

Public Opinion Negotiations in a Digital Media Ecosystem: A Conceptual Framework

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Abstract

Digital media constitute a key space for the negotiation of public opinion. Despite long-standing research on public opinion climates on digital media, little theory exists that considers their emergence and discursive dynamics. In this article, we conceptualize public opinion negotiations in a digital media ecosystem as a discursive process aimed at delimiting the latitude of normatively acceptable opinions. Building upon theoretical work on predigital media, we distill five enduring aspects to characterize digitally mediated public opinion negotiations as (a) the public expression of (b) normative opinions upon public issues by (c) positioned speakers, resulting in (d) the public negotiation of acceptable stances (e) within digitally mediated public arenas governed by institutional and sociotechnical media logics. Discussing how digital media shape this discursive process, we propose a theory of public opinion negotiations in a digital media ecosystem, flagging operational implications for the empirical study of public opinion processes on digital media.

On November 15, 2023, 9:49, a relatively unknown X user posted an antisemitic comment. Initially receiving little response, things changed when the platform's owner Elon Musk retweeted the post, adding: "You have said the actual truth."¹ From then, views and engagements counted up rapidly. Less than an hour later, CNN journalist Jake Tapper called out Musk on X, accusing him of "pushing unvarnished anti-semitism."² Professional media sites picked up the incident, and before long, reactions were found on variegated news sites and social media platforms, overwhelmingly criticizing Musk. In the next morning, the business portal Forbes summed up the incident: "Elon Musk Condemned After Calling Antisemitic Post 'Actual Truth'."³

Digital media platforms constitute a key space for the negotiation of public opinion. Beyond enabling users to (in)form their opinions on current issues by accessing a wealth of views expressed by others, interactive digital platforms—notably,

social media, online sites and apps that permit diverse forms of user feedback and digitally mediated interaction—grant users ample opportunity to express their opinions, potentially influencing others. Identifying like-minded and competing voices, discerning consensual from contested opinions, and positioning themselves within the debate, users can both gauge current public opinion climates (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) and attempt to co-shape public opinion negotiations on digital media.

Critical as the public negotiation of opinions on digital media is for the study of public opinion, there is to date little theory that helps us conceptualize its dynamics within the context of contemporary digital media ecosystems. Despite extant scholarship in public opinion research on the role of digital media in shaping information flows and forming personal views, existing theory remains focused on those opinions held across the populace (Bastos, 2012; Glynn, Herbst, Lindemann, O'Keefe & Shapiro, 2016), with scant attention given to their public negotiation in digital discourse (Crespi, 1997). In political communication research, scholars have theorized numerous processes related to public participation and the formation of issue agendas and frames on digital media (Entman & Usher, 2018; Gilardi, Gessler, Kubli, & Müller,

¹ <https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1724908287471272299>. The preceding tweet has meanwhile been deleted.

² Tapper's reply contains a screenshot of the original interaction: <https://x.com/jaketapper/status/1724922127206273338>.

³ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/tylerroush/2023/11/16/elon-musk-condemned-after-calling-antisemitic-post-actual-truth/>.

2022) but shied away from addressing how these processes converge toward evolving public opinion negotiations in the digital media ecosystem.

In this article, we offer a conceptualization of public opinion negotiations on digital media as a discursive process. Through an ongoing process of public,⁴ digitally mediated discursive negotiation, participants collaboratively construct and continually evolve public opinion, understood in a normative sense (Glynn, 1997) as the pluralistic latitude of opinions widely recognized as acceptable within a given public (Sherif & Hovland, 1961). Our conceptualization illuminates how differentiated public opinion climates are constructed and perceived (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) across a variety of networked, often fragmented digital publics (Bruns, 2023). Focusing specifically on public exchanges across a variety of websites, mobile applications, networked and channel-based social media platforms (Carr & Hayes, 2015), we understand digital media ecosystems as massively multi-vocal, interactive, networked communication spaces that cannot be limited to any one platform or digital technology (Hasebrink, Merten, & Behre, 2023). Enabling the conceptually grounded study of public opinion negotiations based on the analysis of digital media contents, our framework offers new avenues for studying dynamic public opinion, such as the emergence and erosion of public consensus, the expansion or narrowing of latitudes of acceptance (“opinion corridors”), as well as the (de)fragmentation and (de)polarization of political public debates.

For our conceptualization, we begin by inspecting existing theoretical approaches to studying public opinion processes as discursive negotiation, most of which predate not only digital media but also the rise of survey-based public opinion research. From that literature, we distill five enduring properties of discursive public opinion negotiations, which rest upon (a) the public expression of (b) normative opinions about public issues by (c) positioned speakers, resulting in (d) the public negotiation of acceptable stances (e) within public arenas governed by institutional and sociotechnical media logics. We develop our argument by examining these properties against the backdrop of contemporary digital media environments. Assembling our theory of public opinion negotiations on digital media, we conclude by highlighting key implications for the empirical study of online opinion expression and public discourse.

Public Opinion Negotiation in Predigital Theory

Before the rise of survey-based public opinion research in the 1950s, it appeared self-evident to theorists that any understanding of public opinion would have to rest on those public discourses made available to the public via the mass media—at the time, the printed press (Lippmann, 1922; Tarde, 1898; Tönnies, 1922), and later, broadcast services. In this understanding, public opinion was composed of the informed opinions of elites, negotiated in public among a finite set of reputable voices (Blumer, 1948). In this process, opinions

that stood the test of public negotiation could be regarded as normatively superior: If not quite living up to Habermasian standards (1984), collaborative examination by the best minds, in light of available evidence, should produce reasonable, viable choices to guide the public in the exercise of its democratic powers⁵ (Lippmann, 1922; Tönnies, 1922).

While this elitist conceptualization of public opinion drew copious criticism in the following decades (e.g., Fraser, 1990), and was eventually retired,⁶ insights from this phase of theory building remain useful for conceptualizing public opinion negotiations on digital media. In this perspective, to count toward public opinion, opinions need to be expressed and made accessible to the public (Tarde, 1901; Tönnies, 1922). Silently holding an opinion, or reporting one to a pollster, does not yet constitute it as part of public opinion (Blumer, 1948). Expressed opinions must be subjected to collective evaluation: “public opinion is no mere aggregate of separate individual judgments, but an organization, a cooperative product of communication and reciprocal influence” (Cooley, 1911, p. 121). Public opinion arises as the *outcome* of public negotiations, wherein opinions may be discarded or undergo significant modification. Being publicly scrutinized, opinions are collectively validated against commonly recognized normative standards (Habermas, 1984). In consequence, public opinion as it emerges from public negotiation demands validity (Tönnies, 1922) in ways that individual expressions do not (Luhmann, 1996).

To do so, public discourse invites members of the public to “situate themselves ... in relation to already formulated opinions” (Bourdieu, 1973, p. 1304; *translation: Axtmann*): Participants may express their assent, challenge expressed opinions, or contribute their own views. Where disagreements arise, “conflict among group members stimulates discussion, and through it, opinion formation and change within the group” (Price, 1992, p. 197). Through interactive negotiation, some opinions emerge as widely accepted, while others remain contested or are rejected, incentivizing participants to update their views to gain acceptability or continue to challenge emerging consensus. Simultaneously, the discussion establishes pertinent grounds for endorsing or rejecting proposed views, re-negotiating the normative standards that govern public discourse (Boltanski & Thevenot, 2006; Taber & Lodge, 2006). As a consequence, public opinion is constantly evolving (Baumgartner, De Boef, & Boydston, 2008).

Importantly, interactions are riddled by pervasive power imbalances. Following Blumer, “differences in prestige, position, and influence that characterize groups and individuals in the functional organizations of a society are brought into play in the formation of public opinion” (1948, p. 545). Participants’ symbolic capital influences their chances of gaining access to and being heard within the public debate, and colors how their contributions will be received (Kuklinski & Hurley, 1996). Presented opinions are examined against available knowledge of their speakers, gauging their credibility, competence (Hovland, Janis & Kelly, 1953), power, and

⁴ Recognizing that accessibility and perceptions as public vary considerably across and even within digital platforms, we regard exchanges as public in relation to a given community to the extent that they are recognized and treated as such by its members: Also semi-public meso-spaces (Kligler-Vilenchik & Tenenboim, 2024) can become part of public opinion negotiations if their contents become available as part of wider public discourse (e.g., by cross-platform sharing), or if most members of a public have access (e.g., in neighborhood chat groups; Pasistelska et al., 2025).

⁵ Later iterations of scholarly work also considered demands or contestation by nonelite actors (e.g., activists), admitted to the debate by journalistic gatekeepers (Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, & Rucht, 2002).

⁶ The demise of discourse-based conceptualizations of public opinion was heralded by then-new survey methods enabling the study of opinions held across entire populations (Splichal, 1999). The ensuing paradigm shift toward personally held opinions excluded public discourse, conceptualized as external influence (Zaller, 1992), from being part of public opinion itself.

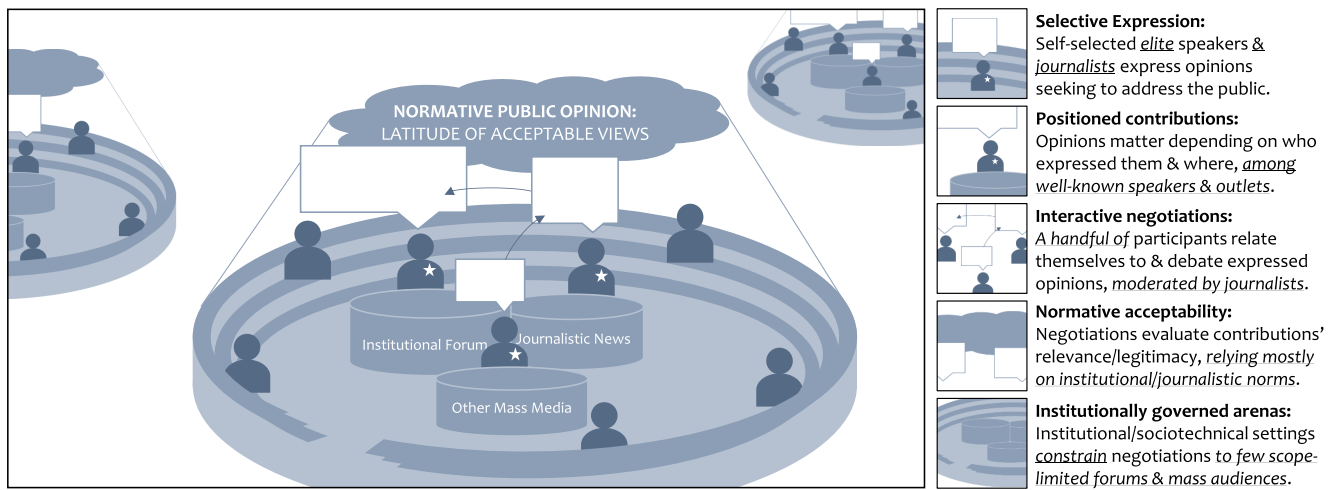


Figure 1. Public opinion negotiations in the predigital arena.

legitimation to speak in the name of others or institutions (Bourdieu, 1973) but also possible biases, hidden agendas, and other relevant information. Likewise, also responses expressing assent or contestation carry different weight and meaning. Consequently, public opinion emerges as weighted public agreement among “influential people” (Bourdieu, 1973), which deviates from those opinions held by the many, or those deprived of symbolic capital.⁷

Institutional and Technological Foundations of Public Opinion Negotiations

For public opinion negotiations to claim validity, they must be publicly visible and accessible, enabling potential challengers to express their objections (Fraser, 1990).⁸ Consequently, public opinion negotiations are closely tied to the (socio)technical and institutional mediation of public discourse, which governs their accessibility and visibility. In predigital times, journalists were *the* pivotal actors controlling public opinion negotiations, both as individuals and as an institution (Blumer, 1948; Habermas, 1984; Lippman, 1922; Tarde, 1898): As gatekeepers, journalists decided which (and whose) contributions were worthy of being publicized, soliciting additional voices, or representing views themselves (e.g., on behalf of “the people”; Clayman, 2002). Acting as a quality control filter (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013), journalists commented on speakers’ status and called out norm violations (e.g., falsehoods, bad faith arguments, inconsistencies; Schudson, 2008). Marking contributions as “attacks on” or “support for” known positions (Schreiber & Kampf, 2021), journalists synthesized ongoing negotiations, logging agreed-upon points and important challenges as they emerged. Despite their markedly diminished centrality in contemporary digital media ecosystems (Bruns, 2005; van Aelst, et al. 2017), journalists still control key sites within the much-expanded realm of digital discourse (Langer & Gruber, 2021), and the performance of

journalistic roles—though not necessarily by journalists—continues to shape the negotiation of public opinion.

Recognizing the enduring relevance of predigital theorizing for understanding public opinion negotiation in digital media ecosystems, we characterize public opinion negotiations as an interactive discursive process aimed at delimiting the societal acceptability of opinions. In this negotiation, members of the public self-select to publicly express their opinions (Kligler-Vilenchik & Literat, 2024; Tönnies, 1922) and situate themselves in relation to opinions expressed by others (Bourdieu, 1973; Springer, Engelmann, & Pfaffinger, 2015), registering assent or contestation. Participation in the public debate is governed by the institutional and (socio)technological constraints inherent to those media whereupon public discourse takes place (Lippman, 1922; Nielsen & Ganter, 2022). Normative public opinion arises from the discursive interactions among participants negotiating the acceptability of presented opinions, as well as their observable resonance among the wider public (Baden & David, 2018; Blumer, 1948).

Illustrating this model, Figure 1 identifies five tenets that require renewed consideration in the context of contemporary digital communication ecosystems. First, digital spaces have massively expanded the enfranchisement of nonelite actors in the negotiation of public opinion (Kligler-Vilenchik & Literat, 2024). Second, digital affordances have profoundly reshaped the public positioning of participants (Weizman, 2008). Third, the complexity of digital communications has thoroughly reorganized interactive discourse (Wright, Graham, & Jackson, 2016). Fourth, evaluative practices have been transformed on digital media (Scharlach & Hallinan, 2023). Finally, the platformization of digital communication arenas has eroded the central role of journalism in favor of new forms of sociotechnical governance (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Neuberger et al., 2023).

Public Opinion Negotiation on Digital Media

Digital media have brought about a far-reaching reorganization of visibility and interactivity, enabling virtually anyone to contribute to ongoing public debates (Neuberger, et al., 2023; Schulz & Roessler, 2012). Leveling most barriers that previously excluded participation, digital media have considerably expanded the inclusiveness of public opinion negotiations. While

⁷ Note though that digital communication ecosystems recognize a much-widened range of symbolic resources, enabling also populist and anti-elite voices and even pranksters to gain standing and resonance.

⁸ Predigital public discourse mostly struggled to enable inclusive participation (Ferree et al., 2002), while in digital media, observing emergent consensus constitutes the greater challenge (van Aelst et al., 2017).

elite speakers and those elevated by institutional logics (e.g., journalists, representatives; [Bruns, 2023](#); [Coleman, 2013](#)) continue to enjoy privileged roles, institutional actors' capacity to bar contributions that fall short of certain normative standards has been eroded ([Bruns, 2005](#); [Nielsen & Ganter, 2022](#)), resulting in the proliferation of rumor, mis- and disinformation ([van Aelst et al., 2017](#)), including inauthentic opinion expressions ([Quandt, 2018](#); [Zelenkauskaitė, 2022](#)). At the same time, participants in public discourse continue to express and interactively evaluate opinions amid a complex, algorithmically structured discursive process of public opinion negotiation.

Participatory Expression

As in legacy media, also public opinion negotiations on digital media begin with individuals' decision to express their views in digital spaces accessible to fellow members of a public, enabling others to take issue and respond ([Kligler-Vilenchik & Literat, 2024](#)). The exchange between an antisemitic X user, Musk, and Tapper cited at the beginning of this article illustrates this dynamic. Expression is largely self-directed and relatively unrestricted by (limited) content moderation. As digital media have leveled most barriers preventing speakers from expressing themselves in public, participatory expression is structurally pluralistic, potentially subjecting any publicly expressed opinion to controversial debate.

To participate, speakers need to determine what they wish to contribute, making their contribution relevant to ongoing debates (e.g., using keywords or hashtags; selecting suitable sites; replying to prior contributions; [Bruns & Burgess, 2011](#)). Presenting their opinions (and themselves) in deliberate ways, participants try to actualize an intended participatory effect but need to also anticipate others' capacity to challenge or recontextualize their contributions, eroding authors' control. Entering into potential interaction with other members of the public, speakers need to consider what contributions are worthwhile and safe enough, while managing their exposure to adverse reactions ([Velasquez & Rojas, 2017](#)).⁹ Owing to these demands, most opinions are never expressed in public ([Schulz & Roessler, 2012](#)), rendering the act of public expression a participatory performance sustained by civic-minded norms ([Kligler-Vilenchik & Literat, 2024](#); e.g., making one's opinions known; interceding when there is something "wrong" on the Internet; [Kligler-Vilenchik, 2022](#)).

Opinion expression may aim to verbalize inner states but often involves also performative aspects (from virtue signaling to provocation; [Danet, Ruedenberg-Wright, & Rosenbaum-Tamari, 1997](#)) and may occur in strategic and inauthentic ways ([Quandt, 2018](#)). As participants control when, where, and regarding what issues they express themselves, they can tailor their expression in the pursuit of certain impressions or effects (e.g., foregrounding aspects expected to resonate; signaling identities; [Kligler-Vilenchik & Literat, 2024](#); [Zelenkauskaitė, 2022](#)). Participants may try to increase their contributions' visibility by buying reach, gaming algorithms, rallying supporters, or enlisting bots to amplify their post ([Treré & Bonini, 2024](#)). Outside actors may enter debates, overtly or in disguise. Inversely, actors may seek to suppress competing opinions by discouraging their expression (e.g., projecting hostile opinion climates, cyberbullying) or delegitimizing them once expressed (e.g., using ridicule, rallying pushback;

[Ferree, 2004](#); [Yarchi, Baden, & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021](#)), reducing their visibility (e.g., outcrowding, downrating) or getting them removed (e.g., lobbying content moderators).

Given this intense struggle inherent to opinion expression on digital media, theorists have worried about possible chilling effects that discourage participants from contributing, especially to controversial debates ([Masullo, Chen, & Lu, 2017](#); [Rossini, 2020](#)). On social media, fragmentation, anonymity, and limited institutional governance facilitate uncivil and intolerant practices, potentially ceding these arenas to become dominated by the most committed, well-resourced, ruthless, and often extreme voices ([Quandt, 2018](#)). That said, some of the most prominent sites for opinion expression remain controlled by institutional actors, including journalistic media, and continue to afford superior opportunities for expression to speakers capable of presenting relevant credentials (e.g., democratic legitimacy, expertise). The co-presence of institutionally governed and largely unmoderated, self-organizing online spaces results in a highly differentiated field for the expression of opinions competing for public visibility, relevance, and acceptability.

Positioned Contributions

Similarly to the elite-dominated debates on legacy media, also in inclusive digital media ecosystems, negotiations remain intensely structured by speakers' differential power, standing, and public image. In our example quoted at the beginning, few responses addressed the original post, while almost all condemnation focused on Elon Musk, often discussing his views in relation to platform policy on X: Users regarded it as sadly unsurprising that someone posted antisemitic content but responded with outrage when one of the world's richest men, owner of a major social media platform, endorsed such positions ([Kuklinski & Hurley, 1996](#)).

Of course, also unfamiliar users' comments are immediately contextualized. Speakers actively position themselves, stating their credentials (e.g., "My wife is Jewish, and..."; "As a doctor, ...") or otherwise inform readers of their subject position (e.g., via their user profile: "independent thinker"; "ex special forces"; [Georgalou, 2017](#); [Weizman, 2008](#)). Others also participate in negotiating a speaker's positioning, pointing out available, inferred or conjectured information, typically attacking alters' standing ([Badarneh & Migdadi, 2018](#)), or less commonly, to elevate it (e.g., pointing out their expertise, integrity, or capacity to speak for some group; [Kligler-Vilenchik, 2022](#)). Likewise, noting speakers for making "unlikely" contributions may serve to elevate them (e.g., a doctor advising against vaccination), while casting opinions as expectable given a participant's positioning typically diminishes their significance. More radically, speakers can be positioned as illegitimate claimants by accusing them of being unqualified (e.g., dumb, brainwashed; [Badarneh & Migdadi, 2018](#)), insincere (e.g., lying, troll; [Baden & Stalpouskaya, 2020](#)), or nonmembers of the public (e.g., foreigners, bots; [Zelenkauskaitė, 2022](#); [Zelenkauskaitė & Niezgodą, 2017](#)). Importantly, positioning relies on *attributed* motives, symbolic capital, and standing, such that also sincere, informed, balanced, and legitimate contributions may be positioned as inauthentic, baseless, biased, or otherwise illegitimate, and vice versa.

Positioning is not only limited to the speaker but also includes channel and platform features ([Baden & Stalpouskaya, 2020](#); [Hovland et al., 1953](#)). Participants may

⁹ For example, by not staying around for sustained interactions ([Springer et al., 2015](#)).

recognize reputable sites controlled by institutional quality assurances (e.g., scientific or journalistic outlets) and discount known rumor mills, or they may attribute weight to channels following less dependable heuristics (e.g., ideological alignment, (para-)social ties; [Pasitselska, 2022](#)). Generally, known speakers and outlets carry more authority, but also more baggage, than unknown ones, and are less free in how they position themselves (or are positioned) within the debate.

Interactive Negotiation

Even more than in legacy media, public opinion negotiations in the cacophony of digital media do not necessarily respond to every posted contribution but focus on what is left standing after everyone had their say. In our illustrative exchange, the fact that Musk, an extremely influential entrepreneur, reposted an antisemitic post hardly indicates that such opinions are publicly acceptable: widespread condemnation marked it as far beyond the pale.

Compared with predigital media, available repertoires of responses to controversial contributions have expanded considerably, relying on digital platforms' distinctive (socio-)technological affordances. While participants continue to expressly applaud or criticize others' contributions, evaluate them indirectly by echoing similar ideas or presenting opposing claims, digital media offer variegated new, mostly non-verbal means—most prominently, “liking”—for evaluating contributions ([Scharlach & Hallinan, 2023](#)). Importantly, on digital media, evaluative interactions with posted contents commonly amplify these contents, either overtly (e.g., sharing, upvoting) or implicitly (e.g., via algorithmic amplification). Even without approving commentary, as in Musk's case, sharing is normally¹⁰ interpreted as expressing agreement, re-broadcasting messages to followers and others if platform algorithms pick up the pattern. Expressing disapproval usually requires more effort: Users can add critical comments to reposts (as did Tapper); some platforms sport downvoting features or emotes to express negative sentiment ([Graham & Rodriguez, 2021](#)).¹¹ Depending on platform design and the form of contestation, expressed disagreement may diminish posts' visibility (notably, via downvoting, flagging; [Scharlach & Hallinan, 2023](#)) or amplify it (e.g., algorithms treating anger as engagement; [Rathje, Van Bavel, & van der Linden, 2021](#)).

A peculiar form of evaluation deeply engrained in digital communications is the use of memes ([Shifman, 2013](#)). Akin to predigital commentators expressing (dis)agreement by reusing quotes and phrases, memes distill core meanings from a widely recognized text or situation and render it available for reuse across diverse online debates. Many memes rely partly or fully on visual modality, inviting adaptation by editing captions or details, while their visual form encapsulates the reused evaluative statement ([Dean, 2019](#)). Memes either directly endorse or criticize specific opinions or perform meta-discursive functions (e.g., ridicule, denouncing hypocritical, or illogical contributions) that can be used to comment upon others' opinions. As memes mobilize users' culturally embedded understanding of referenced ideas and norms, popular

memes can convey a powerful sense of what opinions are deemed acceptable within a given public ([Shifman, 2013](#)).

Once again, not all responses matter equally but depend on what is known about their authors and their relation to the speaker. In our example, applause for Musk from known far-right voices might backfire, validating concerns about normalizing extremist voices. Respected and independent voices matter more than anonymous replies to negotiate a contribution's acceptability; support from political opponents counts more than loyal claqueurs, and opposition from one's ingroup hurts more than outsiders' predictable disagreement ([Rathje et al., 2021](#)). Evidence of coordinated responses (e.g., activist campaigns, bot activity; [Yarchi et al., 2021](#); [Zelenkauskaitė, 2022](#)) may diminish the impact of expressed support or criticism. Moreover, impressions depend on where responses are recorded (e.g., adjacent on the same platform or elsewhere; on Facebook or in an op-ed). Generally, effortful responses contribute more to establishing resonance than counts of likes/dislikes, demonstrating deeper engagement and more profound agreement or objection ([Valenzuela, 2013](#)).

Given the complexity of public discourse on digital media, perceptions of public opinion negotiations depend on how they are rendered visible to online publics. While journalists continue to play a role in this process—in our example, many learned about Musk's repost only from CNN or Forbes—digital media have extended discursive power to many new voices, including alternative media actors, experts, and activists ([Scott, Millard, & Leonard, 2015](#)). Complementing journalistic coverage with new formats (e.g., blogs, explainer videos, and Wikipedia entries), this heterogeneous field of observers has considerably expanded society's capacity to observe and process public opinion negotiations across diverse sites and publics ([Carpenter, 2010](#)). In the cacophony of online public discourse, what emerges as consensual or contested depends significantly on where one looks, resulting in pluralistic negotiations wherein different public opinions can coexist ([Moy & Hussain, 2013](#)).

Normative Acceptability

As in legacy media, also on digital media, public opinion negotiations reflect not what people believe but what is widely regarded as acceptable within a given digital public. In our example, negotiations focused neither on understanding the motives behind the original post nor were they concerned with the fact that many Americans harbor antisemitic beliefs; instead, users denounced Musk for trying to normalize a position conventionally regarded as unacceptable. Responses abound in normative vocabulary, invoking Nazi references and accusing Musk of fanning antisemitic violence.

In the collective effort to delineate what opinions are acceptable, one key evaluative dimension concerns opinions' foundation in fact and reason, as participants criticize opinions for relying on inaccurate or misleading arguments ([Kligler-Vilenchik, 2022](#)). Likewise, assessing expressed opinions' authenticity to expose noncredible declarations, fakes, and outside interference constitutes a common critique ([Zelenkauskaitė, 2022](#)). That said, participants can evaluate claims against virtually any social norm, from high-minded Kantian imperatives (is a stance generalizable? [Kant, 1996](#)), to moral norms (e.g., fairness, respect), to basic relevance (who cares? [Boltanski & Thevenot, 2006](#)).

¹⁰ Exceptions include shares that are read as informing or alerting others to important events (e.g., by journalists).

¹¹ Emotes are often polysemic: For instance, emoting 🙄 in response to a negative opinion statement may be read as agreement with its sentiment, or as anger directed toward the post.

Relevance negotiations stand at the beginning of many exchanges on digital media: Where contributions fail to resonate, they mostly affect public opinion by establishing public indifference. Contributions regarded as relevant accumulate responses, gaining visibility via shares and algorithmic amplification (Nielsen & Ganter, 2022). Accordingly, the making of issues—typically treated as separate in predigital theories (Lang & Lang, 1981)—is no longer fundamentally distinct from the negotiation of acceptable stances: Issues arise as, and because, participants in the digital debate (activists, political entrepreneurs, and journalists) advance claims that are widely regarded as relevant and worthy of evaluation (Langer & Gruber, 2021; Yang & Saffer, 2018). Depending on which norms are recognized as important, publics may find different contributions relevant and acceptable, such that an issue may be relevant to one online public but not another (Hasebrink et al., 2023). As public opinion negotiations require public interest, both relevance attributions and normative acceptability co-shape emerging latitudes of acceptable opinions (Sherif & Hovland, 1961).

Public opinion negotiations are inseparable from those social and discursive norms that govern what renders a contribution acceptable (Boltanski & Thevenot, 2006). Beyond expressing a stance, opinion statements commonly mark their normative foundations, as do both supportive and critical responses (Baden, Springer, Krämer, & Steindl, 2021):¹² In our example, Tapper's one-line response mobilizes norms regarding the rejection of antisemitism, public safety, and responsible political talk to criticize Musk. What norms can be mobilized to mark opinions as (un)acceptable is subject to ongoing re-negotiation, as each intervention (e.g., criticizing opinions for being misinformed) simultaneously demands the validity and primacy of mobilized norms (here: informedness) for evaluating public opinion. Accordingly, the selective mobilization and contestation of normative justifications constitute a key component of public opinion negotiation (Glynn, 1997; Tönnies, 1922). By rendering visible public support for and commitment to enforcing available norms, public opinion negotiations constantly update participants' understanding of what constitutes valid justifications, and what opinions can be voiced safely or run the risk of drawing contestation. As activists, political actors, and others continue to challenge prevalent norms and latitudes of acceptable opinions, the normative order of public opinion evolves, enabling novel claims to emerge as acceptable, while others cease to find public approval (Sherif & Hovland, 1961).

Context-Embedded Arenas

Compared with legacy media, digital public discourse is distributed over a much wider, heterogeneous range of sites and platforms, each of which provides participants with a distinctive set of governing rules and affordances that structure who can speak, on what, to whom, and so on. Case in point, Musk was free to endorse antisemitic content on his own platform, which elsewhere might have triggered automatic or community-based moderation; speaking at a conference two weeks later, he was required to apologize before being permitted to proceed.¹³

¹² Even the rejection of perceived-absurd stances (e.g., by emoting 🤔 or 🙄) usually alludes to its normative foundation (here: uninformedness, unsound reasoning; Baden et al., 2021). Only dismissal as irrelevant usually takes place by neglect, without marked justification.

While digital platforms have massively expanded the number, diversity, inclusiveness, and depth of sites available for public discourse, these sites continue to govern access, visibility, and opportunities for interactivity in complex ways (Nielsen & Ganter, 2022). Highly visible, public-facing sites—many controlled by media and other institutional actors—have been complemented by a near-infinite wealth of sites where publicly accessible¹⁴ discussions take place without necessarily being intended as participatory contributions to a wider public debate. Brought to the attention of wider audiences in a much more limited or selective fashion (e.g., by sharing/reposting; algorithmic propagation), such contributions nevertheless hold the potential to shape public opinion negotiations if regarded as relevant.

Chadwick (2017) describes the complex process of hybridization by which journalistic logics have been interwoven with digital media logics and have inversely infused key sites of digitally mediated discourse. Next to these, commercial logics, platform policies, and community practices co-shape who can speak on which platform (Nielsen & Ganter, 2022; e.g., U.S. president Trump was temporarily banned from Twitter; podcasts selectively invite speakers), what they can say there (e.g., content moderation, topical constraints, length/format restrictions, enabling responses), under what conditions (e.g., real-name requirements, editability), and how contributions can become amplified (e.g., editorial decisions, money, community responses, algorithmic amplification; Baden, Heft, Vaughan, & Pfetsch, 2024). Public awareness of sites' differential access regimes, policies, and community norms positions contributions, endowing journalistic contents or expert blogpost with symbolic capital that other contributions lack (Schulz & Roessler, 2012).

That said, the expansion of online public discourse has long shattered assumptions of *one* shared public sphere (Bruns, 2023; Schäfer, 2015). Unlike the coverage offered by predigital opinion-leading mass media, digital media sustain so many simultaneous negotiations that it is neither possible nor meaningful to follow everything. Digital public spheres are inherently plural, requiring users to select what negotiations to follow and which to ignore (Dahlgren, 2005).¹⁵ That said, some public spheres—notably, those tied to politics—continue to center upon a finite set of opinion-leading, journalistic, and political-institutional arenas that synthesize the wider diversity of debates on other platforms (Langer & Gruber, 2021). Even in highly fragmented or polarized media systems, most individuals share awareness of public opinion negotiations at the level of the “general” public (Barberá, Jost, Nagler, Tucker, & Bonneau, 2015) while primarily following distinct (e.g., ideological, identity-based; local; issue-focused; Dewey, 1927; Hasebrink et al., 2023) public spheres.¹⁶ Alternative publics deliberately differentiate themselves from mainstream publics, negotiating their own

¹³ <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/11/29/investing/elon-musk-dealbook-summit/index.html>.

¹⁴ To be considered, contributions must be accessible to large parts of a given public, and regarded by these as widely visible within that public; for some publics, also contributions on access-restricted platforms may satisfy this criterion (Kligler-Vilenchik & Tenenboim, 2024).

¹⁵ Also predigital public spheres were plural, but more confined in scope. Moreover, most theorizing focused on national political public spheres, which could with some plausibility be imagined as unitary (Habermas, 1984).

¹⁶ This raises the question to what extent platforms used by multiple communities, oriented toward different sites of public negotiation, constitute public spheres in a meaningful sense.

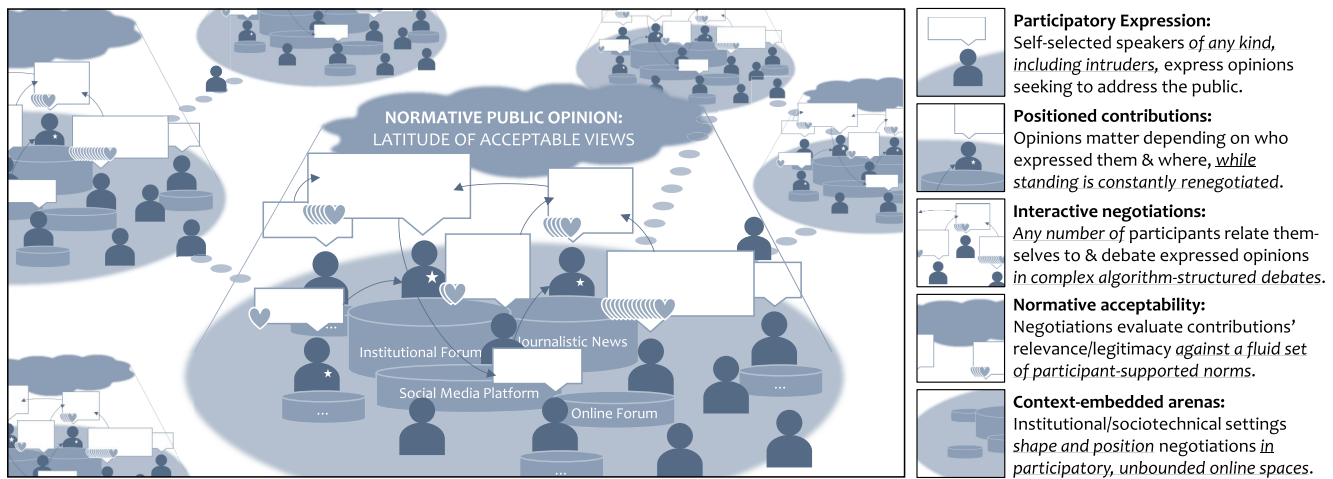


Figure 2. Public opinion negotiations in the digital communication ecosystem.

distinctive take (e.g., conspiracy theory communities, political counterpublics; Jackson & Kreiss, 2023) in implicit reference to “general” public opinion.

The ease with which actors and contents move across numerous sites of public discourse has profoundly eroded the boundaries demarcating distinct publics, and with these, imaginations of publics as exclusive, enduring communities (Hasebrink et al., 2023). Instead, digital public spheres are characterized by densely networked discursive sites: On the one hand, distinct publics regularly observe one another’s debates, pulling selected contributions into their own negotiations to re-evaluate them against their distinctive normative beliefs (Haller & Holt, 2019). On the other hand, individuals participate in multiple public spheres and can convey ideas between these, acting as bridges (Simon, Welbers, Kroon, & Trilling, 2023; Bruns, 2023). Accordingly, public opinion is negotiated both within and across a variety of wider and narrower digital publics, most of which remain sufficiently networked to respond to negotiations elsewhere if doing so appears relevant (Dahlgren, 2005)—potentially sustaining the negotiation of mutually acceptable opinions even within highly fragmented digital media ecosystems.

Public Opinion Negotiation as Discursive Process in a Digital Media Ecosystem

Built around the five enduring properties of public opinion negotiations derived from predigital theoretical work, our framework accounts for the important structural transformations that characterize opinion negotiations within contemporary hybrid media (Figure 2).

Reflecting the plurality of publics that co-exist within the digital media system, we understand a public as any imagined community of individuals that recognize one another as legitimate participants in a shared debate about issues of public concern (Anderson, 1983). For a public to debate its own public opinion, it must recognize some collection of sites as an arena wherein public discourse takes place among its members (Gerhards & Neidhardt, 1990). There, any member can seek to address the public and learn about other members’ responses to any contribution presented. Typically, sites are endowed with different weights and centralities within the community, as well as distinctive public identities

and governance structures that contribute to their positioning.

Publics are not neatly bounded as in predigital times but permit considerable mobility, share membership with other publics, and are in ongoing contact with one another. Even nonmembers may “walk in” and address the community, which may choose to regard their contribution as relevant to its discussions. Contributions made to one public’s digitally mediated opinion negotiations remain accessible also to other publics and may be subjected to negotiations also in other publics’ discourses (Hasebrink et al., 2023). In this sense, arenas of public discourse are constantly overlapping, and the only way to understand public opinion as negotiated within one public is to artificially isolate one arena and examine everything that is negotiated therein.

In contrast to predigital models of communication arenas (Gerhards & Neidhardt, 1990), digital arenas do not distinguish categorically between actors within and spectators outside the arena (Rosen, 2012). Subject to the governance of sites, individuals can choose from moment to moment whether to remain passive or to participate in the debate: In place of a classical amphitheater, digital arenas more resemble a public town square furnished with various, taller or lesser pedestals (sites of discourse) where people can step up to speak, listen in, and applaud or boo as they pass through. Participation is graded, from speakers who express original contributions (Springer et al., 2015), to those who re-share and re-affirm or memetically echo prior contributions (Shifman, 2013), to less elaborate forms of communicating (dis)agreement via prestructured features afforded by the digital platform (Scharlach & Hallinan, 2023).

As people step into the public arena to speak or otherwise express themselves, they enjoy varying degrees of recognition. Some are famous and immediately recognized and positioned, commanding attention. Others need to introduce themselves first, or risk that others publicly position them in ways that may be less flattering (Weizman, 2008). The more speakers draw attention to themselves, the more they invite others to examine their identity and position them accordingly. We may thus imagine a town square arena overlaid with a layer of augmented reality, whereupon speakers can be tagged with positioning information—accurate or not—that is available to onlookers.

Table 1. Implications of Studying Public Opinion Negotiations as a Discursive Process

Theoretical proposition	Mismatch with classic public opinion theories	Operational implication for studying public opinion as a discursive process
Participatory expression	Expressed opinions not representative of a public	Consider meaningful self-selection and structural absence of voices
Positioned contributions	Not all contributions matter the same	Contextualize/weight contributions against speaker roles and mobilized/attributed symbolic capital
Interactive negotiation	Many contributions require context to comprehend	Reconstruct interactive negotiations, public resonance, and evolving consensus
Normative acceptability	Nonvalid inference from expression to held beliefs	Focus on how opinions are justified/challenged, as well as resulting latitudes of normative order
Context-embedded arenas	Unbounded online spaces do not match publics	Recognize differentiated roles, positionings, and governance of digital sites of discourse

Within the arena, participants compete, vying for onlookers' attention and support (Gerhards & Neidhardt, 1990); yet, their competition is less akin to gladiators fighting to defeat one another but rather resembles a crowdfunding show or charity event, wherein multiple winners may find themselves supported at the same time. Still, participants can attack one another's projects, trying to persuade onlookers to de-fund unworthy endeavors. The show is interactive: Not only can anyone, including passers-by, register their support or opposition at any time; they can also chip in and directly contribute to a bid. What eventually wins the favor of the crowd is not the speaker, but the collaborative project that emerges from many contributions. Winning favor entails being able to continue with the public's support, whereas rejected bids are not necessarily terminated but have to make do without such resources and may face opposition when trying to re-enter the arena.

Taken together, our model of public opinion negotiations sketches a walk-in fair wherein more or less well-known norm entrepreneurs present their projects across various stages and stalls (including fanciful stages guarded by reputable gatekeepers, but also self-furnished, hastily assembled tables), trying to convince visitors to support their endeavor. While some projects find near-universal support and thrive, elsewhere supporters face hecklers, or people pass by without turning their head. All this, finally, happens within a digital panopticon, wherein any visitor can monitor the standing of different bids, observe ongoing controversies, or access and exchange background information or gossip about the people in the arena. What emerges from this scene is a plural landscape of opinions presented within the public debate: While some reside high atop unassailable thrones of popularity and general assent, others fend off detractors or cram the slopes, trying to establish themselves on higher ground of public support; still others are banished to the edges of the scene, bearing the marks of public rejection or neglect.

Implications for Studying Digitally Mediated Public Opinion Negotiations

Public opinion negotiations of the kind conceptualized above are ubiquitous on contemporary digital media, extending from sites affiliated with traditional institutional actors—political parties, journalistic media—all across variegated social media platforms, at times even involving semi-public digital spaces such as mailing lists, community forums, and WhatsApp groups

(Kligler-Vilenchik & Tenenboim, 2024). Capitalizing on the much-expanded scope and observability of public opinion negotiations due to the far-reaching penetration of digital media, communication scholars have not only begun to study many of the practices and processes discussed (e.g., claims making, self-presentation: Kligler-Vilenchik & Literat, 2024; Valenzuela, 2013; interactive normative negotiation: Baden et al., 2021; Springer et al., 2015), but also attempted to make digital media content data valuable to the study of public opinion as a whole. However, lacking a suitable theoretical understanding of public opinion negotiations *as a discursive process*, most have accessed digital discourse as another, textual manifestation of public opinion as it had been understood within a survey-based paradigm, a representation of opinions held across the members of a population (Murphy et al., 2014). Attempting to infer the distribution of opinions among a population from a census of messages posted on some platform (usually, Twitter/X; Yarchi et al., 2021), these efforts were not only largely unsuccessful; they also ran into numerous epistemological issues rooted in a mismatch between survey-based theories of public opinion (Jungherr, 2015) and the nature of public opinion negotiations on digital media, as we have laid out above. By applying a mismatched theoretical framework, such studies misconstrue online populations (which are no representative, let alone random sample, of any meaningfully defined public; Murphy et al., 2014), public opinion expression (which is different from reporting an opinion to a pollster; Kligler-Vilenchik & Literat, 2024), the aggregation mechanism (messages are common for reasons unrelated to how many people hold an opinion; Jungherr, 2015), and indeed, the content (which is more about normative acceptability than belief) and structure of the digital public sphere (which neither exhausts any platform nor is it limited to one; Schäfer, 2015).

To study public opinion negotiations on digital media in a theoretically grounded perspective, it is instrumental to adopt an approach that recognizes the discursive negotiations as foundationally participatory, positioned, interactive, normatively oriented, and governed by the sociotechnical structuring of digital platforms. While discussing the operational requirements for such an endeavor is beyond the scope of this theoretically focused paper (for a detailed discussion, see Baden et al., forthcoming), several key implications can already be identified, which are summarized in Table 1. Starting at the bottom, owing to the unboundedness, permeability and networkedness of digital publics, researchers need to artificially, conceptually delineate the public they wish to investigate, identify what discursive sites act as key venues for public opinion

negotiation, and position these to recognize their distinctive roles (Hasebrink et al., 2023). For instance, a study of political opinion negotiations at a national scale will likely depart from opinion-leading journalistic and political sites but also include key sites of extra-institutional contestation (e.g., activist discourses, salient counterpublics), which are normally well-indexed in the mainstream debate (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; for a study of opinions regarding antisemitism in the United States, relevant sites might include those associated with the pro-Gaza movement, but also key platforms or sites used by the alt-right). Within selected debates, next, the negotiated nature of digitally mediated public opinion requires appraising expressed views in light of their public resonance as relevant and acceptable. A key part of this analysis concerns the normative grounds on which proposed views are justified or challenged (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; e.g., what reasons are presented to legitimize generalized hostility toward Jews, how are such claims rebutted), and the normative structuring of evolving public opinion negotiations (e.g., tensions with social justice norms, ethnonationalist beliefs). To do so, analyses need to place contributions within the context of the interactive negotiation process, discerning what emerges as widely acceptable, contested, or rejected, and why—and also what parts of the public fail to fully recognize this consensus (Baden & David, 2018). Rather than classifying and counting expressed opinions, a more suitable approach is to recognize distinctive kinds of discursive interactions (e.g., activist demands met by institutional delegitimization, both eliciting differentiated public resonance; Ferree et al., 2002), as well as ongoing efforts at synthesizing and logging emerging consensus (e.g., policies adopted by social media platforms, colleges, and advocacy groups; Baumgartner et al., 2008). Such efforts benefit from recognizing the differentiated identities of participants in the public debate in terms of their (self-)attributed public standing and positioning, as well as their distinctive discursive roles (Weizman, 2008): Libertarian billionaires, left-wing college students, network journalists, and political office holders all participate in the debate wielding vastly different power and symbolic capital, and their statements are interpreted accordingly. Instead of misunderstanding opinion expression in digital discourse as evidence of opinions held among larger or smaller shares of the public, researchers need to keep in mind that much of the observable debate is conducted among a minority of invested voices (Jungherr, 2015), while most participants do little more than “like” or click away specific contributions. Still others choose not to express themselves on this matter altogether, while still identifying as part of the public and thus subject to its normative negotiations (Kligler-Vilenchik & Literat, 2024). Accordingly, any inferences drawn from discursive negotiations of acceptable opinions result not in statistical generalizations, but in the construction of pluralistic, differentiated latitudes of normative acceptability (Sherif & Hovland, 1961), delineating what can and cannot be safely expressed as part of an ever-evolving public opinion climate (for additional discussions, see Baden et al., forthcoming).

Conclusion

Within the field of public opinion research and theory, our theoretical framework positions the discursive process of public opinion negotiation as a distinctive achievement of normative public discourse (Blumer, 1948; Bourdieu, 1973; Glynn, 1997). While public opinion negotiations on digital media

shape and are continually shaped by public opinion as the distribution of personal views held among members of a public (Zaller, 1992), they cannot be reduced to another manifestation of the same phenomenon: Uneven participation rates and performative practices, hierarchically differentiated sites and positionings, as well as the path-dependent evolution of normatively structured negotiations all separate those opinions held from those expressed, and still others recognized as acceptable among a public (Baumgartner et al., 2008; Jungherr, 2015); inversely, people are quite capable of privately holding on to opinions also when they are regarded as controversial or publicly sanctioned (Schulz & Roessler, 2012). At the same time, public discourse is well-established also as a driver of opinion formation among members of the public (Bastos, 2012), just as noted shifts in the distribution of held opinions are likely to register also in public participation (e.g., via direct expression, organized activism, shifting electoral support for political elites). In fact, public opinion as it manifests itself via surveys is frequently represented as part of the public debate, enabling powerful discursive practices from populist demands to heed the will of “the people” (Pasitselska & Baden, 2020) and silence dissenters (Baden et al., 2024) to the scandalization of public support for normatively sanctioned views (Demirhan & Çakir-Demirhan, 2017). Within the context of public opinion research, public opinion negotiations on digital media most closely relate to what Noelle-Neumann (1974) called public opinion climates: By negotiating what opinions are widely acceptable, contested, or rejected, public discourses inform—and therefore should predict—people’s perceptions of what can and cannot be safely expressed in public (Soffer & Gordoni, 2020). Further research will need to refine and empirically validate our propositions, testing our operational recommendations (Baden et al., forthcoming). We hope that with our conceptualization, we have laid the foundations for a research agenda that takes public opinion negotiation on digital media seriously as a discursive process in its own right.

Funding

This article is based upon work from COST Action “What are Opinions? Integrating Theory and Methods for Automatically Analyzing Opinionated Communication” (OPINION), CA21129, www.opinion-network.eu, supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology).

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