Unit 5 — Media and Public Opinion — Teacher copy

Track E · Klasse 13 · Niveau E (Basisfach / Leistungsfach) · Abitur year

Niveau E

1. Vocabulary

Match each item to its meaning or use it in a sentence.

Term	Your note
algorithmic amplification	
attention rent	
recommendation system	
network effect	
platform governance	
content moderation	
attention economy	
asymmetric visibility	
the visible majority	
micro-targeting	

2. Reading

Read the text and use it for the activities below.

Reading — two extracts (paraphrased)

Tufekci (2017): Algorithmic amplification produces attention asymmetries that are not the same as public opinion. The *visible majority* on a platform is a function of the platform's ranking signals, not of the underlying population.

Wu (2016): The history of mass media is the history of *attention merchants* — actors whose business model is the harvest, packaging, and resale of attention. Platforms inherit and intensify this model.

Vocabulary — platform-media analysis

algorithmic amplification, attention rent, recommendation system, network effect, platform governance, content moderation, attention economy, asymmetric visibility, the visible majority, micro-targeting.

3. Practise

Niveau E — controlled

1. Match: algorithmic amplification → ranking-driven visibility; attention rent → the price of your attention; the visible majority → not the same as the actual majority.
2. T or F: platforms inherit the attention-merchant model; algorithmic amplification reflects underlying public opinion 1:1.

Niveau E — productive

3. Build 4 sentences applying platform-media vocabulary to a recent online controversy.

4. Your turn

Media-analysis essay, 450 words. Argue a complex causal claim about platforms and public opinion. Use 6 platform-media terms + 7 academic discourse markers + 2 cleft structures + 2 integrated quotes + 1 hedge.

Sample

The single most useful conceptual distinction in this year's reading on platform media is Zeynep Tufekci's between public opinion and the *visible majority*. The available evidence suggests that algorithmic amplification produces attention asymmetries that systematically diverge from the underlying distribution of views in a given population. Accordingly, what looks like a consensus on a platform — a trending hashtag, a saturated reply space, a viral take — is not, in the strict sense, public opinion. It is a function of the platform's ranking signals interacting with user behaviour. By contrast with the older mass-media model, where editorial gatekeepers were visible and contestable, platform amplification is structurally opaque. It is precisely this opacity that makes Tim Wu's *attention merchant* genealogy useful: the business model is continuous with earlier media, but the visibility of the gatekeepers has decreased while the precision of micro-targeting has increased. More specifically, the common claim that *the algorithm is showing what people want* is, on inspection, a circular one. The algorithm is showing what its ranking signals treat as engaging; engagement-as-measured is shaped by what the algorithm previously elevated. The system is, in this regard, a feedback loop with no neutral baseline. Critics will counter, fairly, that *some* signal of underlying interest is preserved — otherwise the platform would lose users. I accept that, but the signal is filtered through ranking choices that are themselves political-economic. The honest analytical move is to decompose the visible majority into three components: underlying preferences (real but partial), ranking-induced amplification (large and shaping), and feedback-loop reinforcement (non-trivial). It is precisely this decomposition that the public discourse has been bad at. Caution is warranted; the next decade of platform governance will, in my reading, hinge on whether regulators can compel transparency on the second and third components. Without that, *public opinion* and *aggregated platform behaviour* will continue to be confused — to the political advantage of whoever sets the ranking signals.

5. Further reading / listening

- Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas* (2017).
- Tim Wu, *The Attention Merchants* (2016).
- Joseph Bernstein — accessible journalism on platforms.

6. Teacher answer key

Controlled. 1. all true.

2. T, F (it is shaped by ranking signals).

Productive. 3. Open.