

## Hybrid Public Sphere in The Digital Era: A Systematic Literature Review from A Habermasian Perspective

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**ABSTRACT**

The rapid expansion of digital platforms, algorithmic governance, and networked communication has fundamentally transformed the structure of public communication, creating new challenges for understanding democratic deliberation and public participation in contemporary societies. This research aims to systematically examine the evolution of the hybrid public sphere in digital public communication research from a Habermasian perspective, analyse how Habermasian concepts are applied and reinterpreted in digitally mediated environments, and identify emerging opportunities, challenges, and future research directions. Using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) guided by the PRISMA framework, data were collected from the Scopus database and analysed through thematic synthesis. A total of 28 peer-reviewed articles published between 2010 and 2025 were selected for qualitative analysis. The findings reveal that the hybrid public sphere has evolved into a platformised, networked, and algorithmically mediated communication environment, characterised by the interaction of online and offline communication, social media platforms, civic participation, and digital activism. The reviewed studies confirm the continuing relevance of Habermasian concepts — including the public sphere, communicative action, and deliberative democracy — while also demonstrating their reinterpretation in response to platform capitalism, algorithmic governance, affective publics, and emotional communication. The review further identifies democratic opportunities arising from expanded participation and networked engagement, alongside challenges related to misinformation, polarisation, communicative fragmentation, and platform domination. This study advances Habermasian public sphere theory by synthesising fragmented discussions on hybrid public communication and proposing a platformised, networked, and affective hybrid public sphere, with implications for digital platform governance, democratic communication policy, and civic digital literacy in hybridised ecosystems.

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### INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed the structure and dynamics of public communication in contemporary society (Bruns, 2023). Public discourse, which was historically dominated by face-to-face interaction and traditional mass media, has increasingly shifted toward digitally mediated communication environments characterized by social media platforms, networked interactions, and real-time information exchange (Nudo et al., 2026). This transformation has generated what scholars increasingly

conceptualize as a *hybrid public spnudohere*, namely a communicative space in which offline and online forms of interaction coexist, intersect, and mutually shape public deliberation, political participation, and opinion formation (Brantner et al., 2021). In this context, public communication no longer operates through linear and centralized channels, but rather through multidirectional and platform-based communication ecosystems involving governments, media institutions, civil society organizations, and digitally connected citizens (Smyrniotis & Baisnée, 2023).

The emergence of hybrid communication environments has significantly altered the nature of democratic engagement and public discourse. Digital platforms such as X, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and other networked media have expanded opportunities for civic participation and enabled broader access to political expression and public deliberation (Pfetsch, 2023). Simultaneously, however, these platforms have also intensified concerns regarding misinformation, algorithmic manipulation, political polarization, echo chambers, and the fragmentation of public discourse (Croce et al., 2023). Consequently, the digital transformation of communication has produced contradictory implications for democracy: while digital media potentially democratize access to public debate, they also challenge the rational-critical deliberation traditionally associated with democratic public spheres (Scherman et al., 2025).

Within communication and media studies, the theoretical contributions of Jürgen Habermas remain central to understanding these transformations. Habermas' concept of the Public Sphere and Communicative Action Theory provides a normative framework for analyzing democratic communication as a process grounded in rational dialogue, inclusiveness, and the formation of public opinion free from domination (Seeliger & Sevigani, 2022). In the context of digital communication, Habermasian theory has been widely employed to examine the democratic potential and limitations of social media, online deliberation, networked communication, and digitally mediated participation (Dahlberg, 2006; Jennings et al., 2021; Rosa, 2022). Nevertheless, the contemporary digital environment presents complexities that exceed the assumptions of the classical bourgeois public sphere, particularly due to the growing influence of platform capitalism, datafication, algorithmic governance, and commercially driven communication infrastructures (Friedland & Kunelius, 2023).

The continuing relevance of a Habermasian perspective becomes particularly important in an era characterized by platform capitalism and algorithmic governance. While contemporary communication environments differ substantially from the conditions under which Habermas originally developed his theory of the public sphere, his normative principles remain valuable for evaluating the democratic quality of public communication. Concepts such as communicative rationality, inclusiveness, public deliberation, and the formation of public opinion free from domination provide critical benchmarks for assessing whether digitally mediated communication environments support or undermine democratic participation (Seeliger & Sevigani, 2022; Williams & Knops, 2024). In particular, Habermasian theory offers a useful framework for examining how platform algorithms influence communicative visibility, how commercially driven digital infrastructures shape opportunities for public discourse, and how platform governance affects democratic participation and deliberative processes (Friedland & Kunelius, 2023; McCarthy et al., 2023; Nosthoff & Maschewski, 2024; Staab & Thiel, 2022).

Furthermore, the rise of misinformation, affective publics, emotional communication, and identity-driven participation does not diminish the relevance of Habermasian theory; rather, it highlights the need to reassess and reinterpret deliberative democratic principles within increasingly platformized and emotionally mediated communication ecosystems (Rosa, 2022; Salte, 2022; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). Contemporary public discourse is increasingly shaped by emotional appeals, algorithmically amplified content, and fragmented information

environments, creating challenges for rational-critical debate and the formation of informed public opinion. At the same time, concerns regarding polarization, communicative fragmentation, and disinformation reinforce the importance of normative frameworks capable of evaluating the quality, legitimacy, and inclusiveness of public discourse in digital societies (Brüggemann & Meyer, 2023; Nieminen, 2024; Ștefănel & Allegri, 2025). Consequently, a Habermasian perspective remains essential not only for understanding the transformation of contemporary public spheres but also for critically evaluating their democratic implications in the context of platformized and algorithmically mediated communication environments.

Previous studies have extensively explored issues related to digital public spheres, political communication, deliberative democracy, social media discourse, and civic participation (Aytac, 2024; Castelló et al., 2025; Oswald, 2024; Saud et al., 2023; Toumaras, 2025). Existing scholarship suggests that digital communication technologies can facilitate participatory engagement and accelerate the circulation of information across public networks (Gonçalves et al., 2024). At the same time, scholars have highlighted the emergence of communicative fragmentation, disinformation, affective polarization, and declining deliberative quality within online environments (Brüggemann & Meyer, 2023; Ștefănel & Allegri, 2025; Törnberg et al., 2021). Despite this growing body of literature, the concept of the *hybrid public sphere* remains theoretically fragmented and terminologically inconsistent. Related concepts such as *digital public sphere*, *networked public sphere*, *hybrid media system*, *media convergence*, and *online-offline communication* are often used interchangeably without a coherent conceptual synthesis. Furthermore, many studies focus predominantly on digital platforms in isolation, while comparatively limited attention has been given to the interconnection between online and offline communicative practices within contemporary public spheres.

In addition, the application of Habermasian theory in studies of digital communication remains uneven and dispersed across disciplines. While some studies employ Habermas primarily as a normative reference for deliberative democracy (Aubert, 2021; Williams & Knops, 2024); Others critically interrogate the limitations of Habermasian public sphere theory in digitally mediated societies characterized by algorithmic filtering, participatory inequalities, and platform domination (Brinkmann et al., 2022; Rosa, 2022). However, there remains a lack of systematic synthesis regarding how Habermasian concepts are operationalized, interpreted, and debated within the broader literature on hybrid public communication. This theoretical fragmentation indicates the need for a comprehensive review that integrates diverse scholarly perspectives and identifies emerging trajectories in the field.

The urgency of this study stems from the growing influence of platform capitalism, algorithmic governance, misinformation, and affective publics in shaping contemporary democratic communication. Digital platforms increasingly function not only as channels of communication but also as powerful socio-technical infrastructures that determine the visibility, circulation, and prioritization of information through algorithmic systems and data-driven logics (Friedland & Kunelius, 2023; Smyrniotis & Baisnée, 2023). As public discourse becomes increasingly mediated by commercial platforms, concerns have emerged regarding communicative inequality, information manipulation, surveillance practices, and the weakening of shared deliberative spaces. These developments challenge the normative assumptions of the classical public sphere and raise important questions about the extent to which democratic communication can be sustained within platformized communication environments. Consequently, revisiting Habermasian perspectives remains necessary because they provide a critical normative framework for evaluating inclusiveness, communicative rationality, democratic legitimacy, and the quality of public deliberation in contemporary digital societies.

Despite the growing literature on digital public spheres, networked communication, and deliberative democracy, few studies have systematically synthesized how the concept of the hybrid public sphere has evolved and how Habermasian theory has been interpreted, applied, and contested within this emerging field. Existing studies tend to focus either on digital platforms, social media participation, or deliberative communication in isolation, resulting in fragmented conceptual understandings of hybrid public communication. Therefore, the novelty of this study lies in its comprehensive synthesis of hybrid public sphere research through a Habermasian lens, integrating diverse theoretical and empirical perspectives into a coherent analytical framework. This study contributes theoretically by clarifying the conceptual foundations of the hybrid public sphere and proposing a broader understanding of contemporary public communication as a platformized, networked, and affective communication environment. Practically, the findings provide insights for policymakers, platform regulators, civil society organizations, and digital literacy practitioners seeking to strengthen democratic communication, improve platform governance, and promote more inclusive forms of civic participation in increasingly hybridized communication ecosystems.

Against this background, this study conducts a Systematic Literature Review to systematically examine the evolution of the hybrid public sphere in digital public communication studies from a Habermasian perspective. Specifically, this study seeks to address three primary research questions: (1) How has the concept of hybrid public sphere evolved in digital public communication studies? (2) How is Habermasian theory applied in studies of hybrid public communication? and (3) What opportunities, challenges, and future research directions emerge in studies of the hybrid public sphere? By synthesizing the existing literature, this study aims to contribute to the theoretical development of digital public communication research, clarify the conceptual foundations of hybrid public spheres, and provide a future research agenda for understanding democratic communication in increasingly hybridized digital societies.

## **METHOD**

This research employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to examine the evolution of the hybrid public sphere in digital public communication studies from a Habermasian perspective. The review followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021), which provide a transparent and replicable framework for identifying, screening, assessing, and selecting relevant studies.

The literature search was conducted in the Scopus database on 15 March 2026. Scopus was selected because of its extensive coverage of peer-reviewed publications in communication, media, political communication, sociology, and related social science disciplines. The search was performed using the TITLE-ABS-KEY function with the following search string:

*( "public sphere" OR "digital public sphere" OR "networked public sphere" )  
AND ( Habermas OR "communicative action" OR "deliberative democracy" )  
AND ( "digital communication" OR social media OR "hybrid media system"  
OR "media convergence" OR "networked communication" )*

The search was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles and review articles published in English between 2010 and 2025 within the subject areas of Social Sciences and Arts and Humanities. The inclusion and exclusion criteria are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

Criteria	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Document type	Peer-reviewed journal articles and review articles	Conference papers, book chapters, books, editorials, notes, reports, and non-academic publications
Source	Indexed journals in Scopus	Non-indexed sources
Publication year	2010–2025	Publications outside the specified time range
Language	English	Non-English publications
Subject area	Social Sciences and Arts and Humanities	Subject areas unrelated to communication, public discourse, or democratic studies
Research focus	Public sphere, digital public communication, deliberative democracy, civic participation, or political communication	Studies unrelated to public communication or democratic discourse
Digital component	Includes digital communication, social media, networked communication, or digital public sphere elements	Studies without digital or mediated communication aspects
Hybrid communication	Discusses the integration or interaction between digital and offline communication environments	Studies focusing exclusively on offline communication or purely technical digital systems
Theoretical relevance	Explicitly or implicitly engages with Habermasian theory, communicative action, or deliberative democracy	Studies without substantive theoretical relevance to Habermasian public sphere concepts
Analytical contribution	Provides conceptual discussion, theoretical analysis, empirical findings, or critical evaluation	Purely descriptive, technical, or non-analytical reports
Data availability	Full-text accessible	Full-text not accessible

Source: Developed by the researcher (2026)

Following the initial search, all retrieved records were exported to Mendeley Reference Manager for reference management and duplicate removal. The remaining records were then screened using Microsoft Excel based on titles and abstracts. Studies unrelated to public sphere theory, digital public communication, deliberative democracy, Habermasian theory, or hybrid communication were excluded. Full-text screening was subsequently conducted to assess conceptual relevance and eligibility according to the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria.

The final set of eligible studies was analyzed using thematic synthesis (Sviderski et al., 2025). The analysis involved coding and categorizing recurring themes related to the evolution of the hybrid public sphere, the application of Habermasian concepts, democratic participation, platform governance, algorithmic influence, misinformation, polarization, and online–offline communication dynamics. The identified themes were then synthesized to examine theoretical developments, research trends, challenges, and future directions in hybrid public sphere research.

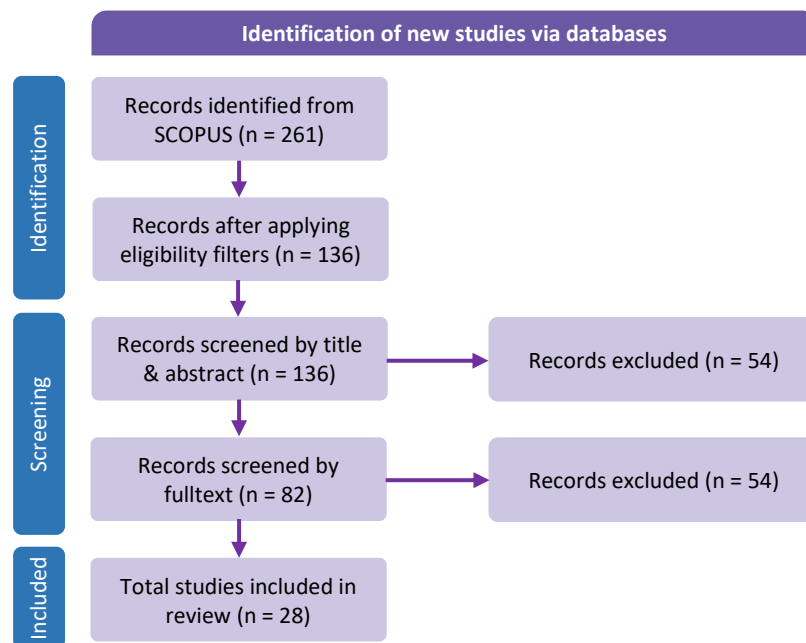
## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Study Selection Process

The literature search conducted in Scopus initially identified 261 records. After applying eligibility filters, including publication year (2010–2026), document type (article and review), language (English), subject areas (Social Sciences and Arts and Humanities), and

source type (journal), the number of records was reduced to 136. Subsequently, title and abstract screening were conducted based on relevance to the hybrid public sphere, digital public communication, social media communication, and Habermasian perspectives, resulting in the exclusion of 54 records and leaving 82 articles for further evaluation. This stage ensured that only studies aligned with the scope of digital public communication and public sphere transformation were retained.

The remaining 82 articles were then subjected to full-text review to assess their relevance to the research questions and theoretical contribution to hybrid public sphere studies. During this stage, 54 articles were excluded because they did not substantially discuss hybrid public communication or Habermasian perspectives. As a result, 28 articles were finally included in the qualitative synthesis. The complete study selection process is illustrated in the PRISMA flow diagram presented in Figure 1.

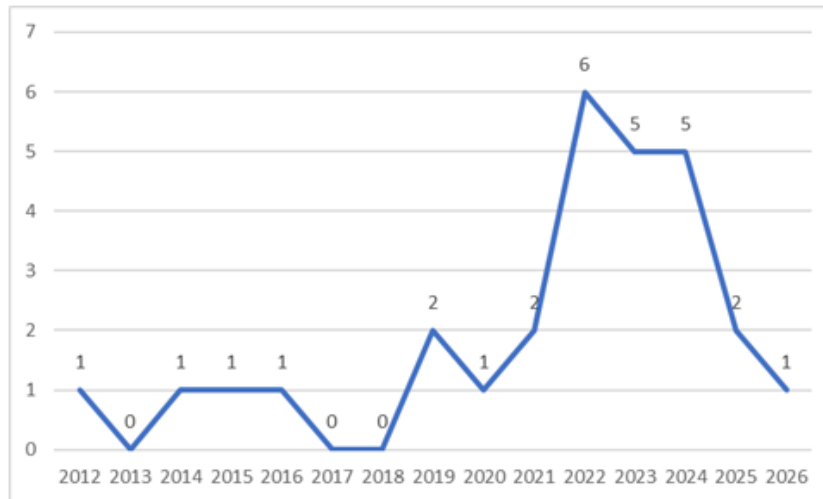


**Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram**

Source: Developed by the authors based on the PRISMA 2020 procedure

### Study Characteristics

The final dataset consists of 28 articles published between 2010 and 2026, reflecting the growing scholarly interest in hybrid public sphere and digital public communication studies over the past decade. As shown in Figure 2, the distribution of publications remained relatively limited between 2010 and 2018, with only occasional publications identified during this period. Scholarly attention began to increase in 2019 and 2021, followed by a significant rise in 2022, which recorded the highest number of publications. The number of studies remained relatively high in 2023 and 2024, then declined slightly in 2025 and 2026. This trend indicates that discussions surrounding digital public spheres, platform governance, social media communication, and deliberative democracy have intensified substantially in recent years.



**Figure 2. Distribution of articles by publication year**

Source: Compiled by the authors from the 28 reviewed articles (2026)

From a thematic perspective, the reviewed studies primarily focus on the transformation of the digital public sphere, social media communication, deliberative democracy, communicative action, platform governance, digital activism, political polarization, and participatory communication. Several studies examine the structural transformation of the public sphere under platform capitalism and algorithmic governance, while others focus on online activism, journalism, crisis communication, influencer communication, and environmental communication. The findings indicate that hybrid public sphere studies have evolved beyond traditional media-centered analyses toward broader discussions of digitally networked communication environments and hybrid communication systems integrating online and offline interactions.

The reviewed studies also demonstrate considerable theoretical diversity. Although nearly all studies engage with Jürgen Habermas’s public sphere theory, communicative action, or deliberative democracy, many combine Habermasian perspectives with other theoretical approaches, including network society theory, platform society theory, political economy, affective publics, digital capitalism, and cultural public sphere theory. This theoretical expansion reflects the need to explain increasingly complex communication environments shaped by social media platforms, algorithms, emotional communication, and networked participation.

Geographically, the studies cover a broad range of contexts, including Europe, North America, Asia, the Middle East, and cross-national comparative settings. Several studies focus on specific national cases such as Indonesia, China, Turkey, Finland, Italy, and the United States, while others examine global digital communication phenomena. This distribution demonstrates that hybrid public sphere transformation is a global phenomenon, although its democratic implications vary depending on political systems, media structures, technological infrastructures, and socio-cultural conditions.

To provide a more systematic overview of the reviewed literature, Table 1 summarizes the key characteristics of the 28 selected studies, including their geographical context, theoretical framework, methodological approach, and principal contribution to hybrid public sphere research.

**Table 2. Thematic Summary of Selected Studies**

No	Author(s)	Year	Country/ Context	Theoretical Framework	Methodology	Key Contribution
1	Abdulla	2023	Egypt	Public Sphere, Counterpublics	Mixed Methods	Introduces the concept of the eventful public sphere linking social media and offline protest movements.
2	Aiseng	2024	South Africa	Public Sphere, Counterpublics	Digital Ethnography	Demonstrates Black Twitter as a digital counterpublic enabling marginalized voices.
3	Al-Hussein	2020	Jordan	Public Sphere Theory	Quantitative Survey	Shows how social media simultaneously facilitate participation and elite manipulation.
4	Fuchs	2014	Global	Public Sphere, Political Economy	Conceptual Analysis	Extends Habermasian theory through digital capitalism and surveillance capitalism perspectives.
5	Korstenbroek	2022	Europe	Public Sphere, Affective Publics	Conceptual Analysis	Proposes the concept of the empathetic public sphere as an alternative to rational deliberation.
6	Liu	2025	China	Public Sphere, Governmentality	Qualitative Study	Explains hybrid public spheres under algorithmic governance and digital authoritarianism.
7	Mattila & Nummi	2022	Finland	Public Sphere, Deliberative Democracy	Case Study	Examines social media as deliberative infrastructure in participatory planning.
8	McCarthy et al.	2023	Ireland/Europe	Communicative Action, Deliberative Democracy	Citizen Engagement Study	Connects platform governance with democratic legitimacy and citizen participation.
9	Munteanu & Staiculescu	2015	Romania	Public Sphere, Network Society	Conceptual Analysis	Introduces the networked and rhizomatic public sphere model.
10	Muzykant & Muqsith	2021	Digital Communication Context	Public Sphere Theory	Conceptual Study	Explains digital public sphere transformation through networked participation.
11	Nelimarkka et al.	2019	Finland & USA	Deliberative Democracy	Comparative Study	Examines platform design and political polarization from a Habermasian perspective.
12	Nieminen	2024	Europe	Public Sphere, Deliberative Democracy	Conceptual Analysis	Connects digital democracy, platformization, and public sphere transformation.

No	Author(s)	Year	Country/ Context	Theoretical Framework	Methodology	Key Contribution
13	Nosthoff & Maschewski	2024	Global/Facebook	Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere	Critical Theoretical Analysis	Explains how platform capitalism reshapes democratic communication through infrastructural power.
14	Nugroho	2026	Indonesia	Public Sphere, Network Society	Qualitative Study	Introduces digital cognitive democracy within hybrid political communication.
15	Patberg	2025	Democracy and Social Media	Public Sphere, Media Society	Conceptual Analysis	Reinterprets the democratic role of social media within Habermas's center-periphery model.
16	Peterson	2022	Democratic Societies	Public Sphere, Discourse Ethics	Conceptual Analysis	Highlights polarization and fragmentation as threats to democratic dialogue.
17	Ronda et al.	2024	Indonesia	Communicative Rationality	Critical Discourse Analysis	Examines parliamentary communication and democratic legitimacy.
18	Salte	2022	Instagram/Influencer Communication	Public Sphere, Cultural Public Sphere	Qualitative Analysis	Demonstrates the role of influencers in shaping affective and visual public discourse.
19	Sevignani	2022	Global Digital Media	Public Sphere, Hegemony Theory	Conceptual Analysis	Integrates Habermasian theory with populist communication and platform society perspectives.
20	Shearmur	2023	Democratic Communication	Open Society, Public Sphere	Philosophical Analysis	Explores post-truth challenges and the erosion of rational public discourse.
21	Shklovski & Valtysson	2012	Digital Media Environment	Public Sphere, Media Convergence	Conceptual Analysis	Explains convergence culture as a foundation of participatory hybrid communication.
22	Splendore et al.	2024	Italy	Deliberative Democracy	Empirical Study	Demonstrates the importance of trust in journalism for democratic deliberation.
23	Staab & Thiel	2022	Platform Society	Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere	Critical Theory	Explains how platform infrastructures restructure democratic communication.
24	Susin & Ordonez-Ponce	2023	Environmental Activism	Communicative Action Theory	Conceptual Review	Examines social media as a platform for environmental engagement and activism.
25	Vatikiotis & Yörük	2016	Turkey (Gezi Movement)	Networked Public Sphere	Comparative Analysis	Demonstrates integration of online communication and offline protest mobilization.

No	Author(s)	Year	Country/ Context	Theoretical Framework	Methodology	Key Contribution
26	Verovšek & Gorišek	2023	COVID-19 Pandemic	Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere	Conceptual Analysis	Explains the role of expertise and science communication in hybrid public spheres.
27	Wahl- Jorgensen	2019	Digital Public Communication	Public Sphere, Affective Communication	Reflective Essay	Critiques rational deliberation by emphasizing emotional participation.
28	Way	2021	Meme Politics and Alt-Right Communication	Affective Publics	Critical Discourse Analysis	Shows how memes and affective communication challenge deliberative democratic ideals.

Source: Compiled by the authors based on the 28 reviewed articles

Table 1 demonstrates the considerable diversity of contexts, theoretical perspectives, and methodological approaches represented in the reviewed literature. While most studies are grounded in Habermasian public sphere theory and deliberative democracy, many extend or challenge these perspectives by incorporating alternative frameworks such as counterpublics, network society, affective publics, platform society, political economy, and digital capitalism. Methodologically, the literature encompasses conceptual analyses, qualitative case studies, surveys, digital ethnography, discourse analyses, and comparative research. Collectively, these studies reveal that the hybrid public sphere has evolved into an interdisciplinary field concerned with the interplay among digital platforms, algorithmic governance, communicative action, networked participation, and democratic outcomes.

### Key Findings

The reviewed studies consistently demonstrate that the concept of the public sphere has evolved significantly in response to the expansion of digital communication technologies and hybrid media systems. Earlier studies primarily focused on participatory media convergence and digitally networked communication environments that challenged traditional mass-media-centered communication structures (Fuchs, 2014; Munteanu & Staiculescu, 2015; Shklovski & Valtysson, 2012). Subsequent studies increasingly emphasized the growing role of social media platforms, blogs, digital activism, and online participatory networks in shaping public discourse and political communication (Al-Hussein, 2020; Nelimarkka et al., 2019; Vatikiotis & Yörük, 2016). More recent studies conceptualize the hybrid public sphere as a platform-mediated environment characterized by algorithmic governance, digital participation, emotional communication, and the integration of online and offline communication processes (Mattila & Nummi, 2022; Nieminen, 2024; Patberg, 2025; Salte, 2022; Staab & Thiel, 2022).

The findings also indicate that Habermasian theory remains one of the dominant theoretical frameworks in studies of digital public communication. Many reviewed studies explicitly apply concepts such as the public sphere, communicative action, deliberative democracy, communicative rationality, discourse ethics, and the structural transformation of the public sphere to examine social media communication, journalism, political discourse, online participation, and civic engagement (Fuchs, 2014; Mattila & Nummi, 2022; Splendore et al., 2024; Vatikiotis & Yörük, 2016; Verovšek & Gorišek, 2023). Several studies also extend Habermasian perspectives by incorporating theories of network society, platform society, political economy, affective publics, and cultural public spheres to explain contemporary digitally mediated communication environments (Nosthoff & Maschewski, 2024; Seignani, 2022; Staab & Thiel, 2022). These studies collectively suggest that Habermasian theory continues to provide an important normative foundation for evaluating democratic communication in digital societies.

Across the reviewed studies, hybrid public spheres are associated with both democratic opportunities and structural challenges. On the one hand, digital communication technologies facilitate broader civic participation, digital activism, citizen journalism, participatory governance, and alternative forms of public engagement (Fuchs, 2014; Susin & Ordonez-Ponce, 2023; Vatikiotis & Yörük, 2016). Social media platforms also enable more direct interaction between citizens, activists, governments, journalists, and political actors within digitally networked communication environments (Nugroho, 2026; Salte, 2022; Verovšek & Gorišek, 2023). On the other hand, the reviewed studies consistently identify major challenges related to misinformation, political polarization, algorithmic filtering, commercialization of communication, surveillance capitalism, declining trust in journalism, and fragmented public discourse (Nieminen, 2024; Peterson, 2022; Shearmur, 2023; Way, 2021). Several studies further highlight the growing influence of platform infrastructures and algorithmic systems in shaping communicative visibility and public participation (Nosthoff & Maschewski, 2024; Staab & Thiel, 2022).

The reviewed literature additionally identifies several important future research directions. Many scholars emphasize the need for further studies on platform governance, algorithmic transparency, digital literacy, democratic regulation of social media, and the long-term implications of platformized communication for democratic participation and public deliberation (McCarthy et al., 2023; Patberg, 2025). Other studies encourage deeper exploration of affective communication, influencer politics, online–offline participation dynamics, and digitally mediated activism across different political and cultural contexts (Salte, 2022; Susin & Ordonez-Ponce, 2023; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). Overall, the findings indicate that hybrid public sphere research is increasingly interdisciplinary and focused on understanding the complex relationships among democracy, digital communication, and platformized media environments.

## **Discussion**

### **Supporting Habermasian Ideals**

A substantial body of the reviewed literature supports the continuing relevance of Habermasian deliberative ideals in contemporary hybrid public spheres. These studies generally argue that digital communication technologies, despite their limitations, continue to provide important opportunities for public participation, deliberation, and democratic engagement. Rather than viewing digital platforms solely as sources of fragmentation or manipulation, these scholars emphasize their capacity to facilitate communicative interaction among citizens, institutions, and civil society actors. Across different contexts, digital platforms are portrayed as communicative infrastructures that expand access to public discourse, strengthen civic engagement, and support the formation of public opinion through networked participation.

Several studies demonstrate that hybrid public spheres can enhance democratic deliberation by connecting online communication with offline civic processes. Mattila and Nummi (2022), for example, show how social media function as deliberative infrastructures within participatory urban planning, enabling interaction between citizens and public institutions. Similarly, McCarthy et al. (2023) find that citizen engagement initiatives in digital governance can contribute to democratic legitimacy by fostering dialogue and collaborative decision-making. In the context of environmental activism, Susin and Ordonez-Ponce (2023) argue that social media expand communicative spaces by facilitating information exchange, civic mobilization, and public participation in sustainability-related debates. These findings suggest that digital platforms can support key Habermasian principles, including inclusiveness, participation, and communicative engagement.

Other studies emphasize the importance of information quality, expertise, and institutional trust as prerequisites for effective deliberation within hybrid communication environments. Splendore et al. (2024) argue that trust in journalism remains a fundamental condition for informed public reasoning and democratic communication, particularly in hybrid media systems where citizens rely on both traditional and digital information sources. Likewise, Verovšek and Gorišek (2023) highlight the continued importance of expert knowledge and credible communication during public crises, demonstrating that democratic legitimacy depends on the effective circulation of reliable information across digital and traditional media channels. Together, these studies reinforce Habermas's argument that public deliberation requires not only participation but also access to trustworthy information and communicative institutions capable of supporting rational-critical debate.

Despite differences in context and methodology, these studies converge in their assessment that the normative foundations of Habermasian theory remain highly relevant for evaluating democratic communication in digitally mediated societies. They collectively suggest that hybrid public spheres retain the potential to facilitate communicative action, public deliberation, and democratic participation when supported by inclusive communication structures, institutional accountability, and reliable information ecosystems. Consequently, rather than rendering Habermasian theory obsolete, digital communication technologies may create new opportunities for realizing deliberative democratic ideals within increasingly networked and hybridized public communication environments.

### **Critiquing Habermasian Assumptions**

While many studies continue to recognize the normative value of Habermasian theory, another significant stream of scholarship questions its capacity to fully explain the dynamics of contemporary hybrid public spheres. These studies argue that the assumptions underlying Habermasian deliberative democracy—particularly rational-critical debate, consensus-oriented communication, and equal participation—are increasingly challenged by the realities of platformized and digitally mediated communication environments. Rather than functioning as spaces of rational deliberation, contemporary public spheres are often characterized by emotional expression, identity-based communication, algorithmic filtering, and fragmented patterns of participation.

A recurring critique concerns Habermas's emphasis on communicative rationality as the dominant mode of democratic engagement. Several studies argue that contemporary digital communication is increasingly shaped by affective and emotional interactions that cannot be adequately explained through deliberative models alone. Wahl-Jorgensen (2019) contends that public participation frequently emerges through personal experiences, emotional storytelling, and affective expression rather than through rational argumentation. Similarly, Way (2021) demonstrates that meme-based political communication relies heavily on symbolism, humor, emotional identification, and viral dissemination, often bypassing traditional forms of deliberative reasoning. Salte (2022) further highlights how influencers mobilize public engagement through visual narratives, emotional appeals, and cultural expression, suggesting that affective communication has become a central component of contemporary public discourse.

Another line of criticism focuses on the fragmented nature of digital public communication. Korstenbroek (2022) argues that contemporary public spheres are increasingly shaped by affective publics, ideological polarization, and fragmented media ecologies, making consensus-oriented deliberation more difficult to achieve. Similarly, Peterson (2022) identifies homophily, echo chambers, and ideological segregation as structural barriers to meaningful democratic dialogue. Studies examining social media environments also emphasize how users tend to interact within ideologically aligned communities, reinforcing selective exposure and limiting opportunities for cross-cutting deliberation. These findings challenge Habermas's

assumption that public discourse naturally facilitates mutual understanding and consensus formation among diverse participants.

Furthermore, several studies highlight the influence of digital platforms and algorithmic systems in shaping communication processes. Research by Nelimarkka et al. (2019), Nieminen (2024), and Patberg (2025) suggests that algorithmic recommendation systems, platform architectures, and visibility mechanisms significantly affect how information is distributed, consumed, and debated within public communication environments. Under such conditions, public discourse is increasingly structured by technological infrastructures and commercial incentives rather than by the normative principles of open deliberation and communicative equality envisioned by Habermas. As a result, communication opportunities may become unevenly distributed, while public attention is frequently directed toward content optimized for engagement rather than democratic deliberation.

Taken together, these studies do not necessarily reject Habermasian theory as irrelevant. Rather, they reveal important limitations in applying classical deliberative assumptions to contemporary digital communication environments. The evidence suggests that hybrid public spheres operate through a complex interaction of rational, emotional, technological, and commercial forces that extend beyond the explanatory scope of traditional public sphere theory. Consequently, understanding contemporary public communication requires a more nuanced framework capable of incorporating affective publics, platform dynamics, algorithmic mediation, and fragmented patterns of participation alongside Habermasian concerns for democratic legitimacy and communicative rationality.

### **Alternative Frameworks**

Beyond supporting or critiquing Habermasian theory, a third stream of scholarship seeks to extend the analytical boundaries of hybrid public sphere research by incorporating alternative theoretical perspectives. These studies generally acknowledge the enduring relevance of Habermasian concepts such as public deliberation, communicative action, and democratic legitimacy, yet argue that contemporary communication environments require broader frameworks capable of addressing platformization, algorithmic governance, digital capitalism, networked participation, and affective communication. Rather than abandoning Habermasian theory, these approaches reinterpret and complement it to better explain the complexities of digitally mediated public communication.

One prominent alternative perspective emphasizes the role of digital capitalism and platform power in shaping contemporary public communication. Fuchs (2014) extends public sphere theory through a political economy approach, arguing that digital communication is simultaneously a space of democratic participation and a site of commodification, surveillance, and capitalist accumulation. Similarly, Staab and Thiel (2022) and Nosthoff and Maschewski (2024) build upon Habermas's concept of the structural transformation of the public sphere by demonstrating how platform infrastructures increasingly govern public communication through data extraction, behavioral monitoring, algorithmic visibility, and commercial optimization. These studies suggest that understanding contemporary public spheres requires attention not only to communicative interaction but also to the economic and technological structures that shape participation and public visibility.

A second group of studies incorporates network-oriented perspectives to explain the decentralized and interconnected nature of contemporary communication. Munteanu and Staiculescu (2015) conceptualize the public sphere as a networked and rhizomatic communication environment characterized by distributed participation, multiple publics, and decentralized information flows. Similarly, Nugroho (2026) combines Habermasian theory with Castells's network society framework to explain how digital connectivity transforms political participation and public opinion formation in emerging democracies. These approaches shift the analytical focus from consensus-oriented deliberation toward networked

interactions, communication flows, and the structural relationships among digital actors, platforms, and institutions.

Another important development involves the incorporation of counterpublic and affective public perspectives. Aiseng (2024) demonstrates how Black Twitter functions as a digital counterpublic that enables marginalized communities to challenge dominant narratives and construct alternative discursive spaces. Likewise, Abdulla (2023) highlights the emergence of an “eventful public sphere” in authoritarian contexts, where digital communication and offline mobilization interact to create temporary spaces of resistance and collective action. Meanwhile, scholars such as Korstenbroek (2022), Salte (2022), Wahl-Jorgensen (2019), and Way (2021) emphasize the growing significance of affective communication, emotional engagement, visual culture, and identity-based participation. These studies argue that contemporary public discourse is increasingly shaped by emotions, storytelling, symbolism, and cultural expression, expanding the understanding of democratic communication beyond purely rational-critical deliberation.

Taken together, these alternative frameworks reveal that hybrid public spheres operate through a complex interplay of communicative, technological, economic, cultural, and emotional dimensions. While Habermasian theory continues to provide valuable normative foundations for evaluating democratic communication, the reviewed literature demonstrates that contemporary public sphere research increasingly relies on complementary perspectives to explain phenomena such as platform governance, digital capitalism, networked communication, counterpublic formation, and affective participation. Consequently, the hybrid public sphere is best understood as a multidimensional communication environment in which deliberation coexists with platform power, algorithmic mediation, networked interactions, and emotionally driven forms of public engagement.

### **Critical Synthesis**

The synthesis of the reviewed studies reveals both significant convergences and divergences regarding the applicability of Habermasian theory in contemporary hybrid public spheres. Across the literature, there is broad agreement that digital communication technologies have fundamentally transformed the structure of public communication by integrating online and offline communicative spaces, expanding opportunities for participation, and enabling new forms of civic engagement. Regardless of their theoretical orientation, most studies recognize that public discourse increasingly occurs within interconnected communication environments where traditional media, digital platforms, institutional actors, and networked citizens interact simultaneously. This shared understanding reinforces the notion that contemporary public spheres are inherently hybrid, characterized by the continuous interaction between digital and non-digital modes of communication.

A second area of convergence concerns the continuing relevance of Habermasian concepts as normative benchmarks for evaluating democratic communication. Studies supporting deliberative democratic ideals emphasize the importance of communicative rationality, inclusiveness, participation, and public deliberation in fostering democratic legitimacy. Even studies that critically assess Habermasian assumptions generally acknowledge the value of these principles as standards against which the democratic quality of public communication can be evaluated. Consequently, the reviewed literature demonstrates that Habermasian theory continues to provide an important normative framework for assessing whether contemporary communication environments promote informed public debate, civic participation, and democratic accountability.

Despite these areas of agreement, substantial divergences emerge regarding the extent to which contemporary digital communication actually fulfills Habermasian deliberative ideals. One group of studies argues that digital platforms create unprecedented opportunities for participation, collective action, and public engagement by lowering barriers to communication

and expanding access to public discourse. From this perspective, hybrid public spheres represent an extension of democratic communication in which citizens are empowered to contribute more actively to public debates and decision-making processes. In contrast, another group of studies highlights how platform capitalism, algorithmic governance, misinformation, polarization, and communicative fragmentation undermine the conditions necessary for rational-critical deliberation. These studies contend that digital communication is increasingly shaped by commercial logics, algorithmic visibility mechanisms, and emotionally driven interactions that may privilege engagement and attention over deliberation and consensus-building.

The most significant theoretical divergence concerns the nature of communication itself. Habermasian perspectives traditionally prioritize rational-critical discourse as the foundation of democratic legitimacy, whereas alternative frameworks emphasize the importance of emotions, identities, networks, and platform infrastructures in shaping contemporary public life. Research on affective publics demonstrates that emotions, storytelling, and symbolic expression have become central mechanisms of public engagement, while studies informed by political economy and platform society theories highlight how communication is increasingly conditioned by technological infrastructures and market-driven governance structures. These findings suggest that public communication can no longer be understood solely through deliberative processes but must also account for the affective, technological, and economic dimensions of digital interaction.

Taken together, the reviewed literature suggests that the hybrid public sphere should be understood not as a replacement of the Habermasian public sphere but as its contemporary transformation. Rather than rendering Habermasian theory obsolete, the emergence of platformized and networked communication environments requires the reinterpretation and extension of its core concepts. The hybrid public sphere therefore represents a communicative environment in which deliberative processes coexist with algorithmic mediation, platform governance, affective communication, and fragmented publics. This synthesis indicates that the future development of public sphere theory lies not in choosing between Habermasian and alternative perspectives, but in integrating normative democratic principles with contemporary understandings of digital platforms, networked communication, and socio-technical power structures.

### **Proposed Conceptual Model of the Hybrid Public Sphere**

Based on the thematic synthesis of the 28 selected studies, this review proposes a conceptual model of the Hybrid Public Sphere that integrates the major dimensions identified across the literature. The model conceptualizes the hybrid public sphere as a dynamic communication environment in which democratic communication emerges through the interaction of institutional actors, digital platforms, algorithmic governance mechanisms, and networked publics. Unlike the traditional public sphere, which primarily emphasizes rational-critical deliberation within relatively stable communicative spaces, the hybrid public sphere is characterized by the continuous interplay between online and offline communication, platform-mediated interactions, and digitally networked forms of participation.

At the structural level, institutional actors—including governments, media organizations, civil society groups, experts, and other public institutions—remain important contributors to public discourse. However, their communicative influence is increasingly mediated by digital platforms that function as the primary infrastructures of contemporary public communication. Social media platforms, online news ecosystems, and digital communities facilitate information exchange, civic engagement, and public participation while simultaneously shaping communication flows through platform architectures and governance mechanisms. As highlighted by several studies in this review, platform infrastructures have become central actors in determining visibility, reach, and access to public discourse.

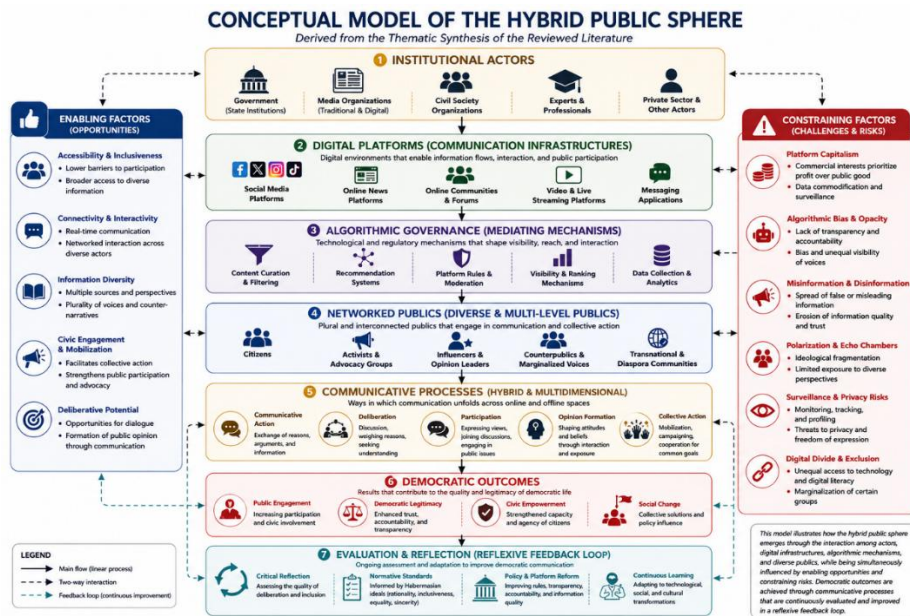
The model further identifies algorithmic governance as a critical mediating mechanism between communication infrastructures and public participation. Recommendation systems, content moderation policies, ranking algorithms, and data-driven personalization increasingly influence which information becomes visible, which voices gain prominence, and how public attention is distributed across communication networks. Consequently, public communication is no longer structured solely through human interaction and institutional mediation but is also shaped by algorithmic processes that influence the circulation of information and the formation of public opinion.

Within this environment, networked publics—including citizens, activists, influencers, advocacy groups, and counterpublics—engage in communicative processes that encompass deliberation, participation, opinion formation, collective action, and civic mobilization. Consistent with Habermasian theory, communicative action remains a central component of democratic communication. However, the reviewed literature suggests that communicative processes increasingly coexist with affective communication, symbolic interaction, identity-based engagement, and platform-driven forms of participation. As a result, democratic communication in hybrid public spheres is shaped by both rational deliberation and emotionally mediated interactions.

The model proposes that democratic outcomes emerge from the interaction between communicative opportunities and structural constraints. On the one hand, digital platforms create opportunities for broader participation, enhanced civic engagement, information accessibility, and collective action. On the other hand, platform capitalism, algorithmic governance, misinformation, polarization, surveillance practices, and communicative fragmentation may constrain democratic deliberation and reduce communicative inclusiveness. Democratic legitimacy therefore depends on the extent to which communication systems balance participatory opportunities with mechanisms that support transparency, accountability, information quality, and meaningful public dialogue.

This conceptual model extends Habermasian public sphere theory by situating communicative action and deliberative democracy within contemporary platformized, networked, and algorithmically mediated communication environments. Rather than viewing digital communication as either a democratic opportunity or a democratic threat, the model emphasizes the coexistence of both possibilities. The hybrid public sphere is therefore understood as a dynamic socio-technical communication ecosystem in which democratic communication is continuously negotiated among institutional actors, digital infrastructures, algorithmic systems, and networked citizens.

Figure 2 illustrates the proposed conceptual model of the Hybrid Public Sphere derived from the thematic synthesis of the reviewed literature. The model demonstrates how democratic communication emerges through the interaction of institutional actors, digital platforms, algorithmic governance mechanisms, and networked publics, while simultaneously being shaped by both participatory opportunities and structural constraints.



**Figure 3. Proposed Conceptual Model of the Hybrid Public Sphere from a Habermasian Perspective**

Source: Developed by the authors based on the thematic synthesis of the 28 reviewed articles (2026)

Figure 3 provides a visual synthesis of the principal themes identified across the reviewed studies and highlights the interconnected nature of contemporary public communication. The model illustrates that the hybrid public sphere cannot be understood through a single theoretical lens but rather emerges from the interaction of communicative, technological, institutional, and socio-political dimensions. This finding reflects the broader trend within the literature toward integrating deliberative democratic perspectives with contemporary concerns regarding platform governance, algorithmic mediation, and networked participation.

The proposed model also helps reconcile the theoretical tensions identified in the preceding analysis. While some studies emphasize the democratic potential of digital communication through enhanced participation and deliberation, others draw attention to the risks posed by platform power, misinformation, polarization, and communicative fragmentation. Rather than treating these perspectives as mutually exclusive, the model suggests that both opportunities and constraints coexist within hybrid communication environments and jointly shape democratic outcomes.

From a theoretical perspective, the model contributes to the development of hybrid public sphere research by positioning Habermasian concepts as normative foundations while incorporating contemporary insights from platform society, network society, counterpublic, and affective public perspectives. Consequently, the model offers an integrative framework for understanding how democratic communication is negotiated and transformed within increasingly complex and platformized communication ecosystems.

## CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review demonstrates that the public sphere has undergone a significant transformation in the digital era, evolving into a hybrid, platformized, and networked communication environment where public discourse emerges through the interaction of digital platforms, algorithmic systems, institutional actors, and networked publics. The findings confirm the continuing relevance of Habermasian concepts—including the public sphere, communicative action, and deliberative democracy—as normative foundations for evaluating democratic communication, while also revealing the need to extend

these concepts to account for platform governance, algorithmic mediation, affective communication, and fragmented publics. By synthesizing 28 studies, this review contributes to Habermasian scholarship through the development of a conceptual model of the Hybrid Public Sphere that integrates deliberative democratic principles with contemporary perspectives on digital platforms, networked participation, and socio-technical power structures. The findings further suggest that hybrid public spheres simultaneously create opportunities for civic participation, public engagement, and democratic inclusion while generating challenges related to misinformation, polarization, surveillance, and communicative fragmentation. These insights carry practical implications for digital platform governance, democratic communication policy, and civic digital literacy initiatives aimed at promoting transparency, information quality, inclusiveness, and meaningful public deliberation within digitally mediated environments. Nevertheless, this review is limited to English-language publications indexed in the Scopus database and focuses primarily on conceptual and theoretical discussions rather than comparative empirical analyses. Future research should therefore examine hybrid public spheres across different political, cultural, and technological contexts, explore the democratic implications of emerging technologies and algorithmic governance systems, and investigate how evolving forms of digital participation, affective communication, and platform regulation shape democratic communication in contemporary societies.

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