The OPINION Manifesto

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This manifesto outlines the critical role of opinionated communication in society, details the challenges posed by the modern digital landscape, and proposes a collaborative path toward understanding and navigating these complex dynamics.

Why Opinionated Communication is Critical for Society

The way opinions are expressed, shared, perceived, and aggregated has a profound impact on how society functions. Expressions of opinion are central to shaping group identity because they indicate alignment or disagreement with shared values, norms, or positions. By articulating their views, individuals both communicate personal perspectives and signal affiliation or distance within the group. In this way, opinion expression transforms private attitudes into public markers of belonging and difference.

Today, digital media have dramatically expanded the scale and public reach of opinion expression, granting unprecedented access to public discourse. Beyond the sheer volume of expressed opinions, digital communication presents overwhelming complexity and is distorted by numerous imbalances and dynamics that complicate observing and understanding public opinion. This complexity arises from the internal structuring of digital media itself and is further compounded as digital platforms can boost sensational or misleading content and disproportionately amplify the voices of specific actors. Digital platforms create echo chambers and enable hateful, toxic, and uncivil narratives, which together distort the flow of information and polarize debates. When these dynamics dominate public discourse, citizens lose confidence in the fairness, reliability, and integrity of democratic communication, leading to broader erosion of public trust. Concerns about the

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unprecedented scale and nature on opinion manipulation and disinformation in the digital age, and the loss of authentic dialogue threaten the very foundation of public trust required for negotiating preferences and building consensus. Understanding how opinion works in this new context is not just an academic exercise; it is essential for the health of our societies. Furthermore, understanding digital opinions is crucial for monitoring and anticipating offline societal dynamics. We believe we can offer a path to understanding opinion dynamics within the contemporary digital landscape and raise awareness of the mechanisms and challenges at play.

For more detailed and nuanced explanations of opinion formation and expression, please consult the [Literature Review](#) and [Glossary](#) developed by our OPINION Network.

Who We Are

The OPINION Network is an EU-funded initiative that brings together a diverse and interdisciplinary group of scholars originating from over 40 countries. Our network is dedicated to developing and integrating conceptual foundations and computational measurements of opinionated communication. We also advance research agendas for the study of textual expressions of judgements and evaluative statements, which are key components of opinion expression. We offer this manifesto to create a shared understanding of how opinions are formed, expressed, manipulated, and measured in a digital era defined by artificial intelligence, platform algorithmisation, and vast amounts of data. By fostering collaboration among researchers, we develop and share new standards for studying opinions and provide actionable insights for all stakeholders involved in the public sphere.

See more on the OPINION network [here](#) .

With this Manifesto, we aim to provide practical, applicable recommendations across various fields for both current practitioners and future generations. Our contributions are divided into two key areas: understanding the state of expressed opinions and understanding the processes that shape them.

Understanding Opinion in the Digital Age

1. Opinions Expressed Are Not the Same as Opinions Held

It is a critical error to confuse the opinions people express publicly with the opinions they privately hold. Expression is a deliberate act shaped by numerous factors, including the opinions individuals privately hold, as well as their goals, psychological motivations, and perceived norms of what is acceptable or legitimate to say. The specific platform and its technical affordances, governance, and moderation policies also dictate what can be expressed. It is important to attend to

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the entire communication situation in context, including the expressed opinions themselves or the context in which they are placed, to understand embedded intentions, such as persuasion, provocation, or the signaling of certain beliefs and identities.

Recommendations for stakeholders:

▶ When analysing public opinion, it is crucial to look beyond the face value of expressed statements. To understand the communicative goals an expression serves, consider the speaker's motivations and identity, the context of the platform, and relevant cultural conventions. For example, cultural norms for expressing dissent vary widely; some cultures prefer indirect cues, while others value direct confrontation as a sign of honesty and engagement

▶ Pay attention to the linguistic evidence within a text that signals communicative intent. Contextualise opinions by reporting on the norms and platform dynamics that shape their public expression.

▶ Recognise that platform governance is a powerful, normative force. Be transparent about how platform design, moderation policies, and user culture norms influence and constrain opinion expression.

2. Not All Opinions Weigh the Same

The digital public sphere is not a level playing field. Certain opinions carry more weight due to the power and prominence of the speaker, while others gain traction through perceived relevance (often manufactured via emotional manipulation and misleading rhetoric) and algorithmic amplification. This dynamic creates an imbalanced discourse where a few dominant voices, backed by social power, capital, or mobilised activists, can overshadow the conversation. This disbalance is worsened by interferences such as inauthentic content, bots, uneven algorithmic visibility, and the increasing presence of AI-generated content, which can artificially create relevance. Relevance is not static; it is a fluid concept negotiated within a debate and validated through reactions and resonance, creating circular feedback processes, as seen with influencers. The opinions of those without a large platform often leave little impact on the conversation, leading to a skewed perception of public opinion.

Recommendations for stakeholders:

▶ Understand that public opinion is not simply an aggregation of equal voices, as simple counts of expressed positions can severely misrepresent societal opinion negotiations. To genuinely engage with the public, one must be aware of the legitimate participants and their varying degrees of influence.

▶ When reporting on or teaching about public debates, acknowledge and expose the power dynamics at play. Highlight whose voices are amplified and whose are

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marginalised and actively pluralise the discourse by including a variety of opinion voices.

▸ Be aware of inauthentic, automated, or artificially inflated content. Rather than discarding it, analyse its role in distorting the opinion landscape. Develop policies that promote transparency around AI-generated content, such as clear flagging or labeling, to help identify active participation by AI in public discourse. Account for speaker position and audience feedback (resonance) in your analysis.

3. AI is a Transformative Force in the Study and Expression of Opinions

Artificial Intelligence (AI), referring to a broad range of computational methods for analysis, content curation, and text generation, is a transformative force in opinion research.

AI's advanced ability to analyse language in context makes it a powerful tool for studying opinion dynamics at scale. However, AI is not a neutral tool. Because AI models learn from vast datasets, they inherit and amplify collective biases that can alter the context of conversations and reinforce existing inequalities when used for analysis and moderation.

Recommendations for stakeholders:

▸ When studying opinion expression, leverage AI's advanced capacity to understand context and communicative intent, but remain critically aware of its inherent biases. Always validate machine-generated assessments against human analysis, and document and account for how the tool itself may be shaping the results.

▸ Recognise that AI is actively participating in public discourse. Develop policies that promote transparency around AI-structured processes and AI-generated content in digital discourse, such as clear flagging or labeling.

▸ The future development of AI must be guided by its critical role in democratic communication, both as a participant and a tool for opinion research. AI development must be anchored in ethical norms, pluralism, and accountability.

Influencing, Reporting on, and Participating in Opinion Processes

1. Generating and Sharing Knowledge About Opinions

Understanding how opinion works is a responsibility shared by all participants in democratic public debates. Scholars, journalists, and educators are uniquely positioned not only to create knowledge about opinion dynamics but also to multiply and disseminate it to the broader public. Journalists, in particular, act as crucial gatekeepers and interpreters of public discourse. By working together, these groups

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can foster a societal reflection on opinion processes, documenting what is happening in real-time and providing the public with the tools for critical understanding.

Recommendations for stakeholders:

▸ The creation of public knowledge and reflection about ongoing opinion processes needs to go hand in hand with the creation of "metaknowledge" about the underlying processes, including their inherent power dynamics, vulnerabilities, and distortions.

▸ Research on opinion expression and public opinion processes needs to be publicly accessible. Beyond aiming to publish open access whenever possible, researchers should partner with journalists and educators to translate complex findings about opinion dynamics into understandable and practical lessons for the public.

▸ Stronger cooperation between scholars, journalists, educators, regulators, and developers is essential. In this partnership, researchers provide expert insights, which journalists and educators make accessible to the public. Regulators can then translate this shared knowledge into effective, evidence-based policy, while developers implement these principles and standards directly into the design of technology.

2. Multiplying Knowledge and Educating the Public

Effective education about opinion expression and public opinion processes goes beyond communicating facts to include explaining the mechanisms by which opinions are formed, shared, and manipulated. This means raising awareness about everything from platform business models to the disproportionate power held by certain actors. The goal is to empower citizens with critical awareness to recognise and understand the forces that shape the information they consume every day.

Recommendations for stakeholders:

▸ Develop curricula and public campaigns that focus on the processes of opinion formation. These efforts should expand on existing Media and Information Literacy (MIL) and Civic Online Reasoning curricula, teaching students and citizens to ask critical questions: Who is speaking? What are their motives? How is this content being amplified? Why am I seeing this?

▸ Reporting on presently expressed opinions needs to be complemented by attention paid to why and how they become prominent. Information must be contextualised, utilising expert knowledge and embracing the role of an educator on media mechanisms.

▸ All stakeholders involved in the public sphere, including researchers, journalists, educators, regulators, and developers, should recognise and embrace their role as knowledge multipliers, conscious of the public accountability that comes with

shaping how society understands opinion, including the necessary commitment to democratic pluralism and controversy.

3. Building Resilience

In an environment rife with opinion manipulation and weaponised opinion expression, building societal resilience is paramount. This can be conceptualised as a collective immune system that helps society cope with and resist distortion, including disinformation disguised as authentic opinion expression. Resilience is built at multiple levels. At the individual level, it involves practices like using a diversity of sources and being aware of one's own cognitive biases, such as confirmation bias, which algorithms are designed to exploit. At the systemic level, regulation and platform design can make it easier for users to spot manipulation, for instance, by flagging AI-generated or boosted content and making suspicious activity more visible.

Recommendations for stakeholders:

‣ Make use of practices that promote resilience, such as actively seeking out diverse perspectives, and, when possible, work to implement features that support them. These features include clear labeling of AI-generated content, sponsored posts, and other forms of amplification.

‣ Be mindful that algorithms often cater to your existing biases and can lead you to lose awareness of opinion processes going on elsewhere in society. Design algorithms that occasionally incentivise users to engage with content outside their comfort zone.

‣ Promote media literacy (MIL) initiatives that focus on building resilience. Equip citizens with the knowledge and critical thinking, including the ability to check facts, identify flaws in reasoning or logical fallacies, and spot misleading correlations. Citizens can use these skills to detect interferences in opinion formation and protect themselves from manipulation, while balancing healthy skepticism with the ability to trust credible sources.