

Communication in the Age of Artificial Intelligence: Power, Meaning, and Control

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ABSTRACT

The rapid integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into communication systems has fundamentally transformed how messages are produced, distributed, and interpreted. AI-mediated communication no longer operates as a neutral technological intermediary but functions as a structural force that reshapes power relations, meaning-making processes, and mechanisms of control. This study aims to critically examine communication in the age of artificial intelligence by focusing on the interrelated dimensions of power, meaning, and control. Employing a qualitative approach with a critical-conceptual research design, the study analyzes theoretical literature from communication studies, critical media theory, and AI studies, alongside policy and ethical documents related to algorithmic governance. The findings indicate that AI algorithms operate as infrastructural actors that regulate visibility, legitimize certain discourses, and marginalize others through automated curation, recommendation, and moderation systems. Furthermore, the production of meaning becomes increasingly aligned with algorithmic logics of optimization and performance metrics, leading to potential homogenization and instrumentalization of communication. At the same time, AI-enabled surveillance and behavioral normalization introduce subtle forms of discipline that shape communicative practices. Although spaces of resistance and negotiation persist, they remain asymmetrical and structurally constrained. This study concludes that communication in the AI era must be understood as a contested arena of power rather than a purely technical domain, highlighting the urgent need for critical frameworks and democratic governance to preserve communicative autonomy and pluralism.

Keywords: *artificial intelligence; communication; control; meaning; power.*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid diffusion of artificial intelligence (AI) has fundamentally transformed contemporary communication systems, reshaping how messages are produced, circulated, and interpreted. Communication processes that were once predominantly intersubjective are now increasingly mediated by



algorithmic infrastructures that automate selection, prioritization, and interpretation of information (De Zúñiga, Goyanes, & Durotoye, 2023; Hohenstein et al., 2021). AI-driven systems such as recommender algorithms, automated moderation tools, and generative language models no longer operate merely as neutral intermediaries but actively participate in structuring communicative realities. In this context, AI functions as a non-human actor that intervenes in symbolic exchanges, influencing not only what is communicated but also how communication is made visible, legitimate, and meaningful. As noted in a study on political publicity during the 2024 election, Instagram has become a strategic space for political actors to construct personal branding and directly engage voters through visual narratives and interactive communication (Muldani, 2022)

From a critical communication perspective, this transformation cannot be understood solely as technological innovation. Rather, AI reconfigures communication as a site of power, where control over algorithms translates into control over visibility, attention, and discourse formation (Asif & Zhou, 2024). Algorithmic systems determine which messages are amplified, marginalized, or silenced through opaque processes of ranking, recommendation, and moderation. As a result, communicative power increasingly shifts away from individual communicators toward platform owners, system designers, and corporate or state actors who govern algorithmic architectures. This shift raises fundamental concerns regarding asymmetries of power, as communicative agency becomes structurally conditioned by proprietary systems that operate beyond public scrutiny (Huang, 2025).

Simultaneously, AI-mediated communication introduces profound challenges to meaning-making processes. Meaning is no longer generated primarily through dialogical interaction but is increasingly shaped by data-driven optimization logics aimed at maximizing engagement, efficiency, and predictability. Communication becomes quantified through metrics such as clicks, shares, and engagement rates, which function as proxies for relevance and value (Hohenstein et al., 2021). This metricization risks reducing communicative meaning to performance indicators, thereby privileging content that aligns with algorithmic optimization over communicative depth, plurality, and critical reflection. Consequently, algorithmic mediation may foster homogenization of discourse, amplification of dominant narratives, and erosion of interpretive diversity within the public sphere.

Despite the growing body of literature on AI and communication, existing studies remain heavily oriented toward technical efficiency, system performance, and functional innovation. Asif and Zhou (2024) provide a comprehensive review of AI applications in communication research but largely emphasize methodological advancements rather than power relations. De Zúñiga et al. (2023), in "A Scholarly Definition of Artificial Intelligence (AI): Advancing AI as a Conceptual Framework in Communication Research," clarify conceptual boundaries of AI but do not sufficiently interrogate its ideological

implications. Meanwhile, Hohenstein et al. (2021) demonstrate how AI alters language use and social relationships, yet stop short of framing these changes within broader structures of domination and control. The research gap lies in the absence of a critical–conceptual synthesis that explicitly examines AI-mediated communication as a power-laden system shaping meaning production and information control, rather than as a neutral technological evolution.

This study addresses that gap by positioning AI-based communication within a critical framework that foregrounds power, meaning, and control as interrelated dimensions. By conceptualizing algorithms as structural forces rather than mere tools, the study seeks to interrogate how AI restructures communicative autonomy, redistributes symbolic power, and redefines the conditions under which meaning is produced and contested. Such an approach is essential for understanding the societal and ideological consequences of communication in the age of artificial intelligence.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research design with a critical–conceptual approach, aimed at analyzing communication in the age of artificial intelligence as a socio-technical and ideological phenomenon. Qualitative inquiry is appropriate for this research because it enables in-depth engagement with abstract concepts such as power, meaning, and control, which cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurement alone (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The primary data source consists of theoretical literature and conceptual texts drawn from critical communication studies, media studies, AI studies, and political economy of communication. These include peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and authoritative policy documents addressing AI governance, algorithmic ethics, and digital communication systems. Library research was conducted systematically to ensure conceptual coherence and theoretical rigor.

Data analysis was conducted through conceptual analysis and critical interpretation. Conceptual analysis was used to identify foundational assumptions underlying AI-mediated communication, while critical analysis examined how these assumptions relate to power structures, ideological control, and communicative asymmetries. The study employed theoretical synthesis to integrate insights from critical theory and communication scholarship into a coherent analytical framework. Analytical validity was ensured through logical consistency, transparency of sources, and alignment between research objectives, method, and theoretical positioning (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Artificial Intelligence as a Structural Form of Power in Contemporary Communication Systems

In the age of artificial intelligence, communication can no longer be understood merely as an exchange of messages between human subjects. AI

increasingly operates as a structural form of power that shapes the conditions under which communication becomes possible, visible, and legitimate. Algorithmic systems embedded in digital platforms determine what information circulates, whose voices are amplified, and which perspectives are marginalized. This transformation aligns with critical communication theory, which conceptualizes power not only as coercion but as the capacity to structure fields of action and meaning (Hohenstein et al., 2021). In this sense, AI functions as an infrastructural actor that governs communicative possibilities before any conscious human interaction takes place. Research on Facebook-based political publicity highlights that “Facebook functions not only as a medium of information dissemination but also as a tool for political image construction and voter mobilization through algorithm-driven engagement (Muldani et al., 2023).

Algorithmic power is exercised primarily through mechanisms of selection, ranking, and automation. Recommendation systems curate content streams based on predictive models that optimize engagement rather than deliberative value. As a result, communicative visibility becomes contingent on alignment with algorithmic criteria that are opaque and externally imposed (Asif & Zhou, 2024). This dynamic shifts communicative authority away from individual actors toward system designers, platform owners, and data controllers who encode values and priorities into algorithmic architectures. Such a shift reflects what Huang (2025) identifies as a redistribution of discourse power in the AI era, where control over communicative infrastructure translates directly into symbolic dominance.

From a political economy perspective, AI-mediated communication also reinforces structural asymmetries between users and institutions. Users participate in communicative ecosystems without meaningful access to the logic governing algorithmic decision-making, while corporate and state actors retain exclusive control over system design and data flows. This asymmetry undermines the normative ideal of the public sphere as a space of equal participation, replacing it with a stratified communicative order shaped by proprietary algorithms (De Zúñiga et al., 2023). Consequently, communication becomes less a matter of dialogical exchange and more a process of managed exposure and behavioral steering.

Importantly, algorithmic power operates largely without explicit coercion. Unlike traditional forms of censorship or propaganda, AI-based control functions subtly through personalization and automation, normalizing certain communicative behaviors while rendering others invisible. Hohenstein et al. (2021) argue that AI reshapes language practices by privileging efficiency, predictability, and emotional resonance over reflexivity and critical engagement. This normalization process embeds power within everyday communicative routines, making it less visible and therefore more difficult to contest.

Taken together, these dynamics indicate that AI does not merely support communication but actively restructures it as a governed space, where power is exercised through code, data, and infrastructural design. Understanding AI as a structural form of power is therefore essential for any critical analysis of

contemporary communication systems, as it reveals how technological mediation redefines agency, participation, and communicative autonomy.

Algorithmic Mediation and the Transformation of Meaning Production in Digital Communication

Beyond restructuring power relations, artificial intelligence fundamentally alters the production and circulation of meaning in contemporary communication. In AI-mediated environments, meaning is increasingly shaped by algorithmic logics that prioritize optimization, prediction, and quantification. Communication is evaluated not primarily by its semantic richness or deliberative quality, but by its measurable performance within data-driven systems, such as engagement rates, click-through metrics, and user retention indicators (Hohenstein et al., 2021). This shift marks a structural transformation in how meaning is constructed and valued.

Algorithmic mediation standardizes communicative expression by favoring content that conforms to recognizable patterns. Asif and Zhou (2024) note that AI systems rely on historical data to predict relevance, which can lead to recursive amplification of dominant narratives while suppressing novelty and dissent. Meaning production thus becomes increasingly path-dependent, constrained by past data rather than open-ended interpretation. This process risks homogenizing discourse and reducing the plurality of meanings that characterize democratic communication.

At the same time, algorithmic systems introduce a form of instrumental rationality into communication. Messages are optimized for visibility and engagement rather than understanding or truthfulness. De Zúñiga et al. (2023) argue that this optimization logic reshapes communication into a strategic activity oriented toward algorithmic recognition. As a consequence, communicative meaning is reframed as a function of system performance, leading to what can be described as the economization of meaning. This transformation raises critical concerns about the erosion of interpretive depth and the marginalization of communicative practices that resist quantification.

However, algorithmic mediation does not eliminate human meaning-making altogether. Instead, it reconfigures the conditions under which meaning emerges. Users still interpret messages subjectively, but their interpretive horizon is increasingly pre-structured by algorithmic curation. Huang (2025) emphasizes that discourse power in the AI era lies in shaping interpretive contexts rather than controlling individual interpretations directly. Meaning is thus produced within constrained communicative environments where certain interpretations are more likely to emerge than others.

To clarify this transformation, Table 1 contrasts key dimensions of meaning production in human-mediated and AI-mediated communication systems.

Table 1. Transformation of Meaning Production in AI-Mediated Communication

Dimension		Human-Mediated Communication	AI-Mediated Communication
Basis of Meaning	of	Intersubjective interpretation	Data-driven optimization
Logic of Relevance	of	Contextual and dialogical	Predictive and algorithmic
Criteria of Value		Understanding and deliberation	Engagement and metrics
Diversity of Meaning	of	Plural and interpretive	Standardized and patterned
Control over Meaning	over	Distributed among participants	Centralized within algorithmic systems

The table illustrates that AI-mediated communication does not merely add a technological layer to existing practices but transforms the epistemic foundations of meaning itself. Meaning becomes increasingly system-oriented rather than dialogically negotiated, raising normative concerns about the future of communicative freedom and interpretive autonomy.

In this light, the transformation of meaning production under algorithmic mediation must be understood as a critical issue for communication theory. It challenges foundational assumptions about agency, interpretation, and the role of communication in democratic life, underscoring the need for critical frameworks capable of interrogating AI not only as technology, but as a structuring force in symbolic life.

Algorithmic Control, Digital Discipline, and the Possibility of Resistance in AI-Mediated Communication

Artificial intelligence does not merely reorganize power and meaning in communication; it also institutionalizes mechanisms of control and discipline that shape communicative behavior at both individual and collective levels. In AI-mediated communication systems, control operates through continuous monitoring, automated moderation, behavioral nudging, and predictive governance. Unlike overt forms of censorship, algorithmic control is embedded within routine communicative practices, making it appear neutral, technical, and inevitable (Hohenstein et al., 2021).

Algorithmic control functions primarily through surveillance-based normalization. Communication platforms collect extensive behavioral data – such as interaction patterns, emotional reactions, and temporal engagement – which are then used to model and anticipate user behavior. These models do not simply describe communication; they actively intervene by rewarding conformity to platform norms and penalizing deviation through reduced

visibility or algorithmic suppression (Ortega-Bolaños et al., 2024). As a result, users internalize platform logics and adjust their communicative behavior preemptively, producing what can be understood as a form of digital self-discipline.

This dynamic aligns with critical theories of power that conceptualize control as productive rather than repressive. AI-based moderation and recommendation systems do not silence users outright; instead, they subtly shape what is considered communicatively appropriate, effective, or desirable. Huang (2025) argues that discourse power in the AI era operates by defining the boundaries of acceptable communication, thereby disciplining expression without explicit coercion. Control is thus exercised through the structuring of communicative environments rather than direct intervention in individual speech acts.

However, algorithmic control is neither total nor uncontested. Spaces of resistance and negotiation persist within AI-mediated communication systems. Users engage in tactics such as platform literacy, algorithmic gaming, counter-discursive practices, and collective critique to challenge or circumvent algorithmic constraints. De Zúñiga et al. (2023) emphasize that communicative agency, while constrained, is not eliminated; it is reconfigured within algorithmically governed contexts. Resistance emerges not outside AI systems, but through critical engagement with their logics and limitations.

Nevertheless, such resistance remains asymmetrical. The capacity to meaningfully contest algorithmic control depends on access to technical knowledge, institutional power, and alternative communicative infrastructures. Without transparency, accountability, and democratic oversight, resistance risks being fragmented and ineffective. Therefore, the question is not whether AI allows resistance, but under what structural conditions resistance can become politically and communicatively consequential. This highlights the necessity of embedding critical reflection and governance mechanisms into AI-mediated communication systems to prevent the consolidation of unaccountable communicative power.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that communication in the age of artificial intelligence cannot be understood as a neutral technological evolution. Rather, AI fundamentally reconfigures communication as an arena of power, meaning, and control. Algorithmic systems function as structural actors that shape communicative visibility, redefine authority, and reorganize the conditions under which meaning is produced and circulated. Communication thus becomes increasingly governed by computational logics that prioritize optimization, predictability, and efficiency over deliberation and interpretive plurality. The analysis reveals that power in AI-mediated communication is exercised infrastructurally through algorithms that structure access, relevance, and legitimacy. Meaning production is transformed as communicative value

becomes tied to metrics and system performance, risking the homogenization and instrumentalization of discourse. At the same time, mechanisms of algorithmic control normalize behavioral discipline through surveillance and automated governance, embedding power within everyday communicative practices.

Despite these constraints, communicative agency and resistance are not entirely extinguished. Users continue to negotiate, contest, and reinterpret AI-mediated communication, albeit within asymmetrical power relations. This underscores the need for a critical communication framework that treats AI not merely as a tool, but as a socio-technical structure embedded in ideological, economic, and political contexts.

Ultimately, safeguarding communicative autonomy in the age of AI requires more than technical optimization. It demands critical awareness, normative regulation, and democratic governance capable of addressing the structural power of algorithms. Without such interventions, communication risks becoming a managed system of control rather than a space of meaningful human interaction and collective understanding.

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