs co-produce new templates of rule that redistribute risks and rights away from already marginalized populations.

The contemporary public sphere is no longer a site of democratic deliberation; it has been restructured into a securitized terrain, while it is optimized for attention extraction and behavior modulation. In this regime, billionaires do not merely host public discourse – they engineer its architecture, define boundaries, and weaponize its affective dynamics. Drawing on Zuboff’s theory of surveillance capitalism, I argue that the digital oligarchic public sphere fuses market logics with infrastructural dominance: experience is mined as behavioral data, and political discourse is filtered through systems designed to serve unrestrained wealth accumulation (Tewari, 2021; Zuboff, 2018). Contemporary oligarchs shape cognitive and political conditions of public life. The digital oligarchic public sphere drives authoritarian capitalism, whereas its critique is essential to democracy. This controlled regime conditions access and reduces dissent. Visibility ties to profitability; manipulation replaces debate. The oligarchic dimension shows structural asymmetry where elites govern digital interaction, while the digital oligarchic sphere institutionalizes inequality and aligns with authoritarian tendencies toward the super-rich.

To guide this analysis, this article asks: How do digital oligarchs consolidate infrastructural and epistemic power to reshape the public sphere, and with what political consequences? To answer this question, the study pursues four interrelated objectives: first, to conceptualize the *digital oligarchic public sphere* by defining its key characteristics and theoretical underpinnings; second, to map empirically the three core mechanisms – *algorithmic hegemony*, *epistemic monopolization*, and *hegemonic norm production* – through comparative case studies; third, to assess how digital oligarchs and authoritarian regimes mutually reinforce one another in the exercise of power; and fourth, to identify emerging fissures of resistance and the nascent infrastructures that contest oligarchic control. Beyond democratic implications, the digital oligarchic public sphere constitutes a

battle for human rights and dignity. When tech billionaires monopolize visibility and shape voices that count, they erode conditions for meaningful free expression. Data-driven surveillance and algorithmic gatekeeping reduce human individuals to metrics, undermining privacy and autonomy. By dictating whose suffering is seen – whether communities in Gaza, Rohingya in Myanmar, or critics in Hungary – these platforms commodify human dignity. Addressing this requires reconceiving digital infrastructures as rights-bearing public goods and recognizing the anti-democratic effects of oligarchizing the global public sphere.

Building on Habermas's deliberative-public-sphere theory, Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony, and Zuboff's surveillance-capitalism critique, this article also integrates a state-capitalism lens (Jessop, 2008; Poulantzas, 1978). This composite framework locates tech billionaires not only as infrastructural gatekeepers but as hybrid state-actors who leverage platform partnerships to extend exclusions entrenched in late capitalist governance. By foregrounding (1) infrastructural sovereignty, (2) epistemic authority, and (3) normative production within a state-capital nexus, we can trace how private algorithms become instruments of both market and state power. Emerging scholarship on state-capitalism reveals that authoritarian regimes and digital oligarchs operate in a symbiotic regulatory ecosystem (Roberts & Oosterom, 2025). Where states outsource surveillance and censorship to platform owners, tech billionaires gain protective state contracts and legal exemptions, blurring the boundary between public authority and private rule-making.

This article uses a socio-legal approach combining open-source evidence from media reports, human rights reports, and multidisciplinary literature to examine how algorithmic hegemony, epistemic monopolization, and normative capture operate in practice. Cases from Gaza, the Philippines, India, the US, and European states illustrate patterns across regime types and platform configurations, examining digital infrastructures' intersection with state power. The analysis uses these cases as exemplars to show how billionaire-driven platform governance affects rights and democratic accountability across contexts, while identifying counter-infrastructures and resistance.

State of knowledge: digital platforms, platforms, and power

Research on digital platforms and political power has generated rich insights into how algorithms, data economies, and corporate governance reshape public discourse. Scholars have documented platform authority abuses – from hate speech amplification to election manipulation – yet a framework for understanding transnational billionaire influence remains underdeveloped (Fadillah & Zhenglin, 2020; Fuchs, 2016; Heft et al., 2020; Markus & Charnysh, 2017; Rakhmanov, 2022; Reporters without Borders, 2016; Schimpfössl & Yablokov, 2020; Tapsell, 2015, 2021; Winters, 2011). This article synthesizes literature on democratic theory, surveillance capitalism, and neoGramscian cultural hegemony. It examines the digital oligarchic public sphere, mapping how algorithmic infrastructures and epistemic control converge under oligarchic rule. Through comparative case studies, the study reveals patterns of infrastructural domination across political contexts. This approach advances theoretical understanding while identifying resistance pathways for policy intervention, bridging media studies and critical theory to diagnose twenty-first century authoritarian capitalism.

The state of knowledge in sociology regarding social media and algorithms shows their significant impact on social inequality. Sociologists have studied the 'digital divide' through access to technology, with recent work examining 'digital exclusion', where socio-technical inequalities stem from broader social disadvantages (Basu, 2019; Helsper, 2012; Selwyn, 2004; Törenli, 2006). Research has shown that algorithms and automated decision-making (ADM) systems can reinforce

and even amplify existing social hierarchies, particularly when used in domains such as welfare, education, and healthcare (Eubanks, 2015; James & Whelan, 2022; Park & Humphry, 2019; Schou & Pors, 2019). Scholars have also examined how algorithmic systems reconfigure labor, often to the detriment of workers, and have critiqued utopian and dystopian narratives about automation and job loss (Bailey et al., 2020; Griesbach et al., 2019; Newlands, 2021; Ossewaarde & Glen, 2020; Shestakofsky, 2017; Vicsek, 2021). Despite the increasing centrality of these technologies, much of the discourse around algorithms remains dominated by technological determinism and a sense of inevitability, with insufficient attention paid to the social structures that shape and are shaped by these systems (Anderson & Rainie, 2018; Vicsek, 2021). Sociological scholarship emphasizes that issues typically framed as ‘bias’ in AI are often manifestations of deeper, systemic inequalities (Editors, 2021; Graaf et al., 2016; Lane et al., 2023; Paul et al., 2024; Regilme, 2023b, 2024a; Zajko, 2022).

Social theorist Christian Fuchs argues that social media sits at the crossroads of emancipatory promise and capitalist exploitation, enabling activists to mobilize online while commodifying their data, exposing movements to corporate and state surveillance (Fuchs, 2016). Fuchs (2016) locates digital platforms within a public sphere dominated by elite users who command disproportionate influence, and he critiques an ‘engaging/connecting/sharing’ ideology masking capital accumulation while perpetuating inequalities despite communal benefits. Accordingly, democratization requires collective, non-commercial media infrastructures to counter digital capitalism’s inequalities.

Critics of digital mediation argue that the metrics designed to capture user attention have fundamentally displaced the rational-critical debate that Habermas envisioned (Downey & Fenton, 2003; Fuchs, 2014, 2016; Gerbaudo, 2022; Habermas, 1991, 2006; Heyman & Pierson, 2015; Kruse et al., 2018; Parker & Bozeman, 2018; Patberg, 2025; Regilme, 2018; Sander, 2025). In algorithmically curated environments, visibility is wielded not by reasoned argument but by engagement signals – likes, shares, and comments are proxies for relevance rather than indicators of argumentative merit (Bhargava & Velasquez, 2021). Empirical studies have shown that sensational or emotionally charged content consistently outperforms nuanced discourse, reinforcing confirmation biases and deepening echo chambers (Gillespie, 2018; Pennycook & Rand, 2021). Moreover, social media has disrupted and effectively dissolved the traditional public sphere, replacing dialectical debate and collective engagement with volatile, ephemeral, and self-centered information flows (Calzati & Kerckhove, 2024). Social networks promote uncritical sharing, rapid forgetting, and loss of common referents, undermining collective deliberation. This transforms public deliberation into a contest for attention, where persuasion yields to platform engagement (Liang, 2022; Törnberg, 2025). By prioritizing sensationalism over substance, algorithmic attention economies erode democratic legitimacy’s foundations and make the public sphere a marketplace of distraction.

Analyses of surveillance capitalism illuminate how platforms monetize every interaction, converting private behaviors into lucrative data streams that shape future engagement. Zuboff (2018) demonstrates that this extraction transforms human experience into a raw commodity, feeding predictive analytics and targeted advertising models. Subsequent research has extended this critique by revealing how these economic imperatives reconfigure user incentives: individuals become both products and consumers of tailored content (Tufekci 2015; van Dijck 2013). The surveillance imperative thus not only commodifies attention but also conditions the parameters of acceptable discourse – platforms prioritize content that maximizes data generation, often at the expense of democratic values such as transparency or equity. Understanding these dynamics is essential for diagnosing how infrastructural incentives align with oligarchic power.

The study of cultural hegemony and epistemic injustice uncovers how elite-controlled narratives become internalized as common sense, marginalizing alternative perspectives. Drawing on Gramsci (1971) and Fricker (2007), processes of meaning-making are not neutral; rather, serve to legitimize existing power structures or challenge them (Fricker, 2007; Gramsci, 1971). In digital contexts, normative capture operates through platform design choices – ranking algorithms, trending topics, and moderated discourse – that subtly reinforce dominant ideologies (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). This normative shaping extends beyond mere content suppression; it determines which frames, metaphors, and topics enter the public lexicon. By rendering elite interests as self-evident, Normative capture precludes the articulation of radical alternatives, serving as the cultural backbone of the digital oligarchic public sphere.

Platform governance research highlights the policy and corporate practices that institutionalize these power asymmetries. Social media platforms constitute opaque processes of content moderation, demonetization, and data-sharing agreements that reinforce platform monopolies (Gorwa, 2019; Helberger et al., 2018). These governance mechanisms operate in concert with surveillance capitalism and hegemonic norms to create a regulatory vacuum: one in which private entities wield *de facto* rule-making authority over public discourse (Kwet, 2019; Tewari, 2021; Zuboff, 2018). By examining concrete governance tools like Meta’s quarterly transparency reports detailing takedown quotas, YouTube’s jointly negotiated censorship protocols with the Indian government, Twitter’s data-sharing agreements with Turkish security services, Amazon Web Services’ private ‘strike’ policies tied to U.S. defense contracts, and OpenAI’s evolving content moderation guidelines for ChatGPT, scholars demonstrate how these ostensibly neutral frameworks deploy ‘community standards’ and ‘security’ rationales to entrench billionaire platform owners’ authority (Hao, 2025; Hermawan, 2025; Muldoon & Wu, 2023; Regilme, 2024a). This integrated perspective underscores that addressing the digital oligarchic public sphere requires both theoretical conceptualization and empirical scrutiny of governance infrastructures.

Key definitions

Term	Definition
Algorithmic Hegemony	The concentrated power of private entities to design, deploy, and control the rules that govern digital platforms – through proprietary algorithms, moderation policies, and data architectures – to determine which content is seen, promoted, or suppressed, without transparent or democratic oversight.
Epistemic Monopolization	The strategic consolidation of authority over the production, validation, and circulation of knowledge, whereby a small elite curates the boundaries of credible discourse and relegates alternative truths to the margins of public awareness.
Normative Capture	The process by which elite interests become internalized as neutral or commonsensical values—market imperatives, securitization, hierarchical order—through sustained control of media narratives and digital infrastructures, foreclosing critical inquiry and alternative imaginaries.

The following sections unpack each of the three mechanisms in turn. First, algorithmic hegemony examines how proprietary algorithms and infrastructure partnerships serve as invisible gatekeepers of visibility and attention. Next, epistemic monopolization traces how content moderation, demonetization, and data-driven targeting across diverse contexts consolidate authority over what counts as legitimate knowledge. Finally, normative capture reveals how platform design choices and viral content strategies embed elite values as commonsense norms, preempting critical inquiry and foreclosing alternative imaginaries.

Algorithmic hegemony: infrastructure as ideology

Algorithmic hegemony captures the power of private entities to control digital platforms through proprietary algorithms and moderation policies that determine which content is seen or suppressed without democratic oversight. Facebook's News Feed, YouTube's recommendation engine, and Twitter's trending topics no longer reflect public interest but actively curate privatized, commodified, and highly individualized realized perceptions. During Canada's 2024 wildfires, Twitter's algorithm deprioritized Indigenous firefighters' livestreams while climate-denial content surged, showing how engagement metrics trumped civic value. These decisions occur behind closed doors, hidden under opaque code and corporate secrecy, with no avenue for public challenge. Platform users have become participants in attention extraction experiments that prioritize clicks over informed debate. This shows how infrastructures have become instruments of power, shaping what we see and what actions deemed institutionally possible. Habermas's ideal public sphere rests on equality and structural neutrality, which are prerequisites that implode once communication infrastructures are privatized (Habermas, 1991, 1996; Regilme, 2018). While early scholarship imagined digital spaces as democratizing forums (boyd, 2010), algorithmic hegemony shows how these spaces ultimately serve market logics. This is what Shoshana Zuboff (2018) calls surveillance capitalism: commodifying human experiences for profit. The digital oligarchic public sphere represents deliberate reengineering, where corporate interests seek to monetize attention and shape how individuals understand reality. In this context, infrastructures themselves become instruments of power that shape not only what we see but also which grievances, solidarities, and policy alternatives are institutionally imaginable. Because these infrastructures are owned and steered by a tiny stratum of tech billionaires, algorithmic hegemony directly anchors the digital oligarchic public sphere: the architecture of the public conversation is calibrated to their commercial and political priorities rather than to democratic deliberation.

Beyond shaping individual feeds, these systems also encode the political-economic interests of the billionaires who own and govern them. On X, for example, engineers reportedly modified the ranking system in early 2023 so that posts by Elon Musk were artificially boosted above ordinary users, ensuring that his content dominated timelines regardless of organic engagement, while his later policy shifts privileged paying 'Blue' subscribers and sympathetic influencers in recommendation and reply hierarchies (Paul, 2023). On Amazon, internal search and recommendation tools have been repeatedly documented as steering users toward Amazon's own brands and preferred commercial partners, illustrating how infrastructural design quietly channels attention and revenue back to the platform owner (Kalra & Stecklow, 2021). Algorithmic curation does not simply misfire; it systematically aligns what is visible, searchable, and amplified with the material interests of a small, ultra-wealthy ownership class. This fusion of technical architecture and oligarchic self-interest defines the digital oligarchic public sphere: billionaires effectively rewrite the rules of visibility, credibility, and risk across communicative infrastructures. Algorithmic hegemony is the micro-level mechanism through which the macro-structure of the digital oligarchic public sphere is reproduced, as platform logics bend toward the priorities of those who own the pipes, data, and code.

This strategic reengineering of the public sphere stifles dissent through distraction, misinformation, and emotionally charged content. Citizens are treated as behavioral data points for extraction and monetization. Power embeds in physical and digital design: data centers, content filters, and notifications that steer attention. Public discourse becomes personalized marketing, where visibility links to profitability. Engagement metrics such as likes, shares, and watch time replace argument,

evidence, and accountability as the core currency of influence, thereby warping civic priorities and reinforcing existing hierarchies. These algorithmic systems depend on a hidden industrial regime that spans energy-intensive data centers, precarious global labor in content moderation (Roberts, 2021), and semiconductor and cloud-computing supply chains that are tightly intertwined with state subsidies and security policy. Within this political economy of data, tech billionaires and the firms they control sit at the apex, converting infrastructural control into enduring oligarchic power within the public sphere (Roberts, 2021). Chip manufacturers and cloud providers align with the interests of billionaires' interests that captured state interests. Combating algorithmic hegemony requires confronting the entire political economy of data: from energy extraction and labor exploitation to international trade and security agreements.

Algorithmic gatekeeping also constitutes a profound human-rights crisis by transforming digital spaces into regimes of data extraction and behavioral control that violate fundamental freedoms (Buhmann & Olivera, 2020; Jawad et al., 2023). Selective amplification of state propaganda, such as Hungary's manipulated 2022 elections, breaches citizens' rights to truthful information and democratic participation. Algorithmic biases marginalize vulnerable groups: for example, Black Lives Matter posts faced disproportionate removals compared to extremist groups, thereby perpetuating discrimination in virtual spaces. Opaque de-platforming and shadow-banning deny users due process, without transparent appeals or oversight, undermining principles of justice. Hyper-targeted content feeds psychological manipulation, decoupling consent from choice and turning individuals into targets of corporate persuasion (Nissenbaum, 2020).

Algorithmic hegemony is directly at odds with both human rights and democratic governance. Platform practices routinely flout the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, not only Article 19's protection of free expression and Article 2's ban on discrimination, but also the broader obligation to respect human dignity in how and what kind of communication is structured and expressed. When algorithms classify people as mere data profiles to be targeted, ranked, or discarded, they hollow out civic agency and reproduce hierarchies of visibility that undermine the equal standing required for meaningful participation in the public sphere. Concentrated, opaque decision-making power in the hands of a few corporations amounts to a parallel system of rule-making that escapes parliamentary scrutiny, judicial review, and meaningful public contestation. If rights are to remain effective, platforms must be accountable for harms through discriminatory ranking, arbitrary de-platforming, and algorithmic amplification of harassment. This requires independent rights assessments for algorithms, transparency obligations for content curation, and shared liability when platforms enable rights violations. Treating algorithms and data infrastructures as rights-bearing public goods, subject to democratic governance, antitrust enforcement, and robust ethical oversight, is essential if freedom of expression is to reinforce, rather than erode, human dignity and democratic equality.

Epistemic monopolization: Musk, Zuckerberg, Bezos & beyond

Epistemic monopolization occurs when platform owners and their content policies dictate which information and interpretations are deemed legitimate. YouTube's demonetization of investigative journalists, Facebook's downranking of 'controversial' posts, and Twitter's opaque appeal process for suspended accounts concentrate authority over 'truth' in corporate hands. Drawing on Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony and Fricker's framework of epistemic injustice, moderation guidelines become tools for silencing dissent (Fricker, 2007; Gramsci, 1971). By assigning visibility to advertiser-friendly content, platforms marginalize alternative analyses, turning the boundary between credible and censored knowledge into a barrier to democratic debate (Ressa, 2022).

Recent work on ‘platform epistemology’ shows how ranking systems, fact-checking labels, and verification badges act as de facto truth infrastructures, with tech billionaires exerting decisive influence over what is treated as reliable knowledge (Gillespie, 2018; Napoli, 2019). Google’s adjustments to search rankings in response to advertiser pressure and YouTube’s systematic privileging of ‘brand-safe’ channels over investigative journalism illustrate how corporate risk calculations silently structure what appears authoritative (Caplan & Gillespie, 2020; Ressa, 2022). Elon Musk’s ongoing attacks on Wikipedia as ‘biased’, coupled with his launch of Grokipedia as an AI-generated alternative tightly integrated into X, further demonstrate how oligarchic actors attempt to displace peer-produced, transparently sourced knowledge with proprietary epistemic infrastructures under their personal control (Conger, 2025). Where Wikipedia relies on open editing, verifiability, and public dispute resolution, Grokipedia is owned, trained, and governed by the same billionaire who controls the distribution platform, collapsing the distinction between knowledge production and its circulation. These cases show that epistemic monopolization is not an abstract tendency but a concrete strategy through which digital oligarchs seek to re-write reference standards, launder their reputations, and marginalize competing interpretive communities. In the digital oligarchic public sphere theorized in this article, control over such epistemic infrastructures becomes as important as control over physical networks, because it enables billionaires to govern not only what circulates but what counts as ‘truth’ in the first place.

After acquiring Twitter for \$44 billion, Elon Musk rebranded the platform as a bastion of ‘free speech’, while suspending journalists, reinstating extremists, and amplifying disinformation (Ledford, 2022; Powell, 2022; Zhu, 2023). His control over Starlink – crucial for military and humanitarian coordination – meant a private individual could shape battlefield dynamics by toggling access (Alemanno & Veraldi, 2025). Twitter/X has been criticized for suppressing pro-Palestinian content, including shadow banning human rights organizations and de-amplifying images of suffering civilians (Nour et al., 2024; Siapera et al., 2015). Musk’s embrace of conspiracy theorists and engagement with authoritarian leaders, like online interactions with Orbán and Putin sympathizers, show how infrastructural control intersects with ideological affinity. Musk does not merely moderate content; he curates geopolitical legitimacy in real time.

Through Meta’s empire (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp), Zuckerberg governs the communication infrastructures used by over 3 billion people (Barbabela et al., 2024; Hunter & Power, 2019). Meta’s content moderation has been accused of bias, with failures such as its role in the Rohingya genocide in Myanmar and silencing of leftist and racial justice movements in the US (Gerken, 2025; Ortutay, 2022). In Brazil, Meta allowed unchecked pro-Bolsonaro fake news during the 2022 elections, exacerbating political violence. In Ethiopia, Facebook spread ethnic hate speech, prompting a whistleblower to testify that the company ignored internal warnings (Scofield & Santino, 2022). The platform’s economic model, based on algorithmic virality and targeted advertising, elevates outrage over accuracy – turning political destabilization into a profitable feedback loop.

Bezos’s control over *The Washington Post* and Amazon Web Services (AWS, which powers vast portions of the internet) symbolizes a fusion of narrative and infrastructural control. AWS hosts platforms across ideologies, but its power to revoke service – as with dropping Parler after the January 6 Capitol insurrection – shows the ability to impose digital death (Bromell, 2022). Amazon Ring’s surveillance infrastructure, linked to police departments, demonstrates how infrastructural dominance integrates into carceral logics (Selinger & Durant, 2022). Bezos governs both the data highways and the stories that travel on them.

Meanwhile, Mukesh Ambani’s Reliance Jio dominates India’s internet infrastructure, with strong alliances to the BJP and Narendra Modi (Fitzgerald, 2020). His media holdings flood Indian

audiences with nationalist content while squeezing out critical journalism, functioning as a de facto propaganda arm. In France and Switzerland, Patrick Drahi's consolidation of telecom and media outlets has reduced pluralism and empowered corporate influence in political reporting (Agence France Presse, 2019; Renier, 2016). Saudi Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, a former Twitter stakeholder and media investor, has backed ventures that align with Gulf state messaging, extending authoritarian narrative power through private investment (Durot, 2022). In Turkey, pro-Erdoğan conglomerates have acquired dominant media outlets, including online platforms, narrowing public discourse and reshaping collective memory through nationalist revisionism (The New York Times, 2018).

These digital oligarchs shape global discourse not through persuasion, but through material and ideational control over the infrastructures that determine what is visible, credible, and actionable. Their power lies in *infrastructural command* – the ability to govern meaning at scale, embedding elite interests into the architecture of public life. This is Gramscian hegemony retooled for the digital age: a fusion of algorithmic design and capital-driven truth. A revealing case emerged in June 2025, when Elon Musk used his platform X (formerly Twitter) to attack U.S. President Donald Trump over government spending and even invoked Epstein-related allegations (Jaiswal, 2025). After days of political escalation and threats to revoke government contracts for Tesla and SpaceX, Musk publicly apologized – resulting in an overnight recovery of Tesla shares and a personal gain of \$191 million in net worth. This episode exemplifies how digital platform control is leveraged not just for narrative power but for material accumulation. The ability to trigger, steer, and neutralize public controversy – at scale and in real time – translates into direct financial reward within the global finance system. Globally, similar dynamics play out: Ambani's media empire renders Modi's ethno-nationalism natural and inevitable; social platforms in Saudi Arabia and Turkey sanitize repression under the guise of consensus. What appears neutral is deliberately engineered. In this digital oligarchy, dissent is filtered, visibility is transactional, and truth is malleable. Public deliberation is no longer democratic; rather, it is optimized for capital accumulation and curated by the unelected.

Normative capture: the oligarchic-authoritarian convergence

Normative capture is the process by which elite interests become internalized as apparently neutral or commonsensical values – market imperatives, securitization, hierarchical order – through sustained control of media narratives and digital infrastructures, foreclosing critical inquiry and alternative imaginaries. This mechanism operates beyond overt censorship; it shapes the semantic field of public discourse by normalizing certain frames and metaphors (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). Analysis of platform design choices, ranging from default recommender settings to viral content strategies, reveals how market logics and state-sanctioned security discourses become embedded in everyday online interactions (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Helberger et al., 2018). The process of normative capture emerges from the structural convergence of political authoritarianism and economic oligarchy. Both political authoritarianism and economic oligarchy converge on exclusionary governance: each relies on surveillance, legal immunity, and market concentration to marginalize dissent (Sadowski, 2025; Winters, 2011). While authoritarian regimes suppress pluralism and checks on state power, oligarchs seek to monopolize markets and influence. Their alliance is systemic. As democratic institutions erode under digital capitalism, authoritarian actors use oligarchic platforms for surveillance and ideological control, while oligarchs find in authoritarian states the protection and contracts that shield them from democratic accountability.

Normative capture is starkly visible in the algorithmic downplaying and selective framing of mass atrocities, most notably the ongoing violence in Gaza. Investigations by journalists, NGOs, and scholars document how Meta and X have repeatedly removed, down-ranked, or restricted pro-Palestinian content and documentation of civilian suffering, while allowing decontextualized, securitized framings of the conflict to circulate widely (David, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2023; Nour et al., 2024). These moderation patterns are not random glitches; they reflect platform policies and ranking systems aligned with advertiser sensibilities, Western security agendas, and the geopolitical interests of states that enjoy close ties to tech billionaires and their firms. By systematically privileging narratives of ‘counter-terrorism’, ‘self-defence’, and ‘stability’ over accounts of occupation, apartheid, or genocide, platforms help normalize an interpretive horizon in which Palestinian disposability appears reasonable or inevitable. This is normative capture at work: billionaire-owned infrastructures curating the moral vocabulary through which global audiences perceive whose lives are grievable, which legal categories (such as ‘genocide’) are thinkable, and what forms of solidarity seem legitimate or extremist. In such a digital oligarchic public sphere, the suppression of Gaza’s testimonial evidence is not simply content bias, but an ideological project that protects existing hierarchies of power, capital, and alliance.

This convergence accelerates in the United States, where Donald Trump began his second term in January 2025, unfolding with right-wing digital oligarchs. Elon Musk, controlling Twitter/X, has enabled a platform that amplifies reactionary voices, reinstates banned accounts tied to hate speech, and undermines mainstream journalism (Peck, 2025). In parallel, Trump’s digital ventures – like Truth Social – create ecosystems of ‘alternative facts’, where disinformation is a governing logic (Harsin, 2021; Knoester & Knoester, 2023; Zhang et al., 2025). The infrastructure of Trump’s political communication depends on hyper-partisan media, data-driven targeting, and algorithmically shaped narratives. This concerns constructing a post-truth regime aligned with oligarchic interests. Trump’s authoritarian populism functions as a delivery mechanism for tax cuts, deregulation, and political immunity for the super-rich. Under Trump 2.0, the boundaries between governance, spectacle, and digital manipulation blur entirely (Brian, 2020; Enli, 2024; Regilme, 2019, 2022, 2023b). The alliance between political strongmen and billionaire platform owners creates a system where democratic norms erode through corruption of public discourse and memory. This represents the digital oligarchic sphere where oligarchs become co-architects of authoritarianism, not just enablers.

Trump 2.0’s power consolidation reveals authoritarian populism’s resurgence beyond Left/Right boundaries. Far-right populists and autocrats align through commitments to elite dominance. The Trump-digital oligarch partnership stems from capturing attention and governing epistemic terrain. Managing discourse through algorithms consolidates power while alternatives are foreclosed, bound by control over cognition and capital.

Across diverse political contexts, digital oligarchs have become key enablers of authoritarian consolidation, aligning infrastructure, narrative control, and surveillance to suppress dissent and manufacture consent. In Myanmar, Facebook was central in spreading anti-Rohingya hate speech, which the UN acknowledged as facilitating genocide (Barroso, 2024; Modok, 2023). In India, Ambani’s platforms assist in data collection and narrative shaping for BJP campaigns, blurring corporate and ethno-nationalist governance (Fitzgerald, 2020; Sharma, 2022). In Egypt, telecom firms and security agencies collaborate for widespread surveillance and suppression of dissent (AlAshry, 2023; Badran & Turnbull, 2022). In Turkey, Erdoğan’s regime has relied on domestic oligarchs and international platforms to manipulate media, demanding compliance from tech firms and criminalizing digital dissent (Akkus, 2023; Akser, 2018). In Hungary, Orbán-aligned oligarchs have

acquired most independent media, aligning news with government propaganda (Szebeni & Salojärvi, 2022; Szilágyi & Bozóki, 2015). In Belarus, social media blackouts and disinformation fueled the regime's crackdown on protests (Makhortykh & Wijermars, 2023). The Philippines offers a revealing case. During the 2016 and 2022 elections, the Marcos and Duterte dynasties, allied with Manny Villar – the country's richest person – weaponized the digital sphere (Hu, 2020; Mendoza et al., 2024; Regilme, 2021; Regilme & Parthenay, 2024). The Marcos family, accused of amassing \$10 billion in ill-gotten wealth during Marcos Sr.'s dictatorship, rehabilitated its image through social media (Pernia & Pano, 2025). Cambridge Analytica reportedly helped rebrand Ferdinand 'Bongbong' Marcos Jr. from a kleptocrat's son into a benevolent unifier (Hu, 2020; Ressa, 2022). Facebook became central to the Duterte regime's disinformation campaign. Duterte's 'war on drugs' – killing 6,000 people officially, though rights groups estimate 30,000 – was supported by digital campaigns that normalized state violence and rejected criticism. Troll farms, influencers, and bots attacked journalists, academics, and opposition voices, including then Vice-President Leni Robredo (Arugay & Mendoza, 2025; Sinpeng et al., 2020). The Marcos, Duterte, and Villar dynasties' convergence of interests created a digital fortress through financial, logistical, and algorithmic power. This coalition used data analytics and algorithms to engineer false public consensus, consequently demonizing democratic, peaceful political opposition. What appeared as populist resurgence was a choreographed spectacle of manufactured consent, directed by oligarchs using digital infrastructure to consolidate authoritarian rule. These examples show oligarchs providing infrastructure and narrative control, while authoritarian regimes offer market access. This alignment serves regime stability and oligarch profits. Their platforms become tools of repression, while the public sphere becomes managed. These digital platforms are entangled with authoritarian regimes, serving as instruments of control.

Conclusions: toward reclaiming the digital commons

Recent neo-Luddite scholarship (Merchant 2023; Sadowski 2025) and decolonial studies (Jutel, 2021; Kukutai & Taylor, 2016; Munn, 2022) warn that digital infrastructures reproduce colonial patterns of dispossession and epistemic erasure. These voices critique not only platform extractivism but its role in perpetuating North–South inequalities – an angle hitherto underexplored in mainstream surveillance-capitalism debates. Despite this bleak panorama, the digital oligarchic public sphere stops short of totalitarian control, whereby encrypted messaging apps like Signal facilitate decentralized protest coordination in Iran and Hong Kong, and peer-to-peer networks enable real-time evidence of human-rights abuses in Gaza to circulate beyond platform gatekeepers. Independent news sites and blockchain-anchored archives preserve marginalized voices – from Rohingya activists documenting genocide to Indigenous journalists live-streaming wildfire responses in Canada – underscoring that even within razor-thin cracks of algorithmic blockade, progressive actors deploy alternative infrastructures to undermine corporate and state censorship. In Palestine, digital activists document war crimes even as content is systematically censored (Abushbak et al., 2025). In Iran, Russia, and Hong Kong, encrypted messaging platforms enable decentralized protest coordination under repressive regimes (Akbari & Gabdulhakov, 2019; Urman et al., 2021). In Colombia and Nigeria, grassroots journalists expose state and elite abuses overlooked by mainstream media (Imoka, 2023; Specht & Ros-Tonen, 2017). Even in Europe, whistleblowers from within tech corporations challenge oligarchic control (Hüttel & Léderer, 2013; Wahl-Jorgensen & Hunt, 2012). These acts go beyond communication as they constitute infrastructural insurrections against the architecture of domination. Practitioners repurpose platform

affordances to fragment surveillance networks, creating ephemeral nodes of free expression. Legal interventions and digital self-help collectives show that collective agency can puncture algorithmic opacity and financial opaqueness. Resistance, therefore, must confront the structural underpinnings of visibility: the algorithmic systems and financial flows that decide who is seen, who is heard, and who is silenced.

Key counter-actors include digital-rights NGOs such as Access Now and Privacy International, platform co-operatives like Mastodon and Fairbnb, and grassroots data-trust initiatives such as MyData Global. Rather than merely criticizing Big Tech, these actors experiment with alternative institutional forms: Mastodon's federated instances decentralize control over content governance; Fairbnb re-routes platform profits into community projects; and MyData Global develops standards for human-centric, collectively governed data sharing (Ball et. al. 2020). Their tactics range from federated software development and interoperability projects, to strategic litigation against unlawful content takedowns and shutdowns, to the construction of community-held data governance models that limit extractive surveillance. By combining technical-sovereignty training with legal advocacy and regulatory engagement, they carve out 'infra-fissures' within oligarchic architectures, defending public-interest speech and institutionalizing new norms of platform accountability. These initiatives do not yet displace the digital oligarchic public sphere, but they materially demonstrate that digital infrastructures can be organized around public purpose, social equality, and human-rights protection rather than shareholder value alone.

The argument developed here suggests several agendas for future research. Analytically, the concept of the digital oligarchic public sphere invites comparative studies that measure the relative strength of algorithmic hegemony, epistemic monopolization, and normative capture across different regime types and regions, and that trace how these mechanisms interact with class, race, gender, and colonial legacies. Empirically, it calls for fine-grained, multi-sited work on 'infra-fissures': the concrete organizational practices, legal strategies, and technical architectures that enable actors to resist or repurpose oligarchic infrastructures. Normatively, it encourages human rights and International Relations scholarship to treat digital infrastructures themselves as rights-relevant institutions, whose design and ownership structures condition whether rights of expression, privacy, and non-discrimination can be meaningfully realized. Bringing these lines of inquiry together would deepen our understanding of how billionaire power is organized in and through digital infrastructures, and how democratic and egalitarian alternatives might be built.

Achieving a genuinely democratic digital public sphere requires a strategic program of 'de-oligarchization' that addresses the privatized infrastructures shaping collective perception and discourse. This entails promoting public-interest platforms as civic infrastructure, establishing cooperative data trusts, mandating algorithmic transparency, and enforcing antitrust measures to dismantle concentrated media ownership. Equally important is the support of grassroots technical sovereignty initiatives – training communities in the development, maintenance, and governance of their own digital networks. Emerging models such as Mastodon, BlueSky, Resonate, and Fairbnb provide empirical evidence that federated, user-owned architectures can sustain platforms oriented toward shared benefit rather than shareholder profit. These experiments underline that alternative infrastructures, grounded in solidarity and collective stewardship, can transform digital spaces into loci of democratic engagement rather than arenas of extractive accumulation.

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