

Democracy, Neo-Orality, and the Unraveling of Political Norms: What Can We Social and Political Scholars Do?

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Abstract

Democratic norms are unraveling amid a deep transformation in how we know, feel, and communicate in public. This essay argues that what we are witnessing is not merely institutional decay but a shift in the epistemic and affective foundations of democratic life itself. Drawing on media theory, political communication, legal scholarship, and post-truth studies, we introduce the concept of *neo-orality* to describe an emerging mode of political discourse defined by immediacy, affect, narrative, and performance. We trace five interwoven dynamics—epistemic fragmentation, performative populism, autocratic legalism, aestheticized politics, and climate silence—as symptoms of this shift. In response, we call for a realignment of method in social and political science: a turn toward closer, slower, and more situated forms of inquiry grounded in participatory, abductive, and design-informed traditions. The essay concludes by offering eight concrete, empirically grounded research directions to guide scholars committed to understanding—and engaging with—democratic life as it is now lived: fractured, mediated—and urgently still in motion.

Keywords

Post-Truth, Democratic Erosion, Neo-Orality, Political Communication, Autocratic Legalism, Epistemic Fragmentation, Populism, Media Ecology

1. Introduction

“Dans une dictature, au plus tard à partir de la deuxième génération, une danse populaire peut devenir plus dangereuse pour le régime qu’un nouveau parti révolutionnaire.”

—*Le Monde*, on David Bowie’s Berlin concert (2016)

We used to think that democracy died with a bang—a coup, a war, a shuttered parliament. But more and more, it dies with a shrug. Not all at once, but drip by drip. Norms loosen, then snap. Courts are stacked. Journalists harassed. Facts lose their gravitational pull. And all the while, the rituals of democracy continue: elections are held, laws passed, press briefings staged. But the substance shifts beneath the surface.

This essay is about that shift. We ask not only *what* is happening to democracy, but *how* it is happening. What kind of cultural, epistemic, and legal transformations underwrite the slide from liberal democratic norms toward performative authoritarianism? What role does our evolving media environment play? And what might social and political science contribute when truth, legality, and deliberation are no longer common currency?

2. Observing the Present Condition

“I dreamed I saw the future. It was just like the present, only dirtier.”

—Patti Smith, from *Auguries of Innocence* (2005)

Five subsections trace the intertwined cultural, epistemic, and legal shifts reshaping democratic life. Rather than identifying a single cause, we observe overlapping dynamics that have collectively transformed the conditions of political possibility.

2.1. From Democratic Backsliding to Disorientation

“Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth.”

—Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949)

Democratic erosion is well-documented. Bermeo (2016) defines the process as “the state-led debilitation or elimination of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy” (p. 5). Unlike earlier periods, today’s erosion rarely involves overt coups. Instead, leaders are elected fairly, then proceed to hollow out the systems that constrain them (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Mutual toleration and institutional forbearance—the democratic norms that keep partisan conflict from tipping into constitutional crisis—are now in short supply.

And yet something more elusive is at play. The procedural skeleton of democracy often remains intact, but the animating spirit—truth-seeking, norm observance, civic responsibility—feels absent. This is not simply political decay; it is *epistemic unmooring*. As Luhrmann & Lindberg (2019) observe, contemporary leaders have become “increasingly adept at simulating democratic practices while systematically undermining them” (p. 1098).

2.2. Post-Truth as Cultural Operating System

“Theories and schools, like microbes and globules, devour each other and by their struggle ensure the continuing of life.”

—Marcel Proust, *Cities of the Plain* (1927)

Post-truth politics is not a side effect of democratic decline; it is one of its engines. The Oxford Dictionary defined “post-truth” as relating to situations where “objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief”. McIntyre (2018) argues that post-truth isn’t the absence of truth, but the elevation of *feeling over fact*.

Importantly, post-truth thrives not in a vacuum but in an overloaded media environment. As Benkler, Faris, & Roberts (2018) document in their analysis of the U.S. media ecosystem, the breakdown of shared narratives has enabled “epistemic fragmentation”: a condition in which different groups not only hold different opinions, but operate with fundamentally incompatible understandings of reality.

Lying has become performative. As Hahl, Kim, & Zuckerman Sivan (2018) argue, charismatic populists may gain credibility precisely *because* they lie—the lie is read not as deception but as defiance. “The transgressive behavior of such leaders signals authenticity to their base by demonstrating a willingness to challenge norms” (p. 7). The result is a political culture in which lying becomes a badge of loyalty, not a liability. Here, post-truth is less a strategy than a cultural mood—a kind of epistemic ambience in which emotional resonance trumps verification. As Papacharissi (2015) suggests, publics today often affiliate not through shared facts but through affective atmospheres, ambient affiliations that shape how people *feel* politically rather than what they *think*. In this landscape, truth is no longer a benchmark—it is a vibe.

The implications of post-truth politics extend far beyond national borders. When epistemic fragmentation becomes a governing strategy, diplomacy itself begins to falter. Trust—so fundamental to international cooperation—relies on at least a minimal agreement about facts, timelines, and intentions. That foundation is now crumbling. In 2024, Russian disinformation campaigns spread doctored videos suggesting Ukrainian officials had staged their own civilian casualties—claims that circulated faster than they could be debunked. Similarly, deepfakes attributed to leaders of the Taiwan Region emerged during the 2024 local election, aiming to undermine cross-strait credibility. These are not merely information attacks—they are assaults on shared reality. They weaponize the post-truth condition by injecting doubt into already fragile diplomatic channels. The result is a form of epistemic warfare, in which ambiguity itself becomes a tool of statecraft.

At the same time, the collapse of shared narratives weakens multilateral institutions. During the 2023 UN Climate Summit, disagreements over climate financing were exacerbated by viral misinformation that falsely claimed Global South leaders had misused previous aid. Though quickly refuted, the claims reshaped the negotiation dynamic in real time. In a post-truth environment, strategic lying and performative contradiction are no longer diplomatic anomalies—they are normalized tools of influence. International relations now operate increasingly within a post-factual arena, where soft power becomes memetic, and credibility is performative, not institutional.

No figure embodies this transformation more completely than Donald Trump—

the genre's archetype, its performative prototype, its ur-form. His political power was never grounded in institutional fluency or empirical coherence, but in his ability to dominate the affective atmosphere. From claiming that he "won the 2020 election by a landslide" to suggesting that COVID-19 might be treated by "injecting disinfectant," Trump's statements were not missteps. They were performative declarations, calibrated for emotional impact and viral uptake. These spectacular untruths served a dual function: they signaled tribal loyalty—truth as vibe, not verification—and they acted as tactical distractions, flooding the attention economy and forcing media and institutions into a reactive posture (Benkler et al., 2018). In post-truth politics, distraction is not incidental—it is the terrain. Trump didn't dismantle norms through logic; he outpaced them through velocity and overload. His authority emerged not despite post-truth conditions, but because of them.

For younger generations, democracy is increasingly encountered as spectacle, contradiction, or meme. Civic trust doesn't collapse in dramatic moments—it decays through digital osmosis. In a post-truth world, the very tools of civic learning feel mismatched to the emotional pace of political life. What erodes is not just trust in institutions, but the capacity to imagine democracy as something slow, collective, and real (Papacharissi, 2015; Marres, 2017).

2.3. The Return of Orality: From Print Reason to Digital Spectacle

"There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in."

—Leonard Cohen, "Anthem" (1992)

To understand this shift, we must move beyond content and look at *form*. Walter Ong (1982) described the profound cognitive and social changes ushered in by literacy, especially print literacy: abstract thinking, linear logic, and a preference for detached reason. In contrast, oral cultures favor performance, immediacy, and group memory.

With the rise of digital platforms—YouTube, Twitter/X, TikTok—we see a return to orality, albeit in a new technological key. As Postman (1985) warned, television had already begun shifting politics from exposition to entertainment. Today, that shift is total. The dominant media forms reward spectacle over coherence, emotional resonance over argument. We are entering a phase of "secondary orality," Ong's term for media environments that simulate orality's characteristics within literate societies. By neo-orality, we mean not just a return to oral habits, but a deeper epistemic shift. It privileges immediacy over reflection, presence over argument, and shared emotional resonance over detached verification. Unlike classic orality, which relied on embodied presence, neo-orality travels across screens, memes, and livestreams. Some examples:

- In early April 2025, US President Trump announced sweeping new tariffs, describing U.S. trading partners as nations that had "screwed us for decades" and were now "kissing our ass" to avoid economic punishment. More than just rudeness—this discourse is part of a broader epistemic and aesthetic shift. De-

- livered in a rally setting and quickly circulated as short video clips, the statement was not a policy explanation but a performative act of vengeance—a visceral staging of dominance, designed to elicit tribal cheers rather than economic understanding. This is not just populist bluster—it is textbook neo-orality. The language is affective, unfiltered, and designed for immediate memetic transmission. The performance bypasses deliberative reasoning and instead enacts a spectacle of grievance and domination. It collapses the distinction between foreign policy and personal insult, and replaces policy deliberation with affective posturing. Here, the *truth-value* of the claim is irrelevant; its power lies in the visceral affect it produces—what Ong might call a “resonant utterance” that activates a loyal audience through shared emotional cues.
- In 2024, following his electoral defeat and legal troubles, Jair Bolsonaro staged a political return through short-form TikTok videos that merged prayer, nostalgia, and masculine bravado. In one viral clip, he stood in silence for ten seconds, tears welling up, as gospel music played and the caption read: “*They tried to silence me, but God has other plans.*” No argument was offered—only a performance of martyrdom. This clip encapsulates neo-orality’s paradoxical fusion of intimacy and distance. The gesture is affectively saturated, visually sparse, and narratively empty—but nonetheless powerful. It enacts political presence not through speech, but through emotional display and algorithmic amplification. Bolsonaro performs political meaning through aesthetics and silence, crafting a shared emotional resonance that spreads faster than reasoned discourse ever could.
 - In the Philippines, former President Rodrigo Duterte cultivated a uniquely violent form of neo-orality. Known for unscripted, coarse-language tirades—often live-streamed or memetically repackaged—Duterte spoke not in policy but in provocation. Statements like “I’ll kill you” or “Throw criminals into the sea” were not gaffes but genre performances: emotionally charged, populist spectacles circulated across Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp. Delivered in Taglish and often punctuated with laughter or singing, these moments blended intimacy with threat, creating a hybrid mode of digital authoritarian charisma. While stylistically distinct, Duterte’s discourse shares the infrastructural DNA of neo-orality: immediacy, performance, and resonance over reason. He did not argue policy—he enacted *dominance*. His communicative power lay in collapsing emotional proximity with executive authority, enabled by a platform ecosystem where coarse affect travels faster than critique.
 - In India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s public communication often blends ritual, direct address, and platform-native aesthetics. During a 2024 military standoff with China, he led a live-streamed meditation session broadcast nationally across TV and digital platforms. Speaking softly and rhythmically, he invoked breath, resilience, and civilizational wisdom. Though no explicit political message was offered, the event was widely circulated as 15-second reels, devotional edits, and meme clips—becoming a viral object of both rev-

erence and remix. Strictly speaking, neo-orality refers to the return of oral-like features—immediacy, emotional resonance, liveness, communal response—within digitally mediated, often hybrid forms. While Modi’s broadcast leans heavily on visual aesthetics and ritual symbolism, it nonetheless operates within a neo-oral frame. His authority is enacted through cadence and presence, not logical proposition. The broadcast stages a collective, affectively charged experience: not to argue, but to *resonate*. As with other neo-oral forms, its epistemic mode is ambient rather than declarative. It draws audiences into a synchronised national affect, in which belonging is performed rather than reasoned.

Neo-orality is not a Western anomaly—it is a transcultural media condition rooted in platform infrastructures, affective economies, and the post-print collapse of epistemic gatekeeping. While its emotional tones vary—nationalist vengeance in the U.S., spiritualized resilience in India—the underlying communicative logic is strikingly consistent. This is not about culture; it is about infrastructure. The affective, real-time, and highly performative logic of neo-orality flourishes across contexts because it is amplified and shaped by global platforms that reward virality over coherence, resonance over reason. Publics increasingly form not through deliberation but through “affective attunement” (Papacharissi, 2025)—a shared sensibility sustained through images, gestures, and digital proximity. In this sense, neo-orality is not merely a return to earlier oral traditions, but a global mutation of political discourse—digitally mediated, epistemically unstable, and profoundly shaped by the emotional architectures of our time.

Neo-orality’s political implications are profound: it collapses the distance between spectacle and truth, compresses deliberation into performance, and replaces the ethos of persuasion with the affective pull of belonging. This is not just a new media form—it is a new *condition of knowing*.

The consequences for democratic discourse are profound. Politicians succeed not by persuading across lines of difference, but by performing loyalty to a tribe. Rational debate gives way to memetic warfare. Argument becomes vibe.

2.4. Law as Weapon: Autocratic Legalism in Action

“Truth goes after him.”

—Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities* (1930)

While epistemic ground shifts, legal architecture is also being repurposed. Scheppele (2018) calls this “autocratic legalism”: the use of law to entrench illiberal rule. Unlike classic dictators, today’s autocrats do not burn constitutions—they rewrite them, stack courts, and criminalize dissent through plausible-sounding legislation.

Tushnet (2020) notes that the very tools of liberal constitutionalism—judicial review, emergency powers, prosecutorial discretion—can be redeployed against the democratic project. The law becomes not a check on power but a mask for it. As Ginsburg & Huq (2018) put it, “Democratic erosion is legalistic: it proceeds

through laws and courts, not tanks in the streets” (p. 7).

The effect is disorienting. Citizens are asked to trust systems that appear procedurally sound but substantively rigged. This further erodes legitimacy, feeding the post-truth vortex.

2.5. The Vanishing Climate: When Urgency Evaporates

“We are not outside the world, but inside it, and our silence is part of its dangerous chemistry.”

—Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia* (2017)

It is striking how quickly the climate crisis—once an incontestable pillar of public concern—has faded from political discourse. Not because the problem has been resolved, but because it has become *unspeakable* within the prevailing political mood. Despite unprecedented wildfires, droughts, floods, and planetary temperature records, political rhetoric around climate has become muted, hesitant, even evasive. What was once framed as a civilizational imperative now often feels like background noise.

The disappearance of climate urgency from mainstream political discourse, we suggest, is not an accident. It reflects the convergence of several forces: the rise of post-truth political strategies (McIntyre, 2018), the saturation of public attention by competing narratives (Benkler et al., 2018), and what Ghosh (2016: p. 11) has called “the great derangement”—the collective inability of modern political systems and storytelling forms to grapple with the scale of ecological collapse. The urgency has not gone away—only our capacity to metabolize it in public life has.

Moreover, the climate crisis disrupts the temporal logic on which most liberal democracies rely. It demands action across decades, even centuries, in systems structured around short-term elections and media cycles. As political theorist Clark (2011) argues, modern governance is fundamentally unprepared to engage with deep time and planetary volatility.

The result is a drift toward denial—not always explicit, but structural. When behaving like a pig becomes culturally permissible again, it’s because the moral infrastructure that once framed restraint as virtue has been destabilized. The climate crisis exemplifies this new cultural mood: not one of confrontation, but of evasion.

Climate silence rarely exists in isolation. It intersects with other post-truth and populist discourses in ways that make environmental urgency politically unspeakable. Populist leaders often frame ecological concern as elitist or anti-growth, casting climate action as a threat to national sovereignty or working-class identity. In 2023, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni dismissed EU climate goals as “ideological luxury” that would “punish our farmers and benefit China”—a reframing that aligned planetary urgency with external threat and internal betrayal. At the same time, aestheticized political movements displace ecological narratives with emotionally charged spectacles—from border security to culture wars—that monopolize public attention. Within this discursive economy, climate becomes struc-

turally invisible: not because it is denied outright, but because it fails to compete in an affect-saturated, zero-sum media environment. The result is not silence in the literal sense, but discursive crowding—a drowning out of the planetary by the performative. In this way, climate politics exemplifies the core post-truth condition: it is not just what gets said, but what can still be heard.

Climate politics is thus not merely one policy domain among others; it is the mirror in which we can see most clearly the entanglement of narrative, emotion, legality, and institutional decay. If democracy struggles to speak about the planet, it is because something deeper has been lost in its capacity to narrate the future.

3. From Observation to Hypothesis: What Might Social and Political Scientists Do?

“We are asked to stand up in the present moment and to speak courageously for those who came before, to speak against familiar currents, from a state of imbalance and as articulately as we can manage.”

—Anne Bogart, *And Then, You Act* (2007)

If we accept that democratic erosion today is epistemic, performative, and legally sanctioned all at once, then our research toolbox may need updating. Below are eight possible avenues for inquiry—less as imperatives, more as invitations to explore the shape of political life under new conditions.

Before turning to the *what*, it may be necessary to reconsider the *how*. After all, if the conditions of political knowledge are changing, so too must the way we generate it. The traditional stance of scholarly detachment—useful in times of relative consensus—may be insufficient, even complicit, in a time of institutional mistrust, media fragmentation, and epistemic tribalism.

We might therefore begin by asking: what does it mean to conduct research in a time of democratic uncertainty and climate silence? What would it mean to move closer—not only in empathy, but in method? This turn to proximity is not a retreat from rigor but a redefinition of it. Participatory Action Research (Reason & Bradbury, 2008), co-creative ethnographic practice (Haraway, 1988), and iterative, design-informed approaches (Fendt, 2024; Liedtka, 2015) offer pathways for rethinking what counts as valid knowledge—and who gets to generate it.

This kind of research happens not from a distant perch but in the trenches. It is slow, embodied, often messy. It takes place in conversation, in prototyping workshops, in street-level observations and feedback loops. And it yields not only insights, but relations, frictions, and sometimes repair. What follows, then, are eight propositions—possible *whats*—grounded in this ethos of methodological proximity.

How Might We Work? We might move closer—methodologically, ethically, and bodily. In a time of epistemic fragmentation and democratic fatigue, it may no longer suffice to study politics from a safe analytical distance. The crises we face—climate inaction, misinformation, democratic erosion—are not only discursive but lived, entangled with everyday perception, memory, and emotion. De-

tached scholarship risks reinforcing the very alienation that fuels distrust in institutions and experts.

Instead, we might imagine scholarship as something more embedded: curious, iterative, and situated in the lives of those most affected. Participatory Action Research (Reason & Bradbury, 2008), co-creative fieldwork (Haraway, 1988), and Design Thinking Method (Brown, 2009; Liedtka, 2015) offer pathways toward a more entangled form of inquiry—what some have called *engaged scholarship* (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006).

This is not a call for naïve immersion. It is a rigorous, accountable mode of working “along the nerve of one’s own most intimate sensitivity” (Truitt, 2009). Wicked political problems demand “abductive, human-centered, iterative” approaches that do not merely analyze political complexity but co-create new understandings within it (Fendt, 2024). Scholars might conduct research *with*, not merely *about*, the people and systems under pressure—while maintaining clarity, structure, and academic rigor.

A tangible example: imagine a team of researchers investigating climate communication in post-industrial towns. Rather than surveying attitudes from afar, they embed themselves with community organizers, test visual metaphors, run narrative prototyping workshops, and iteratively refine their questions. The result is not only data but transformation: of theory, of trust, and of what we understand research to be.

This kind of scholarship takes place in the trenches. It is messy. It is slow. But perhaps, in a time of planetary precarity and political unravelling, it is one kind that still has a chance to matter. Of course, this is not risk-free work. To embed oneself—bodily, politically, methodologically—is to become implicated. Scholars may face reputational risks, institutional pushback, or burnout. But perhaps those risks are the cost of relevance. If the stakes of politics are now visceral, affective, and live-streamed, the stakes of scholarship must stretch to meet them—not with performative activism, but with situated courage.

What Might We Study? What to Choose to Study, Reframe, or Reveal

Grouped loosely into three interwoven domains—epistemic fractures, affective politics, and hybrid zones—what follows are eight concrete, researchable directions, inviting scholars to explore pressing phenomena in situated, participatory, and often experimental ways.

What follows is not a checklist, but a cluster of interwoven questions—each one anchored in practice, yet reaching toward a larger diagnostic. To organize the texture without flattening it, we group these inquiries under three loosely braided themes: epistemic fractures, affective politics, and hybrid zones. Each offers a different vantage point on how truth, belonging, and power now move.

3.1. Studying the Epistemic Infrastructure of Belief

How do people come to believe things—and what sustains those beliefs when evidence contradicts them? Political misinformation about vaccines, for example,

could be explored not just as a failure of science communication but as an act of group belonging. Ethnographic work might uncover the emotional and relational economies behind “alternative facts” (Fricker, 2007).

Example: A field study embedded in Telegram communities during the COVID-19 pandemic, mapping how distrust in public health became a form of identity, not merely opinion.

Purpose: To understand how epistemic allegiance forms through emotional and social bonds rather than factual persuasion.

3.2. Treating Media Systems as Infrastructures

Platforms like TikTok and Telegram are not just channels—they are institutions shaping what is sayable, visible, and viral. Scholars might investigate how algorithmic infrastructures influence the spread of conspiracy-laden content around climate change using network analysis and interface ethnography (Gillespie, 2018).

Example: Studying TikTok’s algorithm during the 2023 Canadian wildfires to understand why anti-climate “hoax” videos reached broader audiences than emergency warnings—echoing Benkler et al. (2018)’s insight that fragmented media systems can amplify ideologically driven misinformation while muting institutional signals.

Purpose: To reveal how platform architectures amplify misinformation and de-prioritize institutional messaging in times of crisis.

3.3. Interrogating Political Aesthetics and Affect

Politics today travels as mood, gesture, spectacle. Why do some images—burning flags, symbolic costumes, viral dance protests—travel deeper than policy reports? As Stone (2002) has long argued, policy is never just about facts or logic—it’s a contest of narratives, symbols, and emotions. In the current moment, this symbolic terrain is increasingly visual, memetic, and affect-driven. Scholars might analyze the choreography of resistance movements such as #EndSARS or French pension strikes to study how emotion is staged and received (Papacharissi, 2015).

Example: Visual and narrative analysis of signage, costume, and soundscapes at pro-Palestinian and pro-Israeli protests across university campuses in 2024.

Purpose: To examine how aesthetic choices construct political meaning and emotional identification within polarized publics.

3.4. Exploring Norm Erosion in Everyday Talk

Democratic drift often surfaces in mundane contexts. Studying the politicization of parent-teacher WhatsApp groups or neighborhood Facebook pages might reveal how mistrust of institutions circulates informally. Researchers might employ digital ethnography and conversational analysis (Woolgar & Neyland, 2013).

Example: A sociolinguistic mapping of chat group debates around school curricula and gender inclusion policies in German-speaking public schools.

Purpose: To trace the micro-politics of everyday speech as a site where democratic norms are reinforced, challenged, or eroded.

3.5. Analyzing Hybrid Political Actors and Cultural Intermediaries

Some of the most revealing sites of political transformation occur in zones that defy disciplinary or institutional boundaries. Influencers who straddle lifestyle and political commentary (e.g., wellness advocates promoting anti-institutional views) form new power nodes. These actors blend personal branding with ideology. Scholars could use mixed methods to trace their audience engagement patterns and discursive strategies (Abidin, 2021).

Example: Analyzing content posted by popular food and wellness creators during election cycles to track how wellness vocabularies bleed into anti-expert political discourse.

Purpose: To identify the cultural intermediaries who normalize distrust in institutions under the guise of lifestyle advice.

3.6. Examining Law's Symbolic and Procedural Duality

Legal systems today are both tools of governance and instruments of political performance. When law appears legitimate but serves illiberal ends, scholars might analyze not just its content but its performative function. Prosecution of opposition figures under broad anti-corruption statutes may be read both legally and semiotically (Scheppele, 2018).

Example: A comparative analysis of legal framing in the disqualification of candidates on ethics grounds in election years across Brazil, the US, and South Africa.

Purpose: To uncover how legality is used performatively to affirm democratic legitimacy while potentially subverting it.

3.7. Studying Resilience Practices and Narrative Repair

Amid disinformation and despair, some communities foster epistemic resilience through local storytelling, public rituals, or creative civic pedagogy. Researchers might study municipal-level innovations in participatory democracy or digital literacy campaigns and the narratives that sustain them (Polletta, 2006).

Example: A collaborative workshop using both digital scraping tools and discourse analysis to study comment threads around “15-minute cities” conspiracy discourse in urban planning debates.

Purpose: To assess where traditional methods fail and to prototype adaptive forms of inquiry.

3.8. Revisiting Our Own Assumptions and Methods

Are our categories still capturing the world? Does “polarization” explain the

QAnon phenomenon? Are surveys enough to understand meme warfare? We might consider methodological hybridity—mixing computational tools with narrative analysis, or blending large-scale data with close readings of comment threads (Marres, 2017).

Example. Following a yearlong citizen assembly on green infrastructure in Warsaw to track how participants' sense of agency and narrative frames evolve over time.

Purpose. To learn how participatory processes can foster epistemic resilience and civic imagination in times of systemic fatigue.

3.9. The Political Imagination of Youth under Platform Conditions

How are younger generations learning what democracy is—or isn't—in a post-truth, neo-oral media environment? Researchers might explore how effective platform cultures shape civic formation: how young people encounter power, legitimacy, and belonging in formats dominated by memes, influencers, and algorithmic intensification.

Example. An ethnographic study of high school students in Germany using TikTok and Telegram during European Parliament debates—mapping how their sense of “politics” is shaped more by influencer commentary and ironic reaction videos than by formal curricula or news.

Purpose. To understand how civic trust, political belonging, and epistemic formation are being reshaped by ambient affect, memetic virality, and the emotional architectures of platform-native life.

A Tangle of Urgencies

These eight propositions are not meant to stand apart. On the contrary, they overlap and tangle like root systems. Aesthetic practices flow into affective publics. The legal becomes theatrical. Belief systems spread through platform logics. A study of any one of these domains will likely brush up against others. That is not a flaw—it is the texture of the moment we are living in (Papacharissi, 2015; Marres, 2017). This list does not pretend to be exhaustive. It reflects, instead, a personal and situated judgment—what I find most urgent, most alive with possibility. Others will frame different questions and see different patterns. That is not only welcome but necessary. The value lies not in the fixity of the themes, but in the spirit of inquiry they are offered in: attuned to fragility, committed to relevance, and willing to move alongside the world, rather than merely comment on it (Haraway, 1988).

In lieu of a Conclusion. Still, We Try.

“For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.”

— T. S. Eliot, *East Coker, Four Quartets* (1940)

What if democracy is not dying but mutating? Not being dismantled but *re-skinned*? A politics that looks familiar on the surface—campaigns, courts, news

cycles—but operates on fundamentally altered cultural and cognitive terrain?

This paper has argued that the erosion of democratic norms must be understood not only institutionally, but epistemologically and technologically. The rise of neo-oral media cultures, the weaponization of law, and the performative turn in political identity formation together create a landscape in which liberal democracy, as we have known it, struggles to survive.

And yet the story is not finished.

Social and political science, if it is to meet this moment, might take risks: methodologically, conceptually, and normatively. We cannot afford to study democracy as if its basic conditions still hold. The question now is not simply whether democracies will endure, but *what form* they will take in a post-truth, post-print, neo-oral world.

To borrow from [Arendt \(1958\)](#), the political is always a space of appearance—of bodies and words thrown into the world. But what happens when that space is saturated with spectacle and stripped of shared reality? What kind of appearance is still possible? In such a landscape, truth does not disappear; it becomes ambient, affective, unstable—felt more than agreed upon. The challenge, then, is ontological as much as institutional: not just to preserve democratic procedures, but to reimagine what it means to appear together in a shared world.

If truth is now vibed rather than verified, and if belonging is staged rather than negotiated, then the political scholar's task may be less to resolve contradictions than to dwell within them—to trace, with care, the contours of the mess.

Some may argue that liberal democracy—once a powerful engine of emancipation—is reaching the limits of what it can offer ([Brown, 2015](#); [Mouffe, 2018](#)). In its place, new political imaginaries are beginning to surface: from radical municipal experiments in local self-governance ([Bookchin, 1995](#)) to Indigenous traditions that center reciprocity, relational accountability, and ecological balance ([Simpson, 2017](#)). These emerging models are less anchored in the abstract, individualist logic of print-based modernity and more in collective, situated ways of knowing. Though still on the margins, they trace the contours of futures not yet dominant, but already in motion—demanding our curiosity, our imagination, and perhaps, our allegiance.

And so, we keep watching. We keep listening. We keep trying.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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