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The Aesthetics of Algorithmic Disinformation: Dewey, Critical Theory, and the Crisis of Public Experience

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Abstract

The rise of social media platforms has fundamentally reshaped the global information ecosystem, fostering the spread of disinformation. Beyond the circulation of false content, this article frames disinformation as an aesthetic crisis of public communication: an algorithmic reorganization of sensory experience that privileges performative virality over shared intelligibility, fragmenting public discourse and undermining democratic deliberation. Drawing on John Dewey's philosophy of aesthetic experience and critical theory (Adorno, Benjamin, Fuchs, Han), we argue that journalism, understood as a form of public art rather than mere fact-transmission, can counteract this crisis by cultivating critical attention, narrative depth, and democratic engagement. We introduce the concept of aesthetic literacy as an extension of media literacy, equipping citizens to discern between seductive but superficial forms and genuinely transformative experiences. Empirical examples from Portugal (*Expresso*, *Público*, *Mensagem de Lisboa*) illustrate how multimodal journalism—through paced narratives, interactivity, and community dialogue—can reconstruct Deweyan "integrated experience" and resist algorithmic disinformation. We propose three axes of intervention: (1) public education oriented to aesthetic sensibility; (2) journalistic practices prioritizing ambiguity and depth; and (3) algorithmic transparency. Defending journalism as a public art of experience is thus crucial for democratic regeneration in the era of sensory capitalism, offering a framework to address the structural inequalities embedded in global information flows.

Keywords: disinformation; social media; algorithmic culture; aesthetic experience; John Dewey; critical theory; media literacy; political economy

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1. Introduction: Disinformation as an Aesthetic and Algorithmic Problem

In recent decades, the informational environment in the Western world has undergone profound transformations, driven by digital technologies and the predominance of social platforms as mediators of public communication. Platforms such as Twitter (now X), Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have altered the flows of information circulation as well as the mechanisms of knowledge production, distribution, and reception. This has given rise to new communicational ecologies characterized by stimulus overload, fragmentation of meaning, and algorithmic logics of visibility.

Within this context, journalism—traditionally conceived as a formative instance of public opinion and a promoter of citizenship—faces a dual process of erosion. On the one hand, it has lost centrality in the contemporary informational ecosystem, traversed by digital disintermediation and fragmentation; on the other, it has been progressively subjected to economic and algorithmic pressures that privilege sensationalist, emotive,

and low-interpretive-density content. Its public function is thus compromised: journalism tends to reduce itself to a mechanism of immediate affective response, to the detriment of critical analysis and the shared construction of meaning.

It is against this backdrop of functional and symbolic crisis that the urgency of rethinking public communication arises, both within journalism and in other media practices, particularly regarding information, civic education, and aesthetic experience as pillars of a democratic public sphere. The underlying issue is that disinformation cannot be reduced to its narrowest sense: the circulation of false content or "fake news." The argument advanced in this article is that disinformation should be understood as a structural symptom of the reorganization of communicative experience, based on a dual dimension: (i) the technical reconfiguration enacted by algorithmic systems that shape what is seen, shared, and felt; (ii) the aesthetic reorganization of experience, characterized by narrative fragmentation and the loss of symbolic continuity.

From this perspective, contemporary disinformation is not merely a question of false content but, above all, of sensory forms and modes of experience. In this sense, algorithms, by privileging the logic of virality over intelligibility or truthfulness, contribute to undermining the construction of a shared horizon of meaning—a condition central to deliberative democracy.

The thesis advanced here is that algorithmic disinformation undermines the public sphere by fragmenting aesthetic experience, disrupting the integration of emotion, cognition, and action in meaning-making. Drawing on John Dewey's pragmatist philosophy, we propose understanding aesthetics not as a peripheral ornament of information but as a condition of its shared intelligibility. For Dewey, aesthetic experience constitutes an intensified and integrated form of engagement with the lived world, mobilizing full attention, critical reflection, and affective involvement.

Conceived in this way, aesthetics offers a key to rehabilitating public communication—and journalism in particular—as a formative practice oriented by sensitivity, intelligibility, and an ethic of mediation. Within this framework, journalism ceases to be understood solely as a channel for factual transmission and instead emerges as a public art of experience, capable of integrating form and content, emotion and reason, sensitivity and citizenship.

This proposal resonates with the diagnosis developed by Christian Fuchs (2014), who argues that social media do not operate as neutral spaces of communication, but as private infrastructures driven by the logic of capital, surveillance, and value extraction. Users' attention is commodified, and algorithms function as instruments of sensitive and performative control. In this scenario, journalism faces the challenge of resisting both superficial aestheticization and the algorithmic hollowing out of experience.

The theoretical framework mobilized here rests on the intersection of John Dewey's pragmatist philosophy and the Critical Theory tradition. Dewey allows us to understand public communication as an aesthetic and educational practice, integrating emotion, cognition, and action within democratic experience. Critical Theory, in turn, provides tools to analyze the structural dimension of digital communication under capitalism, revealing how algorithms and market logics reshape the public sphere.

Drawing on this framework, the article is organized in three stages: (i) problematizing the concept of disinformation as an aesthetic and algorithmic reorganization of communicative experience; (ii) critically analyzing journalism's role in the face of attention fragmentation and commodification dynamics; (iii) proposing aesthetic literacy as an extension of media literacy, understood as a promising avenue for rehabilitating journalism as a public art of experience.

2. Theoretical Framework: Deweyan Aesthetics Meets Critical Theory of Algorithms

John Dewey occupies a central place in the North American pragmatist tradition, due to his critique of the dichotomy between theory and practice and above all because of his defense of an integrated conception of human experience. In *Art as Experience* (1934), he proposes a radical revaluation of aesthetics, moving it away from elitist or formalist understandings. Rather than conceiving art as a domain separate from everyday life, Dewey argues that aesthetic experience is an intensified, meaningful, and integrated form of engagement with the world: a refined combination of experiences involving perception, emotion, and intelligence. For Dewey, the roots of art lie in ordinary practices—in manual work, social rituals, and everyday cultural expressions—and it is precisely through their intensification that aesthetic experience emerges. Art thus fulfils an educational and democratic function, as it cultivates attention, sensitivity, and imagination—capacities indispensable to civic participation and critical deliberation. The link between aesthetics and communication is exemplified in the following passage:

> The function of art has always been to break the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness. Common things—a flower, moonlight, the song of a bird—and not rare or distant objects, are the means through which the deeper levels of life are touched, so that desire and thought spring from them. This process is art. Poetry, drama, and the novel testify that the problem of presentation is not insoluble. Artists have always been the true messengers, for it is not the external event itself that is new, but the spark it ignites in emotion, perception, and appreciation. (Dewey, 1927, p. 204)

Dewey's aesthetic conception of experience finds a political extension in *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), where he develops his theory of democracy. At its core, Dewey argues that beyond formal institutions, democracy depends on the quality of interactions between individuals and their capacity to recognize one another as part of a collective process of deliberation and action. The essence of democratic life is the informed and continuous participation of citizens in matters that affect their shared lives. As Crick (2004) emphasizes, it is precisely in this mediation—through the sharing of experiences, reflection, and meaning—that a vibrant public sphere is forged, capable of resisting manipulative or purely commercial logics.

In this light, it is worth stressing that for Dewey "an experience" arises only under specific conditions and cannot be mechanically engineered through communication techniques. Much like the aesthetic encounter with the sublime, it resists prediction and staging. Aesthetically conscious journalistic practices therefore do not guarantee outcomes but cultivate possibilities: rhythms, narrative forms, and expressive devices that foster integrated attention and open space for meaningful experience to emerge. The emphasis thus shifts from fixed results to the creation of communicative contexts receptive to experiential intensity. This interpretation is fully aligned with Dewey's pragmatism, which conceives experience as emergent, situational, and relational rather than formulaic. Approached as a public art, journalism embodies this conviction by fostering the conditions in which significant experiences may take shape without predetermining them.

The public sphere is therefore a contingent formation, constituted whenever citizens, affected by the indirect consequences of certain actions, recognize one another as sharing a common problem and mobilize to address it. Dewey (1927, p. 126) defines the public as "all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of particular transactions, to the extent that it is deemed necessary that these consequences be systematically addressed." Thus, the public arises not from mere coexistence of individuals but from a communicative process: only when the effects of actions become visible, intelligible, and discussable does

shared consciousness emerge, enabling its constitution as a collective. Democracy, therefore, depends on the capacity to communicate common problems effectively and transform them into matters for public deliberation.

From this perspective, the crisis of modern democracy largely results from the failure of communication forms capable of translating the indirect effects of actions into shared problems. Whenever communication is colonized by private interests, simplified by entertainment logics, or reduced to algorithmic metrics, the public space fragments, and democracy weakens. It is in this context that Dewey's aesthetic conception of experience gains political relevance: democratic communication, to be effective, must also be aesthetic, understood in Dewey's sense: as a form of meaningful organization of experience. Like art, communication must provide continuity, rhythm, form, and relevance to the sensory chaos, allowing the public to feel, comprehend, and articulate the issues affecting them. As Dewey observes, "art and aesthetic experience are functions of a shared act of communication, linking external expression, as in art, to inner thought and feeling, as in aesthetic experience" (Dewey, 1934, p. 106).

Dewey further stresses that technical advances in information circulation—whether in the press, radio, or digital networks—are insufficient to guarantee democratic communication. Only when subordinated to an aesthetic and reflective practice, capable of shaping and rendering intelligible shared experience, can such media contribute to democracy. In his words:

> The highest and most exacting type of inquiry, and an art of subtle, delicate, vivid, responsive communication, must seize the physical machinery of transmission and circulation and infuse it with life. When the age of machines has thus perfected its machinery, it will serve as a means of life rather than as its despotic master. (Dewey, 1927, p. 204)

Through this formulation, Dewey anticipates a critique of technological neutrality: mediated communication is not reducible to the "technical efficiency of transmission" but requires the "aesthetic organization of shared experience." Only when media are appropriated by demanding communicative practices, attentive to complexity, intelligibility, and expressiveness, can they sustain a critical and informed community. Improving the conditions of public communication therefore implies recovering its formal and affective dimensions: the capacity to integrate information and emotion, analysis and sensitivity, form and content. Only when communication assumes such aesthetic qualities does it truly form publics and promote democratic deliberation. Aesthetics, in this sense, is not an accessory to rational discourse but a political condition: it enables problems to become visible, affections to find expression, and citizenship to deepen.

In line with this perspective, contemporary analyses have further emphasized the aesthetic and political dimensions of communicative regimes. Cvar and Bobnič (2019), for example, conceptualize post-truth not as a radical rupture from the Western episteme but as an intensification of pre-existing epistemic conditions. In their view, the phenomenon of so-called fake news reveals less a crisis of factuality than a deeper crisis of the dominant journalistic paradigm, intrinsically tied to the economic logics of media corporations. They further argue that the rise of populist discourse and conspiracy narratives should be situated within a "new aestheticized digital regime of truth," distinctive for its technologized mediation of perception under neoliberal governmentality. This diagnosis converges with Dewey's concern with the fragmentation of communicative continuity, while also situating the problem in a broader socio-political conjuncture of digital capitalism.

Building on this argument, recent analyses have shown how the infrastructures of platforms and algorithms consolidate this conjuncture and redefine the conditions under which journalism, politics, and citizenship interact. Srnicek (2017) demonstrates that

platforms function as the dominant organizational form of contemporary capitalism. They centralize control over data infrastructures, set the conditions of access and visibility, and mediate relations between states, markets, and citizens. By concentrating these capacities, platforms exercise a quasi-sovereign power: they define the rules of interaction, govern flows of information, and distribute value in ways that reshape both economies and public life. Beer (2016) reinforces this perspective by examining the "social power of algorithms." Algorithms operate as cultural and political constructs that structure visibility, direct attention, and legitimize specific forms of authority. In the field of journalism, they determine which stories appear, how they circulate, and which publics engage with them. Together, these insights highlight that journalism develops within infrastructural regimes that configure the very conditions of public experience. Aesthetic and pedagogical practices, while crucial to reinvigorating democratic communication, acquire their full significance only when articulated alongside critical engagement with these structural dynamics.

Applied to journalism, this perspective demonstrates that the social efficacy of information does not depend solely on the truthfulness of content but on how that content structures experience in expressive, intelligible, and engaging ways. As Dewey writes, "presentation is fundamental, and presentation is a matter of art. A newspaper that was merely a daily edition of a quarterly journal of sociology or political science would, without doubt, have limited circulation and restricted influence" (Dewey, 1927, p. 203). Form, therefore, is not a neutral container for content but a condition of its intelligibility and democratic efficacy. From this vantage point, journalism transcends the function of mere data transmission or informational spectacle: it becomes a formative cultural practice with cognitive, ethical, and aesthetic value. By educating attention, stimulating imagination, and organizing reality intelligibly, journalism can be regarded as a public art in the strong sense of the term, contributing to the aesthetic formation of citizens and to the vitality of the public sphere.

Dewey thus demonstrates that democracy is inseparable from the aesthetic quality of communicative experience. Democracy is not merely a political-institutional system, but a mode of coexistence grounded in living, meaningful communicative experiences. Recovering the aesthetic function of public communication, and journalism in particular, entails resisting the logics of acceleration, superficiality, and algorithmic fragmentation, thereby rehabilitating the public space as a site of intelligibility, shared attention, and social imagination.

3. The Algorithmic Reconfiguration of Public Experience: From Journalism to Disinformation

The digital era has brought profound transformations to the dynamics of production, circulation, and reception of information, decisively reshaping the role of journalism within the public sphere (Pavlik, 2000; Zelizer, 2019). On the one hand, digital media have democratized access to information; on the other, they have undermined traditional mechanisms of validation, verification, and contextualization, which were essential pillars of journalism's civic function (Samuelsen et al., 2023). The social practice of journalism, which once operated as a critical mediation between events and the public, now faces a multidimensional crisis: epistemic, economic, ethical, and aesthetic.

From an epistemic perspective, information overload and the speed of dissemination constitute concrete obstacles to rigorous fact-checking and the construction of narratives endowed with interpretive depth. Much contemporary journalism has been captured by a logic of immediacy and virality, where the value of a news item is often measured not by its public relevance but by the clicks, reactions, and shares it generates. As Wuebben (2016) observes, this dynamic reflects a concentration on popularity as the primary metric,

while discursive structure becomes secondary, shaped by platform engagement logics. This phenomenon imposes what may be termed an aesthetics of acceleration, characterized by sensationalist headlines, appealing visuality, textual fragmentation, and superficial consumption, breaking with Dewey's conception of aesthetic experience as continuity, intelligibility, and integration.

The superficial aesthetic typical of the digital environment operates in stark contrast to journalism's educational and democratic function. Rather than fostering attention, curiosity, and critical thinking, it encourages automated reception, emotional reactivity, and intellectual impoverishment. The form of the message, shaped by algorithms, comes to determine content, emptying the deliberative public space in favor of passive consumption and immediate gratification. As Wirz and Zai (2025) show, platforms such as Instagram and TikTok promote a fusion of entertainment and information (infotainment), favoring rapid, visually appealing content and reinforcing this logic of performative superficiality.

Economically, the reliance on business models based on programmatic advertising and performance metrics, such as dwell time, views, and social reactions, encourages journalistic practices that tend to devalue classical editorial standards. Newsrooms, pressured to produce "content" at a rapid pace, resort to repetitive formulas, sensationalist headlines, and clickbait strategies aimed at maximizing immediate engagement. Khawar and Boukes (2024) demonstrate that both traditional and native digital outlets adopt these strategies on platforms such as Twitter (X), which, while effective in the short term, do not foster reflective engagement or lasting trust. The result is a superficial informational experience that normalizes communication practices centered on reactive emotion at the expense of critical analysis.

Within this scenario, journalism loses narrative autonomy and cognitive value, subordinated to the algorithmic logic of circulation. The transformation of news into products optimized for digital performance, rather than instruments of public understanding, reflects an aesthetic and functional reconfiguration of the informational sphere, marked by continuous performance and erosion of democratic discourse quality. This algorithmic reorganization is not merely a technical phenomenon but reflects a structural logic embedded in the material conditions of digital capitalism.

Christian Fuchs (2014) precisely describes how social platforms operate as infrastructures for extracting value from users' communicative and perceptive activity, turning data, attention, and interactions into commodities:

> The capital accumulation model of most corporate social networks consists of turning users' private, semi-public, and public data into commodities sold to advertising clients (...). It is reasonable to assume that users of corporate social networks are unpaid workers generating economic value. (p. 79)

The political economy of platforms thus reveals users as simultaneously consumers and unpaid producers of value, feeding a system of communicational commodification through their daily activity.

In another register, Byung-Chul Han describes this dynamic as psychopolitics, a regime of self-exploitation operating not through repression but seduction, stimulating subjects to expose themselves voluntarily for the sake of visibility and performance. In *Psychopolitics* (2015), he emphasizes that accelerated communication corresponds to a logic of positivity: "lacking interiority, it can circulate independently of context" (p. 19). The result is "flattened", transparent, and homogeneous communication, where interiority and negativity are eliminated in favor of rapidly consumable, emotionally appealing elements. This logic, by dissolving critical depth, transforms the role of the citizen: "the voter merely reacts passively to politics, criticizing, complaining, just as the consumer does towards a product or service he dislikes" (Han, 2014, p. 21).

Thus, Fuchs and Han help explain how algorithms structurally reconfigure the public sphere. Digital platforms operate simultaneously as "playgrounds and factories" (Christian Fuchs, 2014, p. 79), concealing exploitation under forms of entertainment while inducing users to labor for digital capital without remuneration. As Han adds, exploitation is not imposed externally but desired internally, interiorized as a form of symbolic validation. This psychopolitical regime transforms the digital public sphere into a contested space between democratic deliberation logics and imperatives of accumulation.

At this juncture, Walter Benjamin's diagnoses prove particularly relevant. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* (1936/1992), Benjamin identifies the loss of aura as a consequence of mass reproduction: the work loses singularity, temporal inscription, and authenticity. Analogously, in digital journalism, news loses interpretive depth when shaped by repetition, acceleration, and algorithmic performance criteria. As Deranty and Olson (2019) show, digital reproducibility "reconfigures the formal conditions of reception and participation, redirecting public attention towards a fragmentary experience" (p. 110). Instead of dense narratives, news circulates as visual and textual fragments optimized for clicks and shares.

A similar observation appears in *The Storyteller* (1936/1992), where Benjamin distinguishes between *Erfahrung* (dense, shareable experience) and *Erlebnis* (episodic, fragmented experience). The logic of immediacy dissolves narrative temporality, preventing the sedimentation of memory and shared reflection. The public, rather than being guided by integrative narratives, consumes discontinuous flows of reactive information: "In great historical epochs, the mode of sensory perception of humanity changes along with the collective form of its existence" (Benjamin, 1936/1992, p. 80). Today, performative aestheticization substitutes full experience with ephemeral stimuli. This critique continues within the culture industry theory of Adorno and Horkheimer, who describe mass culture as a standardized commodity, emptied of critical negativity: "Pleasure crystallizes into boredom, for it must not demand effort if it is to continue to be pleasurable" (1998, p. 181). The result is superficial reconciliation and passive adaptation, where culture (and journalism) no longer provokes reflection. As Fuchs (2016) demonstrates, applying Adorno today entails defending non-commercial media that resist to the functional aestheticization and cultivate critical density.

Byung-Chul Han reinforces this diagnosis by describing social networks as "digital panopticons" (2015, p. 18), operating not via vertical Foucauldian surveillance but through horizontal hyper connection: "The digital Big Brother, so to speak, passes on its work to the inmates" (Han, 2015, p. 19). The freer subjects feel, the more predictable and exploitable they become. This psychopolitical regime consolidates a functional aestheticization of the public sphere, focused on performance and emotional acceleration, in which journalism, by adopting formats dictated by visibility metrics, risks becoming an appealing surface devoid of critical depth.

In this way, algorithms today operate as a veritable digital culture industry, intersecting platform economic exploitation (Fuchs), the logic of self-exploitation and positivity (Han), the loss of aura and narrative authority (Benjamin), and aesthetic standardization (Adorno & Horkheimer). Collectively, these diagnoses allow us to understand disinformation not merely as the circulation of falsehoods, but as an aesthetic impoverishment of public communication: a loss of narrative, critical, and democratic density in contemporary communicative experience.

In this constellation, Jonathan Beller offers an important extension of the Frankfurt School critique of the culture industry into the digital age. In his concept of the cinematic mode of production (Beller, 2003), spectatorship itself becomes a site of value extraction: "to look is to labour." Attention is the raw material appropriated by capital through cin-

ematic and, later, digital apparatuses. What Adorno and Horkheimer identified as the standardization of culture under monopoly capitalism appears in Beller's account as the capture of vision and perception in deterritorialized factories of images (cinema, television, the Internet) where spectators perform productive labour. His "attention theory of value" (Beller, 2003, p. 92) extends Marx's labour theory of value into the sensory domain, showing that mediation directly organizes the expropriation of human perception.

In *The Message is Murder* (2017), Beller radicalizes this argument with the notion of computational capital. He demonstrates that "the rise of information itself is an extension of the ongoing quantification and instrumentalization of the life-world imposed by early capitalism" (Beller, 2017, p. 3). In this view, digital culture continues and intensifies racial capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism, embedding violence in the very infrastructures of computation (pp. 3–4). With the advent of what he calls "Digital Culture 2 (DC2)" (p. 5), all prior media (books, cinema, language) are subsumed under computation, reorganized into programmable forms of capital accumulation.

At the same time, Brian Massumi's (1995) theory of affect adds a crucial dimension to this trajectory. In *The Autonomy of Affect*, he distinguishes affect from emotion, showing that affect functions as intensity, autonomous from discursive signification. Affect operates at a pre-conscious level, shaping bodily responses, perception, and memory before cognition intervenes (pp. 84–88). This explains why media and political communication increasingly rely on affective intensities rather than rational argumentation. As Massumi argues, the strength of an image lies less in its semantic content than in its capacity to generate intensity—an immediacy that bypasses ideological mediation and anchors persuasion in visceral resonance. With this shift, journalism and media in the 1990s entered a new affective economy, transforming their social function and reconfiguring the very conditions of public experience.

Integrating Beller's insights clarifies that algorithmic disinformation is not simply a degeneration of public discourse. It is a structural effect of computational capital, a system in which the labour of attention is systematically expropriated through digital mediation. Understood in this way, disinformation exemplifies how mediation functions as both a cultural process and a political-economic regime: the very substrate through which capital intensifies its control over perception, experience, and social reproduction.

At this point, the bridge between aesthetics and politics becomes explicit. Susan Buck-Morss's (1992) influential reading of Walter Benjamin shows that the reorganization of sensory experience in modernity is not merely cultural but profoundly political. The "crisis of experience" that Benjamin identifies—the replacement of *Erfahrung* (integrated experience) by *Erlebnis* (fragmented experience of shock)—leads to an "anesthetization" of the collective sensorium. According to Buck-Morss, this anesthetization is the very condition of possibility for the "aestheticization of politics" that Benjamin denounces at the end of his essay on the work of art. The anesthetized subject, numbed by overstimulation and the logic of shock, becomes incapable of political response, even in the face of existential threats. Fascist "aestheticization of politics" does not create this sensory alienation but exploits it, offering substitute aesthetic experiences—the spectacle of war, the choreography of power—consumed passively by a desensitized public.

From this perspective, the central thesis of this article—that algorithmic disinformation constitutes an aesthetic crisis—finds its deepest political grounding: digital platforms, by fragmenting experience and promoting an aesthetic of shock and virality, produce a contemporary form of sensory anesthesia that corrodes the very perceptual basis of a deliberative and democratic public sphere.

4. Aesthetic Literacy and Multimodal Journalism as Resistance: Empirical Cases from Portugal

If the critical diagnosis outlined above points to the algorithmic colonization of communicational experience, with the consequent aesthetic simplification and impoverishment of public deliberation, it is crucial to ask: are there concrete alternatives that can restore the formative richness of communication? Despite structural and economic constraints affecting the media ecosystem—from precarious labor conditions in newsrooms to the metric-driven logic guiding production—it is possible to identify emerging practices in Portugal that seek to reconfigure journalism as a public art of experience, in line with the theoretical proposition of this article. Although still peripheral and not widely adopted, these practices demonstrate consistent attempts to reintegrate form, attention, imagination, and intelligibility into journalistic and pedagogical mediation, resisting the acceleration and sensory predictability characteristic of contemporary digital circulation.

The following analysis draws on three case studies of Portuguese media outlets: *Expresso* (a leading weekly), *Público* (a quality daily), and *Mensagem de Lisboa* (an independent local news initiative). The selection of this corpus is not arbitrary; rather, it is grounded in three principal methodological criteria.

National Context as a Laboratory: Portugal provides a particularly relevant context for this inquiry. As a medium-digitized European country, outside both the large linguistic markets and the global epicenters of big tech, it offers a vantage point for studying the penetration of, and resistance to, global algorithmic logics within what might be termed a "Southern European Global South". This is a setting subject to similar pressures of platformisation and disinformation, yet where journalistic responses are shaped under more constrained resources and a heightened awareness of vulnerability—conditions that often foster inventive practices with wider illustrative potential for comparable contexts.

Diversity of the Media Ecosystem: The inclusion of these three outlets captures a broad and representative spectrum of the Portuguese media landscape. *Expresso* embodies mainstream journalism, with the scale and resources to invest in ambitious multimedia projects; *Público* exemplifies a daily with a strong digital orientation and an editorial culture committed to experimenting with formats and narratives; while *Mensagem de Lisboa* represents a hyperlocal, independent digital initiative, demonstrating how aesthetic innovation and community-based resistance can thrive beyond the major corporate media conglomerates. This diversity illustrates that the pursuit of "aesthetic literacy" is not an isolated phenomenon but an emerging tendency across different scales and models of journalism.

Pioneering and Exemplary Character: Each of the selected outlets has produced paradigmatic and widely recognized examples of multimodal journalism explicitly aligned with Deweyan principles of integrated experience, narrative density, and sensitive mediation. These projects are not mere illustrations but instances of 'best practice' that have achieved national (and in some cases international) visibility, thereby serving as concrete and successful embodiments of the theoretical proposal advanced in this article.

Taken together, this tripartite corpus provides a robust and justified empirical foundation for examining how aesthetic resistance to algorithmic disinformation is taking shape within contemporary journalistic practice.

One of the most significant examples of this aesthetic reconfiguration is the multimedia special by *Expresso*, entitled "*Trace o retrato do país: será mesmo como pensa que é*?" [Draw the portrait of the country: is it really as you think it is?] (Figure 1). The project combines text, interactive maps, infographics, videos, and animations to offer the public a participatory and intellectually demanding reading experience. By translating statistical data into visual and exploratory pathways, it converts the reader into a co-author of the

interpretive process, counteracting the passivity induced by the algorithmic flows of social networks. Far from being a static infographic, it constitutes an immersive experience in which the user selects variables such as age, region, or income, compares their own reality with national data, and generates personalized maps from these choices. Information is organized relationally and sensitively, allowing navigation across different layers of meaning, confrontation of subjective perceptions with empirical evidence, and construction of personal interpretations—exemplifying Dewey's conception of aesthetic experience as the dynamic integration of perception, emotion, and cognition (Dewey, 1934).

Figure 1. Headline and illustration from *Expresso*: "Draw the charts to portray Portugal: does your perception match the real country?" The interactive feature asks readers to test their knowledge of demographic, economic, and social indicators.

Another particularly relevant initiative is *Público*'s commitment to producing audiovisual content with narrative value and interpretive density, materialized on its YouTube channel (Figure 2). In these specials, dedicated to elections, culture, or environmental issues, the combination of interviews, field reporting, graphics, and careful editing creates narratives that transcend mere text-to-video translation. They constitute civic microdocumentaries in which aesthetic construction does not function as ornament but as a condition of intelligibility and expressive mediation. Cinematic slowness, for instance, becomes a narrative device reflecting and emphasizing climate urgency, while the plurality of voices and framings fosters public deliberation. Similar approaches can be observed in other multimodal projects, such as the special War between Israel and Iran in Maps, Videos, and Satellite Images (June 2025, Figure 3), which integrates interactive cartography, satellite imagery, videos, and infographics to offer a gradual reading of the conflict. The decelerated narrative rhythm, with shots exceeding twenty seconds, contrasts with the fragmented logic of social networks, evoking both Benjamin's defense of attentive reception (1936/1992) and Han's (2015) argument on deceleration as resistance to digital acceleration. In this sense, *Público*'s audiovisual proposal demonstrates how multimodality and temporality can be mobilized as cognitive and critical resources, expanding possibilities for understanding and democratic participation.

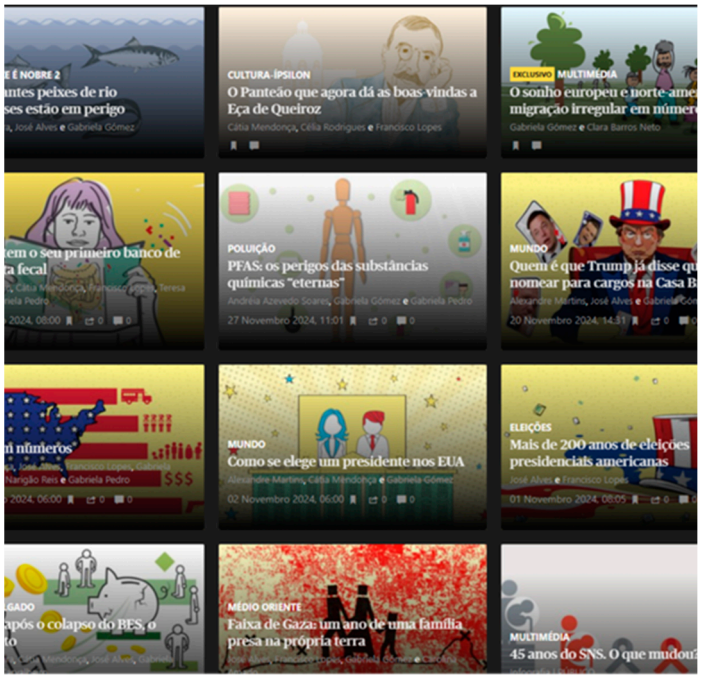

Figure 2. *Público* YouTube specials (2025). Civic micro-documentaries combining interviews, field reporting, graphics, and editing to create narratively dense and interpretively rich audiovisual content.

Figure 3. Special multimedia project "War between Israel and Iran in Maps, Videos, and Satellite Images" (June 2025). The project combines interactive maps, satellite images, videos, and infographics to provide a layered and gradual understanding of the conflict.

The *Mensagem de Lisboa* project (Figure 4) invests in hypermedia formats with a clear community-oriented vocation. Its narratives combine short videos, animated illustrations, podcasts, and infographics to give visibility to previously marginalized realities in the city, such as migrant stories, neighborhood transformations, or social exclusion. Here, journalism acts as a tool for listening and restitution of the commons, granting public presence to subalternised voices through an aesthetic form that constitutes a true "architecture of care." The report Bangladesh in Lisbon exemplifies this approach: instead of sensationalist images, it uses podcasts that directly give voice to street vendors, comic-style illustrations,

and an affective map of ethnic shops in Martim Moniz. This refusal of "poverty porn" translates into an ethical aesthetic, transforming the migrant experience into a shareable expression within the public sphere. As Dewey (1934) proposes, giving aesthetic form to everyday experiences is a prerequisite for their communicability and integration into democratic life. The project's impact, culminating in an exhibition at Lisbon City Hall in 2023, confirms that multimodality, when sensitively articulated, does not merely serve the aesthetics of impact but functions as a formative and democratic device, in contrast to the algorithmic logic of viralisation.

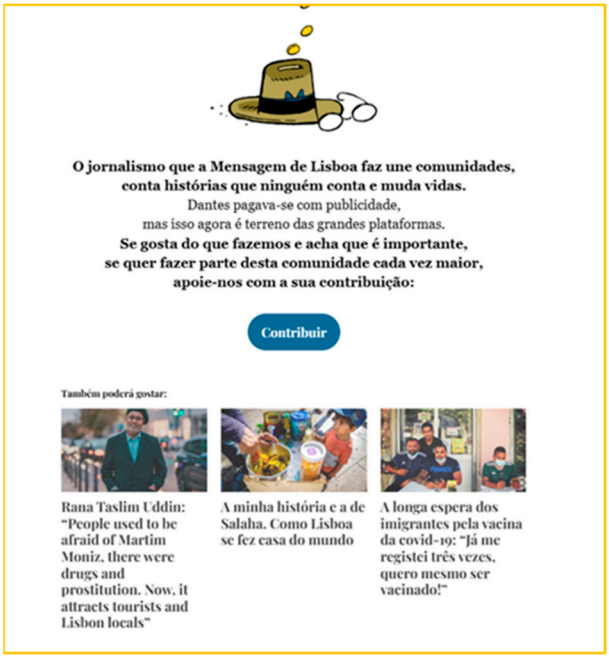

Figure 4. *Mensagem de Lisboa* project (2025). Community-oriented hypermedia combining videos, podcasts, illustrations, and infographics to highlight marginalized urban experiences.

Taken together, *Expresso*'s multimedia special, Público's micro-documentaries, and *Mensagem de Lisboa*'s community formats exemplify different ways of realizing aesthetic literacy applied to digital journalism. In the first case, interactivity transforms data visualization into an exploratory and cognitive practice, aligned with Dewey (1934). In the second, decelerated temporality and narrative multimodality recover the emancipatory potential of technique (Benjamin, 1936/1992) and assert themselves as resistance to digital acceleration (Han, 2015). In the third, an ethics-of-care aesthetic grants visibility to subalternised voices, articulating ethics and expressive form to restore public presence to marginalized experiences. Despite their differences, these projects share a common denominator: they demonstrate that journalism, by mobilizing aesthetic language and multimodal devices, can reclaim its formative and critical function in the public sphere, opposing the standardization of the culture industry (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1947/1998) and the logic of algorithmic viralisation.

If journalism aspires to constitute itself as an aesthetic form of organizing lived experience, its critical reception depends on the formation of audiences equipped with sensitive and interpretive skills. Here enters the notion of aesthetic literacy, conceived as the education of attention and sensibility. It cultivates perceptive judgment capable of resisting superficial aestheticization and recognizing form as constitutive of experience. In more radical terms, aesthetic literacy entails educating the body to perceive the mechanisms of manipulation embedded in ephemeral audiovisual products—such as reels or shorts—and training the eye to distinguish between fast entertainment content and journalistic practices

that, through deceleration and expressive density, carry transformative potential. In this sense, it extends media literacy by integrating form, rhythm, and sensory impact as constitutive elements of public experience. Its purpose is to cultivate the conditions in which meaningful and transformative experiences may emerge, rather than to prescribe a guaranteed outcome in Dewey's sense of "an experience." This formulation resonates with current debates in media literacy research that emphasize the aesthetic and formal dimensions of communication. Recent contributions on slow journalism, multimodal storytelling, and critical media pedagogy stress that literacy extends beyond content verification or critical decoding, encompassing sensitivity to rhythm, narrative density, and expressive form. Aesthetic literacy should therefore be understood not as an idiosyncratic extension but as a logical development of existing approaches, offering a more comprehensive framework for resisting algorithmic simplification.

Among pedagogical initiatives with an aesthetic orientation, the *Expressinho* project by Expresso stands out. It engages children and adolescents in producing school newspapers, going beyond writing and news verification to explore editorial design, visual hierarchy, page rhythm, and text-image articulation. By understanding communication as the result of aesthetic and ethical choices, participants experience the newspaper as a laboratory for sensitive literacy, cultivating a dialogical gaze capable of resisting the superficial aestheticization of digital platforms. This practice aligns closely with Dewey (1934), for whom aesthetics is also educational and quotidian, forming critical and democratic capacities.

At an institutional level, the work of the Entidade Reguladora para a Comunicação Social (ERC) is noteworthy, particularly through LEMEL (Online Media Literacy and Education) and coordination of GILM, responsible for the annual event *7 Dias com os Media*. These initiatives promote practical and reflective activities for students and teachers that interrogate media content as well as the forms of the message, its sensory effects, and the technical devices of digital communication. Attention shifts from the "what" to the "how": how something is said, shown, or induced—how communication shapes the sensible. Workshops such as *Critical Thinking Tools: What Are Fake News?* exemplify this approach, implicitly invoking Adorno and Horkheimer's (1947/1998) critique of the culture industry by fostering a critical awareness capable of recognizing patterns of simplification and persuasion in mass media.

Taken together, these journalistic and pedagogical practices indicate the possibility of articulating aesthetics, education, and citizenship, restoring the formative dimension of public communication. By challenging passivity, cultivating attention, and valuing productive ambiguity, they reinstate density in shared experience and reconfigure the public space as a site of sensitive and reflective co-presence. Yet it must be acknowledged that aestheticization in itself does not automatically yield emancipatory outcomes. In many cases, visual intensification and alluring interfaces simply reinforce algorithmic logics of attention capture, thereby deepening screen dependency and affective reactivity. The challenge for the practices examined here lies precisely in resisting this trap: slowing down narrative rhythm, cultivating productive ambiguity, privileging listening, and fostering community presence. Instead of amplifying the affective–algorithmic circuit, these experiences seek to reconstitute spaces of shared attention and critical reflection.

5. Discussion and Pathways for Intervention: Towards a Democratic Sensory Regime

As we have seen, aesthetic literacy offers a way out of the crisis in journalism, conceiving it not as mere content production but as a practice that shapes democratic sensibility. It represents a pedagogical, critical, and political pathway that opposes the logics of acceleration, algorithmic positivity, and emotional reactivity. By promoting sustained attention,

openness to others, and resistance to sensory standardization, this literacy restores to journalism the possibility of functioning as a public art: that is, a practice capable of organizing shared experience in a reflective and meaningful way. It is through this lens that one can gain a deep understanding of the current communicational crisis and the pathways for its resolution.

Ultimately, the crisis of journalism is a crisis of experience. The way information is organized, distributed, and consumed today increasingly hinders the formation of a critical public, an essential condition for democratic vitality. This article proposes that the crisis should be addressed in its epistemic, economic, and technological dimensions, and above all in its aesthetic aspect. Aesthetic literacy, as the sensitive education of attention and form, is proposed as a critical response to this impasse.

The articulation between Dewey, Adorno, Benjamin, and Han deepens the diagnosis. Sensory standardization (Adorno), the erosion of shared experience (Benjamin), and the performative aestheticization of positivity (Han) help to understand how contemporary aesthetics, serving algorithmic logic, impoverishes the public sphere and undermines journalism's formative function.

The rapprochement between Dewey and Adorno may initially appear counterintuitive, yet it becomes fruitful when viewed through their shared concern with aesthetic form as a condition of public experience. For Dewey, aesthetics integrates ordinary practices into meaningful continuity and supports democratic life; for Adorno, aesthetic autonomy preserves critical negativity against the culture industry. While their philosophical premises diverge, both converge in denouncing the standardization of experience and in demanding forms capable of awakening attention, imagination, and reflection. What Dewey describes as the "art of experience" and Adorno as formal resistance thus share a common horizon: opposing passivity and repetition imposed by market and algorithmic logics. A concrete illustration of this convergence can be seen in their analyses of cultural forms. Adorno denounced the standardization of popular music as a symptom of commodified experience (Adorno, 2002), while Dewey warned against the fragmentation of communicative continuity (Dewey, 1934). Despite their different philosophical premises, both critiques converge in showing how cultural and communicative forms can either impoverish or enrich public life depending on the degree of formal integration and experiential depth they sustain. This convergence highlights that the crisis of experience is a matter of cultural form and is tied to the structural logics that govern digital communication.

In contemporary cultural analysis, Kornbluh (2023) extends this diagnosis by identifying "immediacy style" as the dominant aesthetic of too-late capitalism, a "paradox of anti-style" that negates mediation and privileges absorption, identification, and directness (pp. 9, 30). Similarly to Adorno's critique of standardization and Dewey's concern with continuity, Kornbluh argues that immediacy weakens our collective capacities for critical relation. Against this trend, she calls for aesthetic practices that avow "scale, impersonality, and hold" (pp. 195–96), qualities that expand perception beyond the individual, sustain distance and conflict, and interrupt the flows of circulation. These qualities converge with the ethos of aesthetically conscious journalism as a public art of experience: slowing down narrative rhythm, sustaining density, and cultivating forms of mediated co-presence that resist algorithmic acceleration.

However, this aesthetic crisis should not be regarded as merely a symbolic or cultural phenomenon. As Christian Fuchs (2014) emphasizes, the algorithmic reconfiguration of digital communication is intrinsically linked to a political economy oriented towards the extraction of value from users' time, attention, and activity. Platforms operate as infrastructures of exploitation, where the aesthetics of information are shaped by performance metrics, advertising logics, and the principle of continuous optimization. The crisis of

journalism is thus also material and reimagining it as a formative aesthetic practice requires confronting the structures that constrain it: economic models, distribution circuits, and technical devices that determine public visibility.

Engaging with the structural dimension of the problem aligns with Henry Lara-Steidel's (2022) contemporary interpretation of John Dewey, which argues that the regulation of digital platforms constitutes a legitimate mechanism to safeguard the conditions of the public sphere. Drawing on Dewey, Lara-Steidel argues that the State can and should act to safeguard minimum conditions for democratic formation, particularly when communicational circuits are captured by commercial and algorithmic logics that erode shared intelligibility. Such institutional intervention does not oppose freedom; rather, it sustains it by creating conditions in which public communication remains a space for critical deliberation and experiential formation.

It is within this horizon that aesthetic literacy is proposed as a critical response. It is not merely about teaching how to decode images or detect rhetorical strategies, but about cultivating an attentive eye to the forms, rhythms, and effects of information. This proposal echoes Susan Buck-Morss's (1992) call for a rehabilitation of *aisthítikos* in its original sense—not as a discourse on art, but on the sensory perception of the real. Just as Buck-Morss, reading Benjamin, argues that the task of political art is not to avoid new technologies but to 'pass through them' in order to 'undo the alienation of the corporeal sensorium,' the aesthetic literacy proposed here follows this path. It aims to equip citizens to navigate the digital environment in a way that restores the instinctual power of the human senses. The goal is not merely to decode content, but, in a Benjaminian sense, to 'restore perceptibility' and combat algorithmically induced *anaesthesia*. In this sense, the defense of journalism as a public art of experience is, in itself, an act of politicizing art—the communist response Benjamin opposed to the Fascist aestheticization of politics—as it seeks to reactivate the collective sensorium as the foundation for democratic self-preservation. In this sense, aesthetic literacy constitutes an education of democratic sensibility and a way to resist passive aestheticization, restoring the link between form, experience, and freedom. To realize this aim, three strategic axes of intervention can be delineated.

The first concerns audience education, integrating aesthetic literacy into media literacy programs to enable citizens to critically interpret content as well as the sensory devices of digital communication. The second axis relates to transformation of journalistic practices, encouraging narrative forms that recover experiential density -such as slow journalism, literary journalism, or documentary journalism—prioritizing intelligibility, productive ambiguity, and co-presence of voices, even against the logic of algorithmic performance. The third axis pertains to the critical reconfiguration of digital platforms, advocating for greater algorithmic transparency, public relevance criteria, and sensory plurality in recommendation systems. Calculated aesthetics is never neutral: it shapes what can be felt, said, and thought in the public sphere, and its critique constitutes a democratic urgency.

Restoring journalism to its strong aesthetic function is, in short, to return its capacity to organize the sensible meaningfully, to create integrated public experiences, and to form attentive, demanding, and engaged citizens. As John Dewey reminds us, art (and, by extension, good communication) celebrates moments in which the past enriches the present and the future unfolds as a shared possibility. In this light, conceiving journalism as a public art of experience is not merely a theoretical ideal but a pressing political, economic, and educational imperative in the context of the current crisis of democratic sensibility.

Yet it is necessary to acknowledge the structural limits and power asymmetries that challenge the practical implementation of the proposals advanced here. The advocacy of slow, demanding narrative forms and reception-oriented aesthetic literacy cannot ignore the precarious material conditions of contemporary newsrooms, often subjected to immediate

profitability, high-volume production, and reliance on algorithmic metrics. Discussing slow journalism or formative multimodal journalism also requires rethinking funding models, ownership regimes, and the role of public media in the digital ecosystem. As Drok and Hermans (2015) remind us, the future of these practices depends largely on the receptivity of younger audiences, who grow immersed in a media ecosystem defined by speed, fragmentation, and constant stimuli. Simultaneously, the aesthetic formation of audiences confronts the massive power of platforms, whose algorithmic design is intended to capture attention, minimize friction, and reward reactive emotional consumption. Expecting school workshops or local literacy projects alone to rival the persuasive force of TikTok, Instagram, or YouTube is commendable, yet insufficient. Aesthetic literacy, though necessary, is not sufficient: without effective platform regulation, robust public funding, and sustained cultural policies, formative journalism risks remaining a normative ideal, weakened by the dominant dynamics of marketized sensibility.

6. Conclusions: Journalism as Public Art in the Era of Sensory Capitalism

Reaffirming the central argument, journalism as a "public art of experience" emerges as a crucial political and cultural necessity in the era of sensory capitalism. In a context marked by algorithmic disinformation, accelerated communication, and affective manipulation, journalism's function cannot be limited to the mere transmission of facts. Instead, it must cultivate shared forms of perception, attention, and reflection, contributing to the construction of a public sphere capable of sustaining democratic and deliberative practices. In this sense, journalism becomes a vehicle for information and an instrument for shaping collective sensibility and citizens' critical capacities.

This study has sought to demonstrate this potential by articulating an aesthetic lens inspired by John Dewey with a critical framework grounded in Fuchs, Han, and Adorno. Furthermore, by deepening the political dimension of this crisis through Susan Buck-Morss's (1992) reading of Walter Benjamin, it becomes clear that the '*anaesthesia*' of the collective sensorium is a precondition for the weakening of the public sphere. This intersection allows us to understand journalism as a space of tension between aesthetics and politics, where perception, affect, and collective imagination become central resources for public experience. The cases analyzed, from multimodal and interactive journalism to slow audiovisual production and community-based hypermedia formats, illustrate how journalistic practices that are conscious of form, rhythm, and expressive complexity can resist the logics of acceleration, sensory standardization, and algorithmic virality. These practices are, therefore, more than mere antidotes to disinformation; they are forms of sensory resistance. They represent the 'politicization of art' at a time when the aestheticization of politics assumes new, algorithmic and distributed forms.

Finally, if sensory capitalism thrives on the colonization of attention and the emotional exploitation of users, aesthetic literacy ceases to be a luxury: it becomes an indispensable condition for critical citizenship. Such literacy cultivates eyes capable of distinguishing between superficial communication and transformative practice, enabling individuals to engage more consciously with the media environment and participate in dense, meaningful public experiences. Journalism, understood as public art, thus has the potential to nurture this capacity, reaffirming its relevance as a bulwark against the corrosive forces of the present, while offering concrete pathways for the construction of a more reflective, ethical, and sensitive public sphere.

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