ALGORITHMIC MANIPULATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA: AN INSTRUMENT OF INFORMATION WARFARE AND ITS INFLUENCE ON PUBLIC OPINION

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Abstract

In the digital era, social media platforms are no longer merely channels for disseminating information; they have become key arenas of contemporary information warfare. Algorithms that determine the content delivered to users play a decisive role in this process. Algorithm-driven content curation creates an environment in which individuals predominantly encounter information aligned with their existing interests and views, thereby limiting exposure to diverse perspectives, intensifying polarization, and increasing the risk of disinformation.

This article analyzes studies that examine how social media algorithms shape user behavior and public opinion, how they construct the informational environment, and what implications these dynamics have for democratic processes. It also explores the algorithmic models of TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube, as well as their influence on the formation of public narratives.

The aim of the article is twofold: first, to highlight the significance of social networks in both the Georgian and global contexts, and second, to examine the specific mechanisms by which algorithms function. Special attention is given to analyzing how algorithmic architecture transforms public discourse and how it may amplify the risks associated with the spread of disinformation.

Authoritarian regimes actively exploit these mechanisms to undermine stability in democratic states, while democratic governments seek to use the same channels to strengthen societal resilience and foster critical thinking. Consequently, social media algorithms have become powerful instruments in modern information warfare, shaping political processes, public attitudes, and global security more broadly.

Under these conditions, ensuring transparency and accountability in algorithmic systems is essential. TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube-along with other platforms-must disclose the criteria by which they select and prioritize content for users. Such measures would facilitate the identification of disinformation operations and support efforts to enhance societal resilience. The regulation and ethical governance of algorithms are therefore indispensable for contemporary information security.

Keywords: social media, algorithms, information warfare, disinformation

Introduction

As of 2024, approximately 5.45 billion people worldwide use the Internet, accounting for 67.1% of the global population.

Mobile phones, the majority of which are smartphones, are owned by 5.68 billion unique individuals, representing 70% of the world's population.

The number of social media users has surpassed 5 billion, exceeding 60% of the global population, with 5.17 billion active accounts specifically.

Every minute, over 500 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube, and around 510,000 comments are posted on Facebook. On TikTok, approximately 34 million videos are uploaded daily, averaging around 981,000 videos per hour.

Social media platforms have massive user bases: Facebook has 3.065 billion users, YouTube 2.504 billion, Instagram 2 billion, and TikTok 1.582 billion.[1]

In Georgia, as of 2024, the number of Internet users reaches 2.93 million, representing 79% of the country's population. Around 3 million people use social media, accounting for over 78% of the total population.[2]

Statistical data clearly demonstrate the growing influence of social media both in Georgia and globally. In light of these trends, the relevance of the topic becomes particularly significant, as social media platforms have emerged as key instruments in shaping public opinion in the contemporary digital era. The expanding role of "new media" is largely attributable to the fact that the dissemination of information on social networks is not subject to the control mechanisms characteristic of traditional media. In this context, the operation and function of technological algorithms acquire decisive importance. Algorithms governing the circulation of content on social media platforms often reinforce users' pre-existing beliefs and limit exposure to alternative viewpoints, thereby increasing the risk of disinformation.

Examining the functioning of social media algorithms provides an opportunity to analyze the mechanisms of modern digital communication and their impact on society. A central focus of this research is to explore how the algorithmic systems of TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube influence the informational environment in Georgia, shape vulnerabilities to disinformation, and affect political narratives.

Research novelty: To date, no large-scale or in-depth study has been conducted in Georgia on the impact of TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube algorithms on the informational environment. Consequently, scientific literature on this topic in the Georgian language remains limited. This article seeks to make a modest contribution to the development of scholarship on this subject by offering an analysis of the influence of social media algorithms. The findings of the study have the potential to support the identification of disinformation operations, strengthen societal resilience, and inform recommendations for algorithmic regulation and ethical governance components that are essential to contemporary information security.

Research Methodology:

The study is based on methodological approaches widely employed in the social and political sciences. It adopts a combined research design that integrates systematic desk research with basic empirical observation of the Georgian context. The purpose of this methodological framework is to enable a multidimensional analysis of the functioning of social media algorithms.

The systematic desk research includes the selection and analysis of international studies conducted by institutions such as RAND Corporation, Pew Research Center, MIT Technology Review, Global Witness, Cybersecurity for Democracy, SAGE Journals, and other authoritative sources. The selection of materials was guided by the following criteria:

Publication within the last three years;

Provision of empirical, experimental, or mixed-method data on platform algorithms, mechanisms of social influence, or the dissemination of disinformation;

High academic standards, as demonstrated by scholarly reputation, journal impact factor, and peer-reviewed status.

The basic empirical observation of the Georgian context draws on:

Official data from the Digital Landscape of Georgia 2024;

[1] Curated by Statista. "Social media - Statistics & Facts", https://www.statista.com/topics/1164/social-networks/#topicOverview [L.s. 8.10.2025].
[2] Geostat - National Statistics Office of Georgia. "Use of Information and Communication Technologies in Households." https://www.geostat.ge/ka/modules/categories/106/sainformatsio-da-sakomunikatsio-teknologiebis-gamoqeneba-shinameurneobebshi [L. s. 12.10.2025].

Open user-engagement statistics on TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube;

International indices assessing Georgia's media environment, including studies on media independence, societal resilience, and information security.

Data analysis was conducted using content analysis, comparative analysis, and thematic classification methods. Content analysis enables the identification of the key narrative characteristics of algorithmic influence; comparative analysis provides a basis for drawing parallels between global and local trends; and thematic classification ensures the structured categorization of data for the purpose of identifying core themes.

1. The Function and Influence of Social Media Algorithms

Recent studies indicate that small but highly active and often coordinated groups exploit social media platforms to shape public discourse and exert influence. The 2024 report by the American analytical center RAND, "Social Media Manipulation in the Era of Artificial Intelligence", details how authoritarian regimes employ AI-driven bots and fake accounts on social platforms to disseminate disinformation and manipulate public opinion. The study also examines TikTok's algorithmic structure, which relies on user behavior analysis to determine content distribution dynamics. These algorithms facilitate the rapid dissemination of information, thereby creating tangible opportunities for the manipulation of public opinion.[3]

The study "TikTok and the Algorithmic Transformation of Social Media Communities," published on the SAGE Journals academic platform, examines how TikTok's algorithmic system reshapes social media user experiences and public discourse. The research demonstrates that TikTok's algorithm, which is based on user behavior analysis, creates a unique social environment in which users are frequently exposed only to content aligned with their existing interests. This process fosters so-called informational isolation, reducing exposure to diverse perspectives and facilitating both societal polarization and the spread of disinformation. The study further notes that TikTok's algorithms generate "social media communities" that are particularly susceptible to algorithmic manipulation.[4]

In the contemporary information environment, social media platforms play a crucial role in shaping public opinion and disseminating information, a function largely determined by their algorithmic logic. Algorithmic selection mechanisms are not limited to TikTok; they are widely employed across other major social platforms and significantly influence both the dissemination of information and the ways in which it is perceived by society. Algorithms determine which content captures users' attention and at what pace it spreads, ultimately impacting the formation of public opinion. According to 2024 data from the independent public opinion research center Pew Research Center, Facebook and YouTube remain the primary platforms through which users regularly receive news, granting them substantial influence over public discourse.

1.1 Content Architects: How Algorithms Construct Informational Reality on Social Media

Social media algorithms operate through various technical mechanisms, yet they share a common objective: to analyze user behavior and interactions in order to deliver content that users enjoy and that keeps them engaged on the platform for extended periods. The primary function of these mechanisms is to select content that aligns as closely as possible with individual users' preferences, capturing their attention and ensuring prolonged engagement. Algorithms are not merely technological tools; they actively shape users' informational environments and the content they encounter. Their central goal is to maximize user engagement, which often results in a focus on polarized and emotionally charged

[3] Irving, D., "Social Media Manipulation in the Era of AI 2024." https://www.rand.org/pubs/articles/2024/social-media-manipulation-in-the-era-of-ai.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com [L.s. 10.12.2025].
[4] Gerbaudo, P., "TikTok and the algorithmic transformation of social media publics: From social networks to social interest clusters", New Media & Society, 2024.
https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/14614448241304106?utm_source=chatgpt.com [L.s. 10.12.2025].

content. Social media algorithms are designed to keep users active by presenting them with content that is most appealing and relevant to their interests.

1.2. How TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube Algorithms Work

TikTok's algorithm is one of the most sophisticated systems, relying on a detailed analysis of user behavior to deliver personalized content. Its primary objective is to maximize user engagement and time spent on the platform. The algorithm uses various "signals," such as video watch duration, likes, comments, shares, and videos marked as favorites. Based on this data, the system constructs a user interest profile and recommends content accordingly, thereby increasing user engagement and prolonging time spent on the platform.

In 2024, researchers at the University of Washington analyzed data from 347 TikTok users. Participants voluntarily provided their data, allowing the researchers to examine the real-world impact of TikTok's algorithm on user behavior. The study revealed that TikTok's algorithm effectively predicts user interests and rapidly amplifies content aligned with those interests. As a result, content diversity is reduced, and informational isolation is intensified. The algorithm places particular emphasis on the initial moments of a video, as this period is crucial for capturing user attention. The study demonstrated that incorporating strong visuals or questions during the opening seconds of a video increases the likelihood of it being watched in full, which serves as a signal to the algorithm that the content is engaging and worth recommending. Such personalization can lead to users being exposed predominantly to content that aligns with their existing interests, thereby reducing content diversity, increasing the risks of polarization, and facilitating the spread of disinformation.[5]

Although TikTok's primary objective is to increase user engagement, a 2025 study conducted by researchers at New York University Abu Dhabi suggests that the platform's recommendation system may exhibit bias toward a specific political orientation. According to the study, during the 2024 U.S. presidential election, TikTok's algorithm more frequently presented users with content supporting the Republican Party, raising questions about the platform's neutrality and the objectivity of its information delivery. For the study, researchers created 323 fictitious TikTok accounts and positioned them in three U.S. states: Texas, New York, and Georgia. From April to November 2024, these accounts viewed approximately 394,000 videos. Data analysis revealed that Republican-leaning accounts received, on average, 11.8% more politically aligned recommendations than Democratic-leaning accounts, which in turn were more frequently exposed to content from opposing viewpoints. This asymmetry was observed across all three states and was independent of engagement metrics such as likes, views, shares, comments, or follower count. The findings indicate that TikTok's recommendation algorithm may not be neutral and tends to facilitate the dissemination of content aligned with a particular political narrative.[6]

The results of this study clearly demonstrate that TikTok's recommendation algorithm is not merely a technological tool but also possesses the potential to influence social and political processes. Consequently, despite its effectiveness in determining user interests and optimizing content delivery, TikTok's algorithm requires greater transparency and enhanced user control over recommendations. Furthermore, the use of TikTok's recommendation algorithm necessitates a balanced approach to ensure that content diversity is not restricted and that users' freedom of choice is preserved.

1.3. Facebook Algorithm: Engagement Optimization and Personalization

Facebook's algorithm utilizes artificial intelligence and machine learning models to conduct detailed analyses of user behavior, selecting the most relevant content for each individual user. The platform

[5] Roesner, F., et al., Q&A: "How TikTok's 'black box' algorithm and design shape user behavior", UW News. 2024, April 24. https://www.myscience.org/en/news/2024/q_a_how_tiktok_s_black_box_algorithm_and_design_shape_user_behavior-2024-washington?utm_source=chatgpt.com [L.s. 10.12.2025].

[6] Ibrahim, H., Jang, H. D., Aldahoul, N., Kaufman, A. R., Rahwan, T., & Zaki, Y. "TikTok's recommendations skewed towards Republican content during the 2024 U.S. presidential race", 2025. https://export.arxiv.org/abs/2501.17831?utm_source=chatgpt.com [L.s. 10.12.2025].

considers past interactions, post formats, and recency, generating a personalized news feed tailored to users' interests. However, this personalization system contributes to the formation of so-called "information bubbles," meaning that users are consistently exposed only to content that aligns with their preexisting beliefs. As a result, access to diverse perspectives is reduced, increasing the risk of societal polarization. For example, a 2024 study published in MIT Technology Review*, titled* "Facebook's algorithm still creates echo chambers and it's getting worse," found that users engaging with political content were over 80% likely to view recommendations aligned with their own positions, reinforcing preexisting beliefs and limiting exposure to differing viewpoints.[7]

1.4. YouTube Recommendation System: Maximizing Engagement and Content Selection

The primary objective of YouTube's recommendation algorithm is to maximize user engagement on the platform. To achieve this, the system employs artificial intelligence and machine learning models that generate personalized recommendations based on users' past behavior. In forming recommendations, the algorithm considers both users' interactions with videos (likes, comments, shares) and video consumption patterns and content characteristics.

However, engagement-oriented recommendation systems are associated with significant challenges. According to a 2024 study published in *Political Communication*, YouTube's algorithm often directs users away from serious, analytical content toward lighter and more entertaining videos. This tendency substantially reduces the visibility of credible and diverse information on the platform. The study analyzed data from 1.7 million recommended videos to examine the algorithm's mechanisms and influence. Experimental analysis revealed that YouTube's recommendation system systematically prioritizes popular but less informative content, posing a threat to the quality of the platform's informational ecosystem and limiting users' access to informed choices.[8]

2. The Impact of Algorithms: Democratic Challenges and Security Issues

In the contemporary information environment, social media algorithms are employed not only for commercial purposes but also as instruments of political influence. Authoritarian states actively utilize algorithm-driven platforms to undermine the internal stability of other countries. Through disinformation campaigns, these mechanisms manipulate public opinion and reduce trust in democratic institutions, posing a serious threat to the stability of democratic processes.

It is essential to identify the systemic risks that result from the destructive influence of algorithmic mechanisms on the democratic environment. Specifically, the following section discusses the main risks, illustrated with relevant examples and supported by empirical research findings.

Manipulation of Public Opinion**:** A prominent example of this strategy is provided by the 2016 and 2020 U.S. presidential elections. The 2018 report by the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, "Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election," [9] details Russia's multifaceted interference strategy, which included cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns. According to the report, Russia's troll factory, the Internet Research Agency (IRA), conducted a large-scale information operation aimed at polarizing U.S. public opinion and influencing the electoral process. Specifically, the IRA created thousands of fake accounts across Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, deliberately spreading disinformation, emotionally charged political messages, and forming groups that intensified tensions between Democrats and Republicans.

[7] MIT Technology Review, Facebook's algorithm still creates echo chambers and it's getting worse, 2024, October 17. https://www.technologyreview.com/2024/10/17/facebook-algorithm-echo-chambers [L.s. 11.10.2025].
[8] Huang, S., & Yang, S., "Auditing entertainment traps on YouTube: How do recommendation algorithms pull users away from news?" Political Communication, 41(6), 2024. 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2024.2343769 [L.s. 12.10.2025].
[9] Select Committee on Intelligence. "Russian active measures campaigns and interference in the 2016 U.S. election" (S. Rpt. 116-290). United States Senate. 2020. https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/2020/08/18/publications-report-select-committee-intelligence-united-states-senate-russian-active-measures/ [L.s. 12.10.2025].

Dissemination of Disinformation and Associated Challenges**:** Algorithms often facilitate the rapid spread of disinformation. Systems designed to maximize user engagement tend to prioritize emotional and sensational content, increasing the visibility of false or manipulative information. At the same time, the existing moderation mechanisms on platforms are frequently ineffective at timely identifying and halting disinformation, posing significant challenges to democratic processes. Research indicates that social media platforms, including TikTok and Facebook, face considerable difficulties in detecting and mitigating election-related disinformation, which threatens the integrity of democratic procedures. For instance, during the 2022 U.S. midterm elections, a joint study by Global Witness and Cybersecurity for Democracy[10] found that none of the platforms were able to successfully identify and stop disinformative political advertisements, highlighting weaknesses in monitoring and regulatory mechanisms.

Erosion of Critical Thinking and Societal Polarization**:** Algorithmically recommended content often reinforces users' pre-existing beliefs, reducing critical thinking capacity and exacerbating societal polarization. This process facilitates the spread of extremist views and contributes to the degradation of democratic discourse. A 2023 study conducted by researchers at the University of California, Davis, published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS), addresses this issue. The study, authored by Sharad Goel, Manuel Horta Ribeiro, and Brendan Nyhan, titled "Auditing YouTube's Recommendation System for Ideologically Congenial, Extreme, and Problematic Recommendations", demonstrated that YouTube's recommendation system systematically amplifies the visibility of ideologically aligned and extremist content. According to the researchers, this mechanism promotes societal polarization and diminishes the quality of democratic discourse.[11]

3. Georgia: Algorithmic Influence and Manipulation on Social Media

In Georgia, the influence of social media on public opinion and political processes has been steadily increasing, particularly during pre-election periods a trend reflected in numerous studies and reports published by Georgian civil society organizations. According to 2024 statistical data, the country had approximately 2.85 million active social media users, representing 76.6% of the population, while 96% of internet users engaged actively with social media platforms.[12]

The Georgia Media Consumption Survey 2024, conducted by CRRC Georgia in partnership with IREX[13], examines patterns of media consumption, social media engagement, and the broader information environment. The study assesses user behavior across multiple platforms, including TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube identifying engagement frequency, primary information sources, and levels of trust. The findings indicate that various political actors in Georgia actively employ social networks to shape public opinion and promote specific narratives.

The mechanisms through which social media algorithms operate in Georgia do not differ from global practices: they filter information, amplify particular narratives, and reinforce users' pre-existing beliefs. Consequently, such algorithmic dynamics heighten the risks associated with disinformation, intensify political and societal polarization, and exert significant influence on public opinion formation.

In a context where democratic institutions remain in a process of consolidation and information threats are substantial, it is essential for Georgia to develop proactive strategies. These strategies should include raising public awareness about algorithmic influence, as well as establishing effective regulatory

[10] Global Witness, "TikTok and Facebook fail to detect election disinformation in the US, while YouTube succeeds." 21.10.2022. https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/digital-threats/tiktok-and-facebook-fail-to-detect-election-disinformation-in-the-us-while-youtube-succeeds/ [L.s.11.10.2025].

[11] Goel, S., Ribeiro, M. H., & Nyhan, B., "Auditing YouTube's recommendation system for ideologically congenial, extreme, and problematic recommendations", Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 120(50), e2213020120. 2023. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2213020120.

[12] CRRC Georgia. "Young, in the City, and Online: Most Georgians Use More Than One Social Media Platform." CRRC Georgia Blog, February 13, 2024. https://crrc.ge/en/young-in-the-city-and-online-most-georgians-use-more-than-one-social-media-platform/ [L.s.11.10.2025].

[13] CRRC Georgia and IREX. 2024 Georgia Media Consumption Survey. Tbilisi: CRRC Georgia and IREX, June 2025. https://crrc.ge/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/irex-2024_georgia-media-consumption-survey_eng.pdf [L.s.11.10.2025].

frameworks through cooperation between state institutions and the civil society sector. A systematic approach is advisable one that conceptualizes the democratization of algorithms not merely as a technological issue, but as a value-based and structural challenge. Such an approach would support informed citizenship, autonomous decision-making, and, ultimately, the strengthening of societal resilience and democratic institutions.

4. Democratization of Algorithms and Resilience Policy: Recommendations for Strengthening Democratic Societies

In the contemporary information environment, algorithms play a crucial role in shaping public perceptions, attitudes, and decision-making processes. Algorithm-driven information channels often serve not only commercial purposes but also strategic political interests. In this context, it is particularly concerning when state or non-state actors deliberately exploit platform infrastructures to spread disinformation and exacerbate societal polarization. Therefore, transparency in algorithmic operations and public oversight is essential for ensuring informational sovereignty and the resilience of democratic systems.

Resilience policies, encompassing institutional, informational, and communicational strategies, should be grounded in the principle that a democratic society functions through the participation of informed citizens and a free, pluralistic discourse. In this process, a special emphasis is placed not only on fact-checking and enhancing media literacy but also on the democratization of technological mechanisms, specifically algorithms. This entails:

- Ensuring that platforms are obligated to make their recommendation systems transparent, explaining how content is classified, selected, and distributed across their services;
- Providing users with the ability to accept or reject algorithmically personalized content;
- Granting researchers access to data in a way that enables independent evaluation of platform influence;
- Developing regulatory frameworks that balance the freedom of technological innovation with public safety. It is essential to establish regulations at both international and national levels that require social media platforms to ensure the ethical use of algorithms and the protection of user data;
- Strengthening media literacy: Enhancing public media literacy is crucial for enabling users to develop critical thinking skills and effectively identify disinformation. Proper and structured media education will help users avoid being trapped in informational silos, encouraging the use and evaluation of diverse sources. Society must share responsibility in filtering information and detecting disinformation, which directly contributes to strengthening democratic resilience.

The European Union's Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Code of Practice on Disinformation represent significant steps in this direction. They recognize the public importance of platforms and impose specific responsibilities, setting an example for other countries. In the United States, similar objectives are pursued through the Platform Accountability and Transparency Act, which obliges major platforms to share data transparently with independent academic researchers and accredited investigators.[14]

This legislative initiative represents a significant step in the United States toward increasing transparency and accountability of social media platforms, thereby supporting the protection of democratic processes and combating disinformation.

In Georgia, the media market is regulated by the Georgian National Communications Commission, which is responsible for overseeing the activities of entities operating in the field of electronic

[14] Coons, C., A., Platform Accountability and Transparency Act. U.S. Senate, 2022. https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/5339 [L.s 12.10. 2025].

communications, including television, radio, internet broadcasting, and other electronic communication services. The Commission's mandate is to ensure a competitive, free, and transparent environment within these sectors, thereby contributing to the protection of citizens' rights, interests, and access to information.

It is noteworthy that the Commission implements projects and initiatives aimed at combating disinformation and promoting media literacy. However, at this stage, no specialized regulations or comprehensive legislative framework exists that would directly and systematically govern this sphere and contribute to improving the overall quality of public information.

Conclusion

Social media algorithms play a decisive role in the contemporary information environment: they determine the type of content users are exposed to and influence public opinion, political processes, and the overall stability of democratic systems. The examples of TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube demonstrate that engagement-driven algorithms often reduce the visibility of reliable information sources while promoting simplified, popular, or even disinformative content. Particularly concerning is the fact that the operations of these platforms remain largely unregulated by clear, mandatory transparency and ethical standards, which further increases the risk of informational manipulation. The use of social media by authoritarian regimes as tools for external interference illustrated by the Russian example, confirms that algorithms can have a potentially harmful impact on global security and democracy.

For Georgia, as a country situated in a geopolitically complex region, it is critically important to fully understand these risks, improve mechanisms for monitoring and controlling the information environment, and strengthen both state and civil resilience based on international best practices. Achieving this requires regulatory oversight of platforms, ensuring algorithmic transparency, and enhancing media literacy and critical media skills among users.

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