

DEMOS

**VERIFICATION,
DELIBERATION,
ACCOUNTABILITY**

A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR
TACKLING EPISTEMIC
COLLAPSE AND RENEWING
DEMOCRACY

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FOREWORD

BY POLLY CURTIS



***"Epistemic security"** - the collective ability of a society to keep its knowledge safe*

Fake news, mis- and disinformation, are as old as democracies, but the democratic emergency we are now witnessing across the world is embedded in a new level of information crisis.

The information supply chains that fuel our democratic processes are breaking down, corrupting and fragmenting to the point where people can no longer make good sense of the world around them. Elsewhere at Demos, we have made the case for epistemic security, to secure our information supply chains, just as we would other critical resources such as oil, gas, or semiconductors.

We've argued that the UK has some protective factors that means it could resist the information decline being witnessed in other parts of the world. But this won't happen without policymakers actively pursuing this cause through legislation, regulation, proactive media policy and public education. Our [Epistemic Security Network](#) is focused on this work.

In this paper the esteemed journalist and founder of Bellingcat, Eliot Higgins, and the academic Dr Natalie Martin, set out a new framework to help us understand how epistemic security is embedded in the health of democracy, and that without it democracies hollow out and ultimately collapse.

At Demos we are working on practical ways to upgrade democracy, to win back trust and mend the broken relationships between state and citizen. Trusted information is critical to that. We hope this contribution helps policymakers understand the scale of the challenges we face, and focuses efforts on improving the points at which citizens can better engage in democracy.

A huge thank you to Eliot and Natalie for this important work. Demos is proud to be publishing this guest essay; the authors are solely responsible for its contents.

Polly Curtis, CEO, Demos

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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INTRODUCTION

THE DEMOCRATIC EPISTEMIC EMERGENCY

Across much of the world, democracy is no longer merely fraying at the edges, it is suffering an epistemic collapse.¹ We are experiencing not just a political crisis, but a deeper breakdown in the basic conditions that allow societies to establish truth, debate what matters, and hold power to account.

Disinformation, institutional distrust, and citizen disengagement are often described as separate challenges. However, they are better understood as symptoms of a single underlying problem: the loss of the shared processes that make democratic life possible. Elections may still be held, rights may still exist on paper, and governments may still speak the language of democracy, yet the perceived link between citizens and power is dissolving.

This is not a hypothetical threat. The build up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq exposed the hollowness of political deliberation. The 2008 financial crash revealed elite impunity. Covid-19 tested governments' ability to verify facts at speed in a rapidly changing information environment, with profound consequences for public trust. The storming of the US Capitol on January 6th, 2021, showed how disordered counterpublics,² sustained by conspiracies and inverted truth-claims, can challenge democratic legitimacy itself. In each case, the crisis functioned as a stress test. Too often, institutions failed to demonstrate their capability to establish truth, reason in public, or enforce accountability. Each of these failures deepen the sense that democracy is a performance rather than a reality.

THE FUNCTIONAL CORE OF DEMOCRACY

For democracy to mean more than procedure, it must rest on three foundational functions.

- Citizens must be able to know what is true.
- They must be able to see that their voices count in shaping public reasoning.
- And they must be able to hold power to account.

These are not lofty aspirations, but the functional minimum of self-rule. They are what make democracy more than a label, and when visible, democracy earns legitimacy even in moments of crisis. When they are weakened, trust erodes, participation withers, and institutions become fragile.

1 Seger, E., Perry, H. and Hancock, J. (2025) Epistemic Security 2029: Fortifying the UK's Information Supply Chain to tackle the Democratic Emergency. London, Demos. Available at: <https://demos.co.uk/research/epistemic-security-2029-fortifying-the-uks-information-supply-chain-to-tackle-the-democratic-emergency/>

2 Fraser, N. (1990) 'Rethinking the Public Sphere', *Social text*, 8(3). See also: Warner, M. (2002) *Publics and counterpublics*. New York: Zone Books.

For generations, democracies sustained these functions through visible public rituals: investigative journalism, parliamentary debate, judicial review, protest, and civic activism. These were not just mechanisms of governance, but public practices that conferred legitimacy and reinforced the foundations of democracy. Citizens could see truth being tested, voices being heard, and power being constrained. The health of democracy lay not in perfection, but in the perception by significant sections of the citizenry that these functions were pursued in good faith.

THE NATURE OF THE COLLAPSE

Today, these functions are significantly eroding. While some institutions still perform them robustly, too often what persists is consequence-free ritual. Parliamentary inquiries yield minimal change. Media systems, driven by algorithmic incentives, amplify outrage, obscuring difficult truths. Legal processes may uphold standards, but only in isolated instances.

Beyond erosion lies outright disorder. In such systems, democracy's facade is meticulously simulated, while its substance is inverted. Falsehoods masquerade as fact, debate descends into polarisation and outrage, and accountability shrinks to scapegoating or persecution. For participants, these simulations frequently feel more authentic than the institutions they reject. They mimic democracy's forms while actively corroding its foundations.

The danger isn't merely slow democratic decay. Rather, crises expose institutional hollowness and precipitate collapse. When the public perceives institutions as simply going through the motions, trust plummets. Citizens then react in two primary ways: some disengage entirely, abandoning political belief altogether. Others gravitate towards alternative systems of meaning, conspiracies, ideological movements, or disordered counterpublics that promise not truth, but coherence; not accountability, but certainty; not deliberation, but belonging. Both responses exacerbate the democratic emergency.

THE VDA FRAMEWORK

This report introduces the VDA Framework: a way of diagnosing when democracy is functioning, when it is hollowing, and when it has descended into simulated democracy. It shifts the focus from appearances to realities, exposing any hollowness and simulation behind the democratic façade. The framework rests on a simple proposition: democracy only works when verification, deliberation, and accountability are obvious to the people, and trusted by them.

Most democracies have weaknesses and are not actually functional but mildly hollow. True equality of opportunity is rare and wide gaps exist between rich and poor in some western nations. Whilst they are mostly good enough for most people not to take much notice, times of crises expose the hollowness, and lack of fairness, leading to cynicism and even mistrust about liberal democracy and who it actually works for.

Whilst a single crisis may not destroy legitimacy, repeated events accumulate to undermine trust in liberal democracies and leave them vulnerable to further deterioration. This can happen organically but it can also be exploited by bad actors who expedite the decline and aggravate the lack of trust in liberal institutions such as politicians, the rule of law and the news media. They are able to influence narratives and make the most of easy access to social media, and a susceptible audience.

The VDA Framework is presented as a way of making these issues clear in order for them to be resolved. If they are not identified, they cannot be addressed. In essence it is arguing that epistemic insecurity is caused by actors operating within a system weakened by structural factors. These have highlighted the less than perfect nature of liberal democracy, including

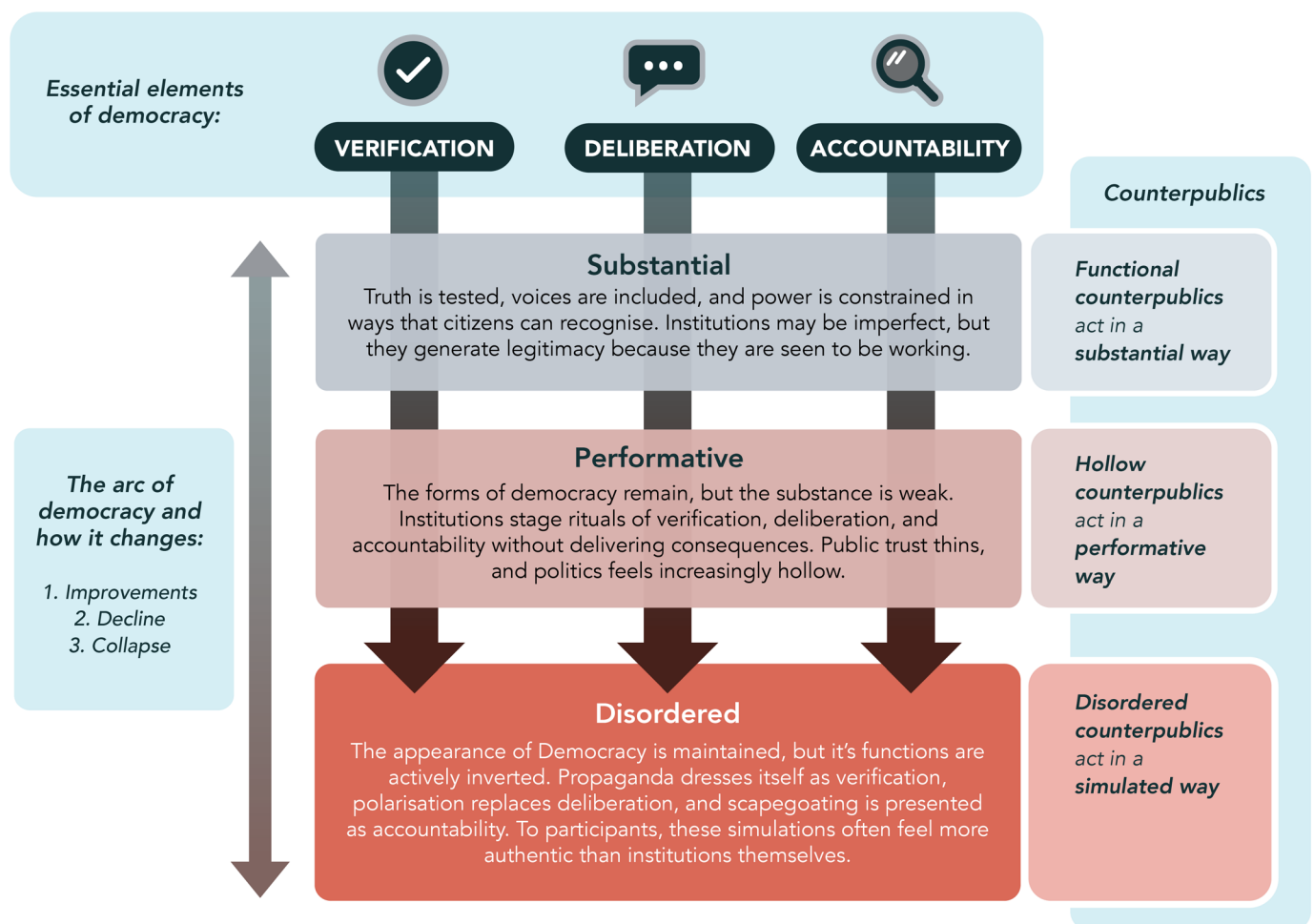
in the UK, leaving it vulnerable to exploitation by both domestic and foreign bad actors who encourage the further deterioration of VDA from mildly hollow, to fully hollow and even disordered.

The reason they do this is because systems with a disordered VDA are very vulnerable to suggestion, because they are prepared to accept emotional truth rather than factual truth. Facts can be stated as true rather than proved, giving them political power. The rise of social media means it is easier than ever before to influence narratives in this way.

The VDA Framework serves three purposes:

- A diagnostic lens – distinguishing between substance, performance, and simulation.
- A normative compass – clarifying what democracy requires to be meaningful.
- A moral vocabulary – naming the betrayal citizens feel when institutions go through the motions but fail to deliver truth, voice, or consequence.

The chapters that follow set out the VDA Framework in full. We begin by establishing the problem. This defines verification, deliberation, and accountability as the structural minimum of democracy. We then introduce the Arc of Democracy, showing how systems move between substantial, performative, and simulated VDA. We explain how crises, bad actors, and the algorithmic incentives of digital platforms accelerate the drift from hollow to disordered states in which disordered opposition groups, counter-publics, are emboldened to act on emotional truth alone.



Then we move from diagnosis to solution. This suggests the way to empower functional opposition movements (counterpublics), hold the government to account, and repair information environments. If we are to restore epistemic security, citizens need verification skills. When anyone with a smartphone can publish, news consumers must be aware of the need to verify information and have the skills to assess the information they are consuming and sharing.

These are not optional reforms. They are the preconditions of a democracy capable of surviving in substance, not just in name.³ Democracy's survival depends on a shared commitment to truth, voice, and consequence. If those functions are defended, democracy retains its legitimacy. If they are lost, democracy becomes a simulation. The task before us is clear: to see the collapse for what it is, and to rebuild the foundations that make self-government real.

3 See the UK House of Lords Communication and Digital Committee report on "Media Literacy" published 25th July 2025. Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/170/communications-and-digital-committee/news/208665>

WHAT DEMOCRACY NEEDS TO WORK

VERIFICATION, DELIBERATION, ACCOUNTABILITY

In a democracy, the framework of constitutions, laws, and institutions provides structure, but substance only exists when citizens can trust that truth is tested, that their voices count, and that those in power can be held responsible for what they do.

These three conditions, verification, deliberation, and accountability, form the structural minimum of democracy. They are not aspirational goals, but the foundations on which all other democratic values depend.



VERIFICATION

Can I know what is true?

Democracy requires a shared ability to establish what is real. Without verification, citizens cannot make informed choices, assess the promises of politicians, or hold governments to their word.

Verification happens through many channels: investigative journalism that tests official claims, scientific review that validates evidence, independent audit of finances, or trusted judicial procedures that examine facts in court. These processes allow citizens to distinguish between truth and fabrication.

When verification is robust, lies can be exposed, evidence can prevail in the long run, and there is a measure of confidence that those who transgress will face some kind of reckoning. When it collapses, the public sphere becomes saturated with noise, conspiracies flourish, and trust disintegrates. In the last two decades these dynamics have been amplified and catalysed by engagement driven, peer-to-peer, many-to-many tech platforms. The result is not just confusion, but paralysis: without reliable truth, the very basis of democratic consent disappears.



DELIBERATION

Does my voice matter?

Democracy is more than registering preferences. It is about reasoning together in public, acknowledging disagreement, and weighing competing values. Deliberation is the process that turns individual opinion into collective judgment.

It is expressed in different ways: debate in parliament, public consultation, citizen assemblies, media commentary, grassroots movements, or local forums. What unites these spaces is the expectation that arguments can be heard, contested, and considered.

When deliberation functions well, people may not always win, but they can recognise that their perspectives were acknowledged and that disagreement contributed to the decision. When it breaks down, debate becomes theatre or polarisation. Citizens no longer believe they are heard, and politics becomes a clash of identities rather than a process of reasoning.



ACCOUNTABILITY

Can the powerful be held to account?

Power without consequence is not democracy. Accountability ensures that those who govern remain answerable to those they govern.

This function is delivered through courts, elections, independent oversight bodies, whistleblowers, journalism, civil society activism, and protest. These mechanisms make authority explain itself, admit mistakes, and face real consequences when it abuses its power.

When accountability is visible and meaningful, citizens see that no one is above the rules. When it fails, impunity takes root. Scandals become routine, corruption is normalised, and the expectation of responsibility disappears. Cynicism grows, and people come to believe that politics is a closed game that never corrects itself.

THE INTERDEPENDENCE OF VDA

These three functions are inseparable. Each depends on the others to sustain democratic legitimacy.

Verification without deliberation reduces politics to technocracy, governed by experts but disconnected from public reasoning.

Deliberation without verification degenerates into noise, where falsehoods and speculation circulate unchecked.

Accountability without either becomes performance, symbolic gestures of scrutiny without the power to correct failure.

The resilience of democracy rests not on whether these functions exist in isolation, but on whether they operate together in ways that citizens can see and trust. When they do, democracy generates legitimacy, participation, and hope, but when they fail, democracy becomes fragile and begins to hollow out. These three functions are never static, their visibility and strength shift over time, sometimes reinforced, sometimes hollowed out.

Crucially, it is not enough for verification, deliberation, and accountability to exist in principle. They must be recognised as legitimate by the public. Institutions may carry out their functions with integrity, yet if citizens cannot see or believe that these democratic practices are real, legitimacy is lost. Conversely, simulated practices of democracy can generate loyalty precisely because they feel authentic, even while inverting democratic substance.

THE ARC OF DEMOCRACY

Democracy is not a settled condition. It is a system that constantly evolves, sometimes strengthening its foundations, sometimes eroding them. What matters is not whether a country is democratic in the abstract, but whether its core functions of verification, deliberation, and accountability are being reinforced or hollowed out.

The Arc of Democracy describes this direction of travel. It shows how systems can move toward legitimacy when these functions are performed visibly and substantially, or slide toward fragility and disorder when they are performed superficially or inverted altogether.

SUBSTANTIAL, PERFORMATIVE, SIMULATED

The framework identifies three distinct ways in which the democratic functions of VDA are carried out:

- **Substantial (Functional) VDA:** Truth is tested, voices are included, and power is constrained in ways that citizens can recognise. Institutions may be imperfect, but they generate legitimacy because they are seen to be working.
- **Performative (Hollow) VDA:** The forms of democracy remain, but the substance is weak. Institutions stage rituals of verification, deliberation, and accountability without delivering consequences. Public trust weakens, and politics feels increasingly hollow.
- **Simulated (Disordered) VDA:** The appearance of democracy is maintained, but its functions are actively inverted. Propaganda dresses itself as verification, polarisation replaces deliberation, and scapegoating is presented as accountability. To participants, these simulations often feel more authentic than institutions themselves.

These are not fixed categories. VDA can exist in relatively “pure” forms, but in practice most societies contain a mix of substantial, performative, and simulated functions. A country may have a judiciary that delivers substantial accountability, a legislature that operates performatively, and an executive that engages in simulation. Even within hollow or disordered democracies, it is common to find islands of substance. Independent courts may still uphold accountability, journalists may still verify evidence, or grassroots assemblies may still provide genuine deliberation. These mixed democratic practices matter. They show that substantial VDA functions can persist even in degraded systems, and they provide footholds from which democratic resilience can be rebuilt.

MOVEMENT ALONG THE ARC

The Arc is best understood as trajectory. The key question is whether systems are moving toward substance or toward simulation.

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- **Improvement** occurs when institutions strengthen verification, deliberation, or accountability in visible ways, for example, when courts constrain power, or when investigative reporting prompts reform.
 - **Decline** occurs when institutions weaken or hollow out their functions, and when publics come to recognise that appearances no longer match reality.
 - **Collapse** happens when simulation becomes dominant: when falsehoods, outrage, and persecution displace truth, voice, and consequence.

Crises often act as turning points. Wars, scandals, financial crashes, or pandemics put pressure on institutions and reveal whether they are functional. If they succeed, legitimacy can be strengthened. If they fail, publics see hollowness exposed and systems tip further into disorder. Turning points can also be more incremental, especially when bad actors deliberately exploit vulnerabilities. In such cases, disorder is not generated by a single exogenous shock but by the cumulative effect of targeted campaigns, sustained manipulation, or the slow erosion of institutional capacity and trust.

WHY TRAJECTORY MATTERS

Understanding democracy through the Arc shifts the focus from static measurement to dynamic movement. It avoids the trap of labelling countries as “democratic” or “not democratic”, and instead asks: are institutions becoming more capable of testing truth, including voices, and holding power to account? Or are they becoming less capable?

It also highlights that recovery is possible. Systems can move back along the arc if functions are restored and, crucially, if citizens can see them as real. What matters is not just the existence of institutions, but whether publics experience them as legitimate.

The Arc of Democracy therefore provides both a diagnostic lens and a strategic compass. It shows when systems are in decline, where they retain resilience, and how crises can either expose fragility or reinforce strength.

When mainstream institutions fail to perform these functions, citizens do not always withdraw from democratic participation. Many build or join alternative spaces of discourse, counterpublics, that can either reconstruct democratic practices from below (functional counterpublics) or accelerate collapse into disorder (disordered counterpublics).

COUNTERPUBLICS AND THE STRUGGLE FOR LEGITIMACY

When the institutions of democracy weaken, citizens - or publics - rarely respond with silence. Instead, they seek alternative arenas where meaning can be made, truth claims can be tested, and grievances can be voiced. Building on the work of Nancy Fraser and Michael Warner, these spaces are understood as counterpublics: communities that form in opposition to dominant institutions or narratives, where citizens attempt to reclaim democratic functions they believe are absent elsewhere.

Counterpublics are not inherently positive or negative. They reflect the condition of the democratic system in which they emerge. Some rebuild democracy's foundations from below. Others mimic its forms without substance. Still others reproduce its architecture in distorted ways, simulating integrity while entrenching disorder.

THE ROLE OF COUNTERPUBLICS

Counterpublics are discursive communities that organise themselves outside of mainstream channels. They may form as activist movements, grassroots campaigns, investigative networks, local forums, or digital collectives. What unites them is the conviction that established institutions are failing to perform the essential functions of verification, deliberation, and accountability.

Alongside institutions and counterpublics, the wider public sphere also matters. Publics are not passive recipients of information but active arenas where meaning is made, signals are interpreted, and legitimacy is granted or withheld. They provide the background field against which both institutions and counterpublics succeed or fail in sustaining democratic functions.

In practice, counterpublics act as sites of democratic experimentation. They develop their own norms of evidence, forums for debate, and practices of accountability. The quality of these practices varies widely. Some strengthen democracy by exposing abuses and amplifying marginalised voices. Others drift into performance or collapse into disordered simulation.

INSTITUTIONS, PUBLICS, AND COUNTERPUBLICS

Institutions

The formal structures of democracy, such as parliaments, courts, media, and oversight bodies, are expected to perform verification, deliberation, and accountability. Their legitimacy depends not only on whether they function, but whether citizens can see and believe that they do.

Publics

The wider arenas of democratic life in which meaning is made and legitimacy is granted or withdrawn. Publics are not passive audiences but active participants, shaping whether the democratic practices of institutions are recognised as real or hollow.

Counterpublics

Discursive communities that form outside mainstream institutions when citizens believe core democratic functions are absent or failing. They provide alternative arenas where truth claims are tested, voices are expressed, and accountability is pursued, whether constructively, superficially, or in distorted forms.

FUNCTIONAL, HOLLOW, AND DISORDERED COUNTERPUBLICS

The VDA framework helps us distinguish between three types of counterpublic. Each type expresses the core functions of democracy in a different way.

- **Functional counterpublics** act in a **substantial** way. They actively improve the functioning of a democracy and ability of a government to deliver for people, reconstructing democratic functions from below. They offer genuine verification, inclusive deliberation, and meaningful accountability. Examples include civil rights movements that broadened democratic participation, citizen-led inquiries that exposed corruption, or open-source investigative networks that hold powerful actors to account.
- **Hollow counterpublics** act in a **performative** way. They adopt the language of democracy but without mechanisms that make it effective. Deliberation takes the form of endless debate without resolution. Accountability is expressed through symbolic protest rather than enforceable consequence. Their activity often generates visibility or spectacle, but produces little reform.
- **Disordered counterpublics** act in a **simulated** way. They imitate democratic functions but invert their meaning. Verification becomes selective sourcing and pseudo-expertise. Deliberation becomes a loyalty test, where disagreement is cast as betrayal. Accountability is reduced to the ritual naming of enemies rather than scrutiny of power. Conspiracy movements, denialist networks, and extremist communities exemplify this form.

THE FOUR PILLARS OF DISORDERED DOUBT

Disordered discourse thrives not only by spreading falsehoods but by destabilising how people know what they know. One of its most effective tools is the systematic use of doubt. The Four Pillars of Disordered Doubt describe how this operates:

Doubt the Evidence

- Undermine facts by highlighting gaps, anomalies, or uncertainties, however minor.
- Turns the impossibility of perfect knowledge into an argument for disbelief.

Doubt the Source

- Attack the credibility, bias, or motives of those providing information.
- Shifts focus from evidence to perceived corruption or bad faith.

Doubt the Process

- Cast suspicion on the systems of verification and accountability themselves: science, journalism, courts, oversight.
- Suggests the rules are rigged, making corrections appear illegitimate.

Doubt the Claim

- Treat even well-established conclusions as provisional or conspiratorial.
- Frames truth itself as endlessly contestable, fostering paralysis or cynicism.

When challenged, doubt can also be deferred, with actors using investigative processes to demand the delaying of judgement on the given topic until the “official” investigation is complete, at which point they deploy the Four Pillars of Disordered Doubt to attack the process they previously demanded everyone respects. Together, these tactics transform doubt from a tool of healthy scepticism into a weapon of epistemic collapse. They erode the foundations of verification, deliberation, and accountability, leaving publics more vulnerable to disordered discourse

HOW COUNTERPUBLICS INTERACT WITH INSTITUTIONS AND PUBLICS

Counterpublics are never isolated. They exist in tension with both mainstream institutions and the wider public sphere.

- When substantial institutions remain visible and trusted, **functional counterpublics** can reinforce them, pressing for reform and expanding legitimacy.
- When institutions are hollow, **performative counterpublics** emerge more easily, filling the gap with activity that looks democratic but fails to deliver change.
- When institutions slip into disorder, **disordered counterpublics** thrive. They offer coherence and belonging at precisely the moment when mainstream institutions appear most hollow.

These dynamics mean counterpublics can either stabilise democracy or accelerate its collapse. Their role depends not only on their own practices but on the condition of the system around them.

WHY COUNTERPUBLICS MATTER

Counterpublics show that the collapse of institutional legitimacy does not end democratic life. People continue to search for spaces where truth can be tested, voices can be heard, and power can be challenged. The critical question is whether those spaces perform these functions in ways that are substantial, performative, or simulated.

Functional counterpublics can act as engines of renewal, re-embedding verification, deliberation, and accountability where institutions have failed. Hollow counterpublics can exhaust energy without delivering change. Disordered counterpublics can entrench epistemic closure, sustaining worlds where simulation replaces substance.

But counterpublics do not emerge in a vacuum. They grow within the systems, infrastructures, and incentives that surround them. Where institutions, civic spaces, and public policies make room for citizen investigation, grassroots deliberation, and accountability practices, functional counterpublics can flourish organically. When these avenues are absent, citizens gravitate to the spaces that remain, and today, those are overwhelmingly commercial platforms designed to maximise engagement. Their algorithms reward outrage, loyalty signalling, and spectacle. In this environment, disordered counterpublics do not simply appear: they are cultivated by design.

This is why functional counterpublics must be understood as part of democratic infrastructure. Without the system, space, and practice to sustain them, disordered counterpublics will dominate by default. They fill the void left by hollow institutions, reinforced by platform incentives that accelerate their growth. The struggle for legitimacy is therefore not just only about repairing institutions, but about creating the conditions where functional counterpublics can emerge and thrive.

PLATFORMS AND THE DEFAULT OF DISORDER

Counterpublics are inevitable in democratic life. They are the spaces citizens build when they feel excluded or misrepresented by mainstream institutions. In healthy systems, counterpublics can be functional, reconstructing verification, deliberation, and accountability from below. But in today's information environment, functional counterpublics are the exception. The conditions of social media platforms mean that disordered counterpublics have become the dominant state.

FROM GATEKEEPERS TO PLATFORMS

For much of the twentieth century, information environments were curated by institutional gatekeepers: editors, broadcasters, publishers. These systems were biased and exclusionary, but they imposed thresholds of verification and accountability that shaped the boundaries of public discourse.

That architecture has been replaced. Social media platforms, driven by engagement algorithms, now curate what most people see. They are not neutral spaces. Their commercial logic rewards whatever holds attention longest, regardless of truth, substance, or consequence.

FROM RECIPIENTS TO PARTICIPANTS

This shift has also transformed the role of the citizen. In the gatekeeper era, people were largely recipients of information. In the platform era, every individual is both recipient and distributor, curating, sharing, and amplifying information to their networks. This means that part of a healthy epistemic system now depends on whether citizens can make informed choices about the information they not only consume but also share. Without the skills to verify content, recognise distortion, and understand how platforms shape visibility, individuals risk becoming unconscious amplifiers of disorder.

ENGAGEMENT INCENTIVES AND SYNTHETIC VIRALITY

On these platforms, outrage and spectacle spread faster than rigour. Content that provokes strong emotion is amplified, while material that demands context or deliberation struggles to surface. This does not only advantage bad information, it advantages modes of communication that destabilise functional verification, deliberation, and accountability.

Actors learn to exploit these dynamics. Disinformation merchants, influencers, and content farms produce staged, misleading, or exaggerated material precisely because platforms reward it. This “synthetic engagement” creates the appearance of grassroots participation while exploiting algorithmic design.

WHY DISORDERED COUNTERPUBLICS THRIVE

The platform environment does not simply host counterpublics, it shapes them. Communities form around the incentives on offer. Functional counterpublics require time, rigour, and visible consequence. But social media platforms optimise for accessibility, speed, volume, and virality. In such conditions, disordered counterpublics flourish because their epistemic style, outrage, loyalty tests, simplified narratives, align with the architecture of the platform.

The result is structural: when citizens seek alternative spaces, they are far more likely to encounter disordered counterpublics than functional ones. The absence of offline infrastructure for functional counterpublics, combined with the algorithmic curation of online discourse, creates a tilted field in which disorder is the path of least resistance.

PLATFORMS AS EPISTEMIC INFRASTRUCTURE

This makes platform governance a question not just of content moderation but of democratic infrastructure. If algorithms and incentives ensure that counterpublics default to disorder, then the public sphere itself is being reshaped around the logics of simulation. Without systemic reform, attempts to rebuild democratic legitimacy will be constantly undermined by an information environment that cultivates disordered discourse by design.

DISORDERED DISCOURSE

DEFINITION AND DYNAMICS

Counterpublics flourish or fracture within the conditions around them. Where institutions and civic spaces sustain truth, voice, and accountability, counterpublics can reinforce democracy. Where those spaces are absent, disordered discourse takes root.

Disordered discourse is not simply the presence of bad information. It is the systemic breakdown in the mechanisms by which truth is validated, contested, and shared. In a fractured information environment, falsehoods no longer circulate as isolated claims. They accumulate, compound, and converge into narrative systems that reshape how communities interpret events, assign meaning, and decide what counts as truth.

Disordered discourse goes beyond disinformation or misinformation as individual items. It is a condition in which information loses its grounding in evidence, and discourse becomes untethered from reality, not only through error, but through the structural and social dynamics that shape how people know what they know.

THE DIMENSIONS OF DISORDERED DISCOURSE

Disordered discourse can be understood through four interrelated dimensions:

- **Elements:** as defined by Claire Wardle & Hossein Derakhshan,⁴ the raw material of disinformation (deliberate deception), misinformation (unintended falsehoods), and malinformation (true content manipulated through framing or context). These forms often blur and evolve as they circulate.
- **Drivers:** the systemic forces that accelerate and entrench disordered discourse. They include algorithmic incentives that reward emotional and provocative content, trust inversion that privileges in-group validators over institutions, doctrine enforcement that punishes dissent,

⁴ Wardle, C. and Derakhshan, H. (2017) Information Disorder Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policymaking. Council of Europe, Strasbourg. Available at: <https://edoc.coe.int/en/media/7495-information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research-and-policy-making.html>

participatory pressures to engage regardless of verification, crisis catalysts that destabilise judgement, and feedback loops that reinforce belief.

- **Agents:** the actors who amplify disordered information and discourse. These range from state and political figures, to proxies and influencers, to self-interested profiteers, to true believers who sincerely reproduce distorted narratives. Their roles often overlap: self-interested actors may radicalise, while political leaders may come to be true believers in the very narratives they once promoted instrumentally.
- **Discourse:** the culmination of these dynamics is the formation of self-sustaining narrative systems. At this stage, evidence is interpreted through internal logic, correction is framed as suppression, and identity becomes inseparable from belief.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF DISORDERED DISCOURSE

Disordered discourse is not an event but a process. Counterpublics typically move through a recognisable trajectory:

1. **Questioning** – triggered by crisis, contradiction, or uncertainty, opening the door to alternative pathways of inquiry.
2. **Engagement** – where individuals join discourse spaces, often finding belonging and affirmation that accelerates alignment. Also where algorithms engage with the individual.
3. **Group Identity Formation** – beliefs fuse with belonging; dissent is punished, loyalty rewarded.
4. **Internal Institutionalisation** – communities establish their own validators, authorities, and media infrastructures, creating an enclosed epistemic ecosystem.
5. **Discourse Absolutism** – the final stage of enclosure, where all new information is interpreted exclusively through the internal framework and external correction becomes impossible.

Not all communities travel this path fully, nor is every individual required to reach the point of discourse absolutism to participate in sustaining disordered discourse, but the pattern recurs across diverse contexts.

EMERGENT DYNAMICS

As these stages unfold, disordered discourse develops mechanisms that make it resilient:

- **Doctrine enforcement** turns dissent into betrayal, cementing ideological purity.
- **The Bubble Lens Effect** ensures all external events are reinterpreted as confirmation of the narrative.
- **Trust inversion** reverses epistemic authority, privileging insiders over external sources.
- **Synthetic engagement and algorithm hijacking** exploit platform mechanics to reward distortion and amplify spectacle.
- **Doubt as a tool**, used strategically to deny reality and reinforce the in-group dynamic.
- **Disordered counterpublics as identity** fuses belief with belonging, making correction feel like an existential attack.

These dynamics make disordered discourse self-reinforcing. Once entrenched, it cannot be dismantled by correction alone. Attempts to introduce counter-evidence are reframed as proof of conspiracy or suppression, further deepening commitment to the disordered counterpublic. In the box below, we outline the case of QAnon and how it demonstrates these features.

THE CASE OF QAnon

Disordered discourses are sustained by lowering the bar of evidence for “truth”. Disordered counter publics come to believe things with minimal evidence – and zero proof. They shift the epistemological parameters by which we can know things and therefore they can be influenced – and even mobilised – without the need for facts. This makes disordered discourse a powerful political tool.

The building blocks – or components – of disordered discourses are dis, mis and mal information. Consumers of such information become more susceptible to believe it – and to lower the bar of evidence – when they are aggrieved through economic or political hardship. Crucially the disordered information is taken into the news eco system by public figures including politicians and celebrities who may or may not believe it but benefit from it in some way. They either publish it through social media platforms or are newsworthy figures whose words are reportable by mainstream news outlets.

The net effect however is the development of narratives not based in fact which the counter publics believe to be true. The QAnon movement is an example of such a disordered discourse based on a way of knowing - an epistemology – which does not require evidence. It emerged in 2017 as the notional musings of a supposed government insider with high level “Q” security clearance who was warning of elite conspiracies of Satanism, cannibalism and child sex trafficking, involving Democrat politicians including Hilary Clinton and Barack Obama.

The QAnon message was disseminated online in cryptic posts warning of the coming “storm” when Donald Trump would arrest the guilty and enact summary justice – including executions. It was repeated through Trump’s supporters in politics and beyond – and came to a head after Trump lost to Joe Biden on January 6th. Some of those who stormed the Capitol were QAnon followers who believed Trump had been deprived of a legitimate election win by the satanic cabal of rogue Democrats. They included Jake Chansley/Angeli aka: the QAnon shamen, and Ashley Babbitt who died after being shot by police officers within the Capitol building.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Understanding disordered discourse in these terms makes clear that the challenge is not just falsehood, but the collapse of shared epistemic foundations. It shows why fact-checking alone fails, why engagement-driven platforms are fertile ground for disordered counterpublics, and why solutions must address the structural conditions that allow them to thrive.

Disordered discourse is best understood not as a fringe pathology, but as a systemic condition. It is what can fill the void when democratic institutions lose legitimacy and when the infrastructure for functional counterpublics is absent.

SIMULATION AND CAPTURE

One reason disordered discourse is so resilient is that it does not present itself as rejecting democracy, but, instead, simulates it. The communities that emerge from this condition do not see themselves as abandoning democratic ideals. On the contrary, they believe they are practising them more faithfully than the institutions they distrust. What they perform, however, are simulations of democracy's core functions.

SIMULATED VDA

Rather than abandoning verification, deliberation, and accountability, disordered communities mimic them in distorted forms:

- **Simulated Verification:** Truth-seeking appears rigorous but functions as confirmation. Selective evidence, pseudo-expertise, and “do your own research” rituals create an aesthetic of inquiry without falsifiability.
- **Simulated Deliberation:** Debate looks vibrant but acts as a loyalty test. Endless discussion, outrage, and identity signalling replace genuine contestation. Disagreement is punished, not processed.
- **Simulated Accountability:** Scrutiny flows outward but never inward. Enemies are exposed, scapegoated, or ritually denounced, while insiders are shielded. Attempts at external correction are framed as persecution.

These practices allow disordered discourse to present itself as more authentic than institutions. Participants feel they are doing democracy better, even as they inhabit a system detached from shared standards of truth.

INSTITUTIONAL CAPTURE

The same dynamics that capture communities can also reshape governance. When political, media, and legal institutions are repeatedly exposed to disordered narratives, they can begin to realign around them, a process we call **institutional capture**. This is not corruption

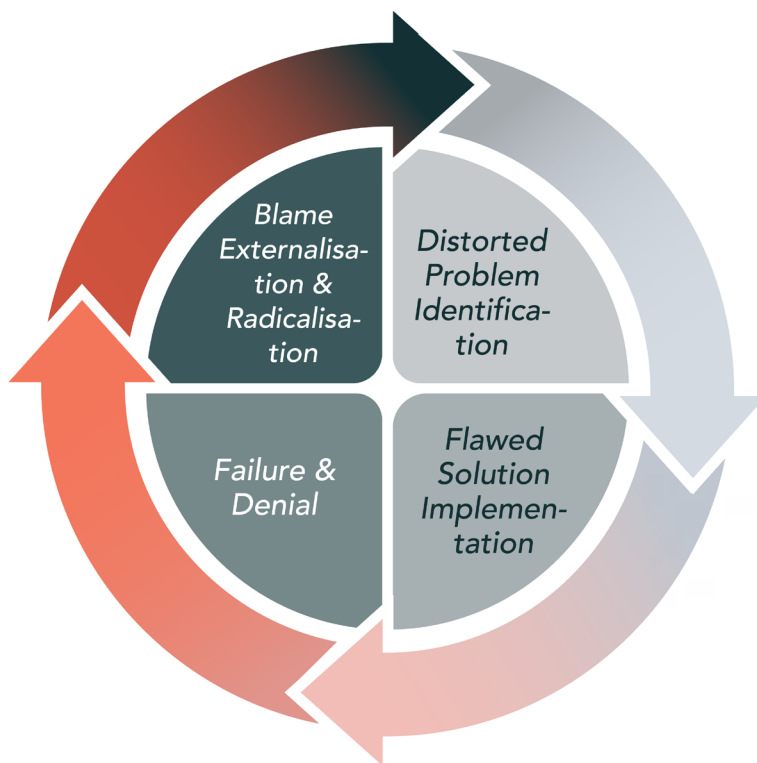
or authoritarian seizure, but a gradual shift away from truth validation, responsiveness, and accountability, and toward survival, theatre, and control.

This process typically unfolds in five stages:



1. **Exposure** – sustained contact with disordered narratives or pressure.
2. **Incentive Alignment** – institutional actors adapt behaviour to accommodate or exploit them for their own benefit.
3. **Narrative Integration** – disordered frames seep into institutional communication and decision-making.
4. **Behavioural Capture** – institutional behaviour and outputs consistently reflect distorted logics.
5. **Structural Embedding** – institutional norms and cultures lock in the new orientation.

Once embedded, institutions fall into a self-reinforcing loop:



- **Distorted Problem Identification** – issues are defined in line with disordered narratives.
- **Flawed Solutions** – policies fail because they address the wrong problems or implement unworkable responses.
- **Failure and Denial** – mistakes are concealed, dismissed, or denied. Internal dissent is seen as disloyalty to the in-group.
- **Blame Externalisation and Radicalisation** – responsibility is projected outward, intensifying the disorder, reinforcing the in-group's sense they are being attacked or suppressed by the out-group, internal dissent and critics are externalised and attacked, or forced to fall in line.

WHY SIMULATED VDA AND INSTITUTIONAL CAPTURE MATTER

We should also recognise that the capture of institutions by disordered discourse leads to further loss of trust in institutions among publics, and increases the likelihood that, through the processes described above, more disordered counterpublics will form.

Simulated VDA explains why disordered discourse is attractive and durable: it does not abandon democracy's ideals, it imitates them. Institutional capture shows how this logic spreads upward, embedding itself in governance and locking institutions into recursive dysfunction. Together they reveal the central threat: not just false information, but the creation of parallel epistemic systems, for individuals, communities, and institutions, that simulate democracy in form while corroding it in substance.

COALITIONS OF DISORDERED COUNTERPUBLICS AND THE FUTURE OF POPULISM

A defining feature of contemporary populism is its ability to function as a coalition of disordered counterpublics. Instead of uniting around a single ideological project, modern populist movements stitch together fragmented communities that each sustain their own disordered discourse: anti-vaccine activists, climate denialists, conspiracy theorists, anti-15-minute city campaigners, and many others.

These groups are already pre-radicalised by distrust of institutions and by internal cultures of doctrine enforcement, making them highly receptive to populist mobilisation. Leaders and parties do not need to reconcile the contradictions between them; they simply validate each group's sense of grievance under the broader populist frame that "the elites are lying, and only we tell the truth."

This coalition logic is particularly powerful in today's fractured information ecosystem, where counterpublics can thrive in algorithmically amplified isolation. Populist movements gain strength not from ideological coherence but from aggregating grievances across multiple disordered discourses.

For institutions, this presents a double challenge. First, it makes capture easier: political actors can mobilise a ready-made base of mistrustful communities to pressure or colonise traditional structures. Second, it makes governance harder: once inside institutions, such coalitions struggle to deliver coherent policy, relying instead on permanent culture war to sustain mobilisation.

The result is a populist model of politics optimised for an era of fragmented realities, lacking in substance but highly effective in reshaping institutions around disordered discourse.

FUNCTIONAL AND HOLLOW COUNTERPUBLICS

DEMOCRATIC POTENTIAL AND LIMITS

Up to this point we have focused on the dangers of disordered counterpublics. Yet counterpublics can also provide democratic renewal when they function substantially.

FUNCTIONAL COUNTERPUBLICS

Functional counterpublics perform verification, deliberation, and accountability in substantial ways. They emerge when citizens recognise institutional failures and reconstruct democratic functions from below.

Examples include:

- Civil rights movements that forced institutions to widen the scope of voice and accountability.
- Citizen-led inquiries or investigative networks that exposed corruption or abuse.
- Open-source investigation collectives that collected and verified evidence when states or media failed.

These counterpublics do not weaken democracy, they extend and refresh it. They provide legitimacy by ensuring that truth can be tested, that excluded voices are heard, and that power is challenged even when institutions resist.

HOLLOW COUNTERPUBLICS

Hollow counterpublics perform VDA only in performative ways. They adopt the language of democracy without embedding the structures that make it meaningful.

Examples include:

- Symbolic protest movements that generate visibility but fail to generate real scrutiny or consequence.
- Online campaigns that mobilise attention but lack processes of verification or accountability.
- News media which doesn't investigate obvious cases in the public interest because it puts its own interests first

Such counterpublics often produce frustration. They can raise awareness, but when activity does not translate into change, they reinforce cynicism. They show the forms of democracy without the substance.

WHY FUNCTIONAL COUNTERPUBLICS MATTER

The existence of functional counterpublics is critical to democratic resilience, providing pathways for citizens to engage constructively even when institutions are faltering. But they cannot be taken for granted.

Functional counterpublics require supportive systems, civic spaces, and policy frameworks that allow them to emerge organically. Without those conditions, citizens searching for meaning are left with few options. The result is predictable: they turn to the discourse spaces that are most readily available, platforms whose algorithms prioritise engagement over facts, rewarding outrage, loyalty signalling, and spectacle. In this environment, disordered discourse and the formation of disordered counterpublics are inevitable outcomes.

The task for democratic renewal is therefore not only to repair institutions, but to build the conditions in which functional counterpublics can flourish. Without them, the public square will continue to tilt toward hollow performance and disordered simulation. Functional counterpublics can also persist even within disordered democracies. Open-source investigators, civic monitors, or citizen assemblies sometimes manage to reconstruct democratic practices in contexts where institutions are captured or corrupted. But without supportive infrastructure, these counterpublics remain fragile. Their survival shows that substance is never entirely extinguished, unless systems are reformed to sustain them, they are quickly overshadowed by the hollow and disordered spaces incentivised by the wider environment.

THE SLIPPERY SLOPE FROM FUNCTIONAL OR HOLLOW VDA - TO DISORDER

The UK faces epistemic insecurity and potential consequences for liberal democracy (Demos 2025). We are vulnerable to the exploitation of our liberal system by homegrown, and other, bad actors who can influence dominant narratives and encourage the development of disordered counterpublics with politically influential alternative realities and ways of knowing things along the way.

This has been enabled by the decline of trust in UK liberal institutions, prompted by events such as the war in Iraq, MPs' expenses, hacking and the 2008 financial crash. They exposed UK democracy, its VDA processes, as being (mildly) hollow and left it susceptible to further denigration.

These structural conditions which weakened the UK's liberal reputation also coincided with the rise of social media and big tech. This provided accessible online fora for people to discuss their concerns and access to alternative sources of news without rigorous standards of verification or deliberation. The owners of such sites are not driven by liberal norms - conversely, it is in their interest to encourage traffic on their sites.

Hence, from these spaces groups, counterpublics, emerged which were opposed to the UK's functioning/mildly hollow state institutions - and which operated within a disordered VDA, adopting dysfunctional verification, deliberation and accountability – and alternative facts or “realities”. Such disordered counterpublics can exist within an overall mildly hollow system.

However, the dysfunctional narratives which emerge from these disordered counterpublics have political influence and the potential to influence elections. Narratives on migration following the Southport murders in 2024 and again in August 2025 indicate how this could work in practice. It presents the possibility the disordered VDA of the counterpublic could be influential enough for the disorder to spread into the liberal institutions and the running of the state.

Whilst this would ostensibly be “democratic” it would not be liberal because it is based on disinformation rather than truth. It is essential therefore to make the general public aware of the need to question their news sources, and preferably be able to verify.

DIAGNOSING AND DESIGNING FOR RESILIENCE

If democracy is to resist capture and rebuild legitimacy, it must be possible to see clearly where its foundations are holding and where they are failing. The VDA framework provides both a diagnostic tool for analysing systems and a design compass for strengthening them.

DIAGNOSING WITH THE VDA LENS

The framework reduces complex conditions to three simple questions:

1. **Is truth being tested?** (Verification)
2. **Are voices meaningfully included?** (Deliberation)
3. **Is power answerable?** (Accountability)

Applied across institutions, publics, and counterpublics, these questions reveal whether the space is **functional, hollow, or disordered**, and whether VDA is being carried out in **substantial, performative, or simulated** form.

- **Institutions:** A parliamentary inquiry that exposes wrongdoing and leads to reform belongs to a **functional institution** performing **substantial VDA**. One that stages hearings with minimal consequence reflects a **hollow institution** performing **VDA in a performative mode**. An inquiry that scapegoats enemies while shielding insiders indicates a **disordered institution** performing **simulated VDA**.
- **Publics:** Citizens who see institutions as capable of correction inhabit a **functional public sphere** where **substantial VDA** is visible. When politics is viewed as an empty ritual, this signals a **hollow public sphere** where only **performative VDA** is recognised. Where citizens instead gravitate to closed interpretive systems that invert truth and accountability, they are embedded in a **disordered public sphere** where **simulated VDA** dominates.
- **Counterpublics:** A citizen-led investigation that uncovers verifiable evidence is a **functional counterpublic** performing **substantial VDA**. A movement that generates spectacle without consequence is a **hollow counterpublic** performing **performative VDA**. A conspiracy forum that reproduces pseudo-verification and loyalty tests is a **disordered counterpublic** performing **simulated VDA**.

These distinctions make collapse legible. They allow analysts, policymakers, and citizens to see not only whether institutions exist, but how they are functioning, and whether legitimacy is being strengthened or eroded.

No democracy is purely functional, hollow, or disordered. What matters is where substance persists and whether it can be reinforced.

DESIGNING FOR RESILIENCE: THE ARC FRAMEWORK

Diagnosis must be matched with design. The VDA Framework makes visible how collapse unfolds, from hollow ritual to disordered simulation, but renewal requires a systemic response. Isolated reforms will not suffice. To move from collapse to resilience, democracies need a coordinated framework that strengthens verification, deliberation, and accountability across society.

The Arc of Democracy lets us understand the movement towards substantial or simulated democratic practice in terms of VDA functions, the Arc Framework allows us to design a response.

The Arc is not a single project but an organising system for rebuilding democratic resilience from the ground up. It takes the three functional minimums of democracy, verification, deliberation, and accountability, and maps them onto eight interconnected tracks of action:

- 1. Education & Epistemic Capacity** – building critical thinking, epistemic literacy, and resilience from primary school through lifelong learning.
- 2. Civic Empowerment & Democratic Practice** – equipping communities to investigate, deliberate, and act meaningfully in democratic life.
- 3. Civic Trust & Value Alignment** – rebuilding pluralistic norms and shared values that sustain coexistence.
- 4. Investigative Infrastructure** – creating resilient, distributed systems for uncovering and verifying truth.
- 5. Democratic Discourse** – ensuring that verified evidence and accountability shape public understanding.
- 6. Institutional Integration & Policy** – embedding epistemic standards and accountability into governance structures.
- 7. Translation to Impact** – ensuring that investigations and deliberation produce real-world outcomes in law, policy, and culture.
- 8. Sustainability & Infrastructure** – building long-term systems and alliances to anchor democratic resilience.

Each track represents a field of work already underway, in education, journalism, civic tech, academia, activism, but too often in isolation. The Arc Framework connects these efforts, giving them shared purpose and cumulative impact. It shifts the focus from patching symptoms to reconstructing the underlying conditions of democratic life.

Where the VDA Framework provides a diagnostic lens, the Arc Framework provides a design compass. Together, they allow us to see collapse clearly, and to organise the systemic recovery required to resist disordered discourse and institutional capture.

Resilience is not about perfection. It is about ensuring that citizens can see, at every level, that truth is tested, voices are heard, and power is constrained. The Arc Framework maps how to make those democratic practices real again, across education, civic empowerment, investigation, media, institutions, and infrastructure. Without such a systemic approach, democracy drifts further into hollow performance and disordered simulation. With it, self-government remains possible in substance, not just in name.

CONCLUSION

THE CASE FOR DEMOCRATIC REPAIR

This report has argued that democracy rests on three functional minimums: the ability to know what is true, to see that voices matter, and to hold power to account. When verification, deliberation, and accountability are performed substantially, democracy earns legitimacy even under strain. When they are hollowed out, politics becomes performance. When they are simulated, democracy is inverted into its own parody.

The risk we face is not only decline, but collapse. Crises expose hollowness and accelerate disorder. Citizens who see institutions go through the motions without consequence either disengage entirely or turn to counterpublics that offer coherence without truth. In an information environment where anyone can publish via social media, with minimal verification, this makes it easier than ever before for disordered counterpublics to be influenced - and to influence others. They flourish by default in a world of easy dissemination and algorithmically targeted consumption, producing simulations of democratic practice that feel authentic while corroding shared standards of evidence and accountability.

But collapse is not inevitable. The same framework that makes democratic breakdown visible also points to renewal. The VDA framework and Arc of Democracy allows us to distinguish between functional, hollow, and disordered spaces, and between substantial, performative, and simulated democratic practices. It helps us see where resilience remains and where repair is most urgent. The Arc Framework provides the design: eight interconnected tracks of action that align efforts across education, empowerment, investigation, discourse, institutions, and infrastructure.

Democracy is not sustained by ballots or constitutions alone. It survives when citizens can see truth being tested, their voices being heard, and power being constrained. These are the visible democratic practices that generate legitimacy. Without them, democracy drifts into hollow theatre or collapses into simulation. With them, it remains capable of self-correction, resilience, and hope. Therefore it is essential that publics have access to reliable information - and preferably the skills to differentiate reliable from *unreliable*. They also need to feel civic life is meaningful and works for them - not just those with power. In other words, we need to find paths back to functioning verification, deliberation and accountability.

This case for democratic repair is urgent and moral. If verification, deliberation, and accountability are defended, democracy will remain more than a label. If they are lost, democracy becomes only a performance or simulation of itself. The task before us is clear: to see collapse for what it is, and to rebuild the foundations of self-government so that they endure in substance, not just in name.

The VDA Framework offers a language for diagnosis. The Arc Framework maps the pathways of design. Taken together, they equip policymakers, educators, journalists, and citizens with the tools not only to understand collapse, but to act for democratic renewal in the UK and elsewhere.

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