



The Cultural Destruction of Democratic Agency

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journals.sagepub.com/home/cus**Baris Cayli Messina¹** 

Abstract

This article develops a cultural sociology of the destruction of democratic agency under platform autocracy. Alongside accounts that locate democracy's crisis in institutional failure, ideological polarization, or economic grievance, I argue that platform-autocratic formations shape democratic life by reorganizing cultural infrastructure in ways that can erode the collective capacity for action. Democratic agency is progressively hollowed out as the affective conditions that sustain meaning-making, civil solidarity, and mobilization are captured and depleted. This process is theorized through the concept of anaesthetic publicity, which explains how communicative saturation drains and redirects the emotional energy upon which democratic life depends. In such environments, more communication can yield less collective capacity to act, as interpretive clarity weakens, and engagement gives way to collective fatigue. Drawing on the aestheticization thesis, civil sphere theory, and the sociology of interaction ritual, and combining comparative-historical analysis of 6 cases with survey data from 48 countries, the article makes 3 contributions. First, it introduces anaesthetic publicity as a cultural mechanism linking communicative saturation to the weakening of democratic agency. Second, it develops a typology of autocratic communication organized around three forms: (i) closure, (ii) capture, and (iii) saturation. Third, it theorizes the oligarch-platform sovereign as a new configuration of power shaping contemporary public life.

Keywords

anaesthetic publicity, autocracy, Benjamin Walter, civil sphere theory, cultural sociology, democratic agency

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Introduction

The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute's 2025 Democracy Report records a finding whose implications reach deep into the texture of everyday life. For the first time in 25 years, autocracies outnumber democracies in the world, with 91 autocratic regimes against 88 democracies, and the average level of democratic governance experienced by the world's citizens has regressed to where it stood in 1985 (Nord et al., 2025). Today, 72% of the global population now lives under autocratic rule, the highest proportion since 1978. Freedom of expression is deteriorating in 44 countries, a record across the quarter-century of V-Dem measurement, and almost half of all autocratizing governments are actively deploying disinformation as a mechanism of political control (Nord et al., 2026). Freedom House, tracking internet freedom across 72 countries, documents the 15th consecutive year of decline in online rights, with conditions deteriorating in 27 countries and citizens in 57 countries arrested or imprisoned for online expression, itself a record high (Freedom House, 2025).

These figures become theoretically consequential because they coincide with an equally unprecedented expansion of communicative possibility. The same period that has witnessed accelerating democratic erosion has produced the most elaborately connected communicative environment in human history. Social media networks connect billions of users across national boundaries. Algorithmic curation delivers political content to audiences of a scale and precision no previous technology could approach. Citizen journalism, podcasting, and live-streaming have dissolved the boundary between authors and audiences. If we accept the foundational Enlightenment proposition that the expansion of communicative openness produces democratic vitality, the present should appear as its vindication. The evidence points in the opposite direction.

The Reuters Institute Digital News Report for 2025, drawing on surveys across 48 markets and more than 90,000 interviews, finds trust in news flat at 40% for the third consecutive year, with 58% of respondents reporting that they feel unable to distinguish truth from falsehood in the online information they encounter (Newman et al., 2025). Pew Research Center surveys conducted in December 2025 find that approximately half of American adults report feeling worn out by the amount of news available, that two-thirds have stopped getting news from a specific source, and that six in ten have reduced their overall news intake. The most analytically significant finding in this body of survey research is that political exhaustion is concentrated among the most politically engaged in the United States: 72% of highly engaged adults always or often feel exhausted by politics (Pew Research Center, 2023). Exhaustion therefore cannot be treated as a simple symptom of disengagement. It appears as a condition produced within political engagement itself.

Existing cultural sociology and public sphere theory have not provided a fully satisfactory account of this coincidence. Fragmentation theory explains structural changes to communicative space without theorizing the affective and cultural mechanisms through which that structure contributes to democratic paralysis (Habermas, 2022). Surveillance capitalism scholarship illuminates the political economy of platform power without fully specifying the cultural formation through which that power works on political subjectivity (Srnicke, 2017; Zuboff, 2019). Disinformation research treats the problem as one of

informational quality, thereby misidentifying both the condition and the appropriate response (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017). These frameworks do not fully explain the cultural mechanism through which democratic citizens, despite having more information, greater communicative freedom, and wider avenues for political expression than any previous generation, become less able to translate awareness into collective political action than those who lived under conditions of scarcity. The gap between informational abundance and political incapacity is the theoretical problem this article addresses, and the concept it introduces to address it is grounded in cultural sociology's own resources.

This article introduces the concept of anaesthetic publicity to theorize the cultural mechanism through which communicative saturation depletes the affective preconditions of collective democratic action. As I shall argue, this saturation ranges along a continuum from the deliberately produced (state-directed information warfare) to the largely structural (the emergent consequence of engagement-optimized platforms), with most contemporary cases falling between these poles. Anaesthetic publicity refers to a culturally produced condition in which the constant flow, repetition, and amplification of information dull democratic engagement by exhausting and redirecting the emotional energy required for collective meaning-making. The concept does not claim that platform power eliminates individual interpretation. It specifies how communicative saturation can obstruct the aggregation of interpretation into shared focus, common framing, durable solidarity and collective action. I theorize the primary structural agent of this process as the oligarch-platform sovereign, an ideal-typical figure in which economic capital, ownership of communicative infrastructure and political authority become structurally aligned. The article makes three main contributions. First, it introduces anaesthetic publicity as a cultural mechanism the discipline has not fully theorized. Second, it extends Alexander's civil sphere framework and Collins's interaction ritual chain theory to the platform-autocratic context, showing how platform structures can weaken the cultural coding mechanisms through which democratic life reproduces itself (Alexander, 2006; Collins, 2004). Third, it develops a three-register comparative typology of autocratic communication grounded in six documented cases. Methodologically, the argument is abductive and theory-building. It establishes the plausibility and internal logic of a cultural mechanism; it does not test a causal hypothesis. The cross-national survey and index data are therefore used as consistency checks, not as validation or confirmation.

The article proceeds in five sections. The next section situates anaesthetic publicity within public sphere theory and cultural sociology, developing its theoretical foundations through Benjamin's aestheticization thesis, Alexander's civil sphere and Collins's interaction ritual chains (Alexander, 2006; Benjamin, 2008 [1936]; Collins, 2004). The following section presents the comparative-historical methodology and justifies the six-case research design. The empirical analysis then develops the typology across three forms of autocratic communication and introduces the paralytic subject as their common cultural product. The discussion examines the implications of these findings for cultural sociology's theorization of collective action, symbolic power, and democratic resilience. The conclusion draws together the article's theoretical contributions, identifies avenues for future empirical research, and reflects on the broader stakes of a cultural sociology of democratic destruction.

Anaesthetizing the Civil Sphere: Theoretical Resources for a Cultural Sociology of Democratic Destruction

The discipline has produced foundational work on the cultural conditions of democratic life by directing attention toward meaning-making, symbolic power, collective action, and the cultural codes through which political legitimacy is constituted and contested (Alexander, 2003; Spillman, 2019; Swidler, 1986). Yet the cultural destruction of democratic agency has not been a dominant preoccupation of cultural sociology. The specific question of how communicative abundance can corrode, instead of enlarging, the conditions of democratic action remains theoretically underspecified. This article addresses that gap by bringing three bodies of literature into dialogue and using that dialogue to build the concept of anaesthetic publicity.

Habermas (1989 [1962], 2022) established the normative and analytical baseline against which diagnoses of democratic communication have been measured, tracing how the bourgeois public sphere was progressively colonized by commercial interests and, more recently, how digitalization has fragmented it into semi-publics whose members no longer recognize the broader communicative arena as a legitimate site for adjudicating competing truth claims. Fragmentation explains changes in the architecture of communicative space. It does not explain why citizens within that space struggle to translate awareness into political action. The Pew Research Center's finding that political exhaustion is highest among the most politically engaged is difficult to explain through fragmentation theory alone. A fragmented public sphere can still contain vigorous political engagement within each of its segments, as the history of partisan press systems in 19th-century Europe demonstrates (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Cultural sociology therefore requires a concept capable of explaining this anomaly. Anaesthetic publicity is proposed in this study as that concept.

The pivotal cultural-sociological resource for theorizing anaesthetic publicity is Alexander's (2006) civil sphere theory. The civil sphere operates through a binary cultural code that distinguishes civil from uncivil and democratic from anti-democratic formations, classifying actors and actions as supportive of, or threatening to, democratic community (Alexander, 2006). This code is not reducible to ideology. It is a cultural structure that shapes the interpretive frameworks through which citizens evaluate political reality, assign legitimacy to political actors, and mobilize or withhold political energy. The culturally specific claim of anaesthetic publicity is that it corrupts this code by dissolving the categorical distinctions on which civil interpretation depends. When citizens cannot distinguish reliable from unreliable information, or legitimate from illegitimate political actors, they lose access to the cultural coding mechanism through which the civil sphere reproduces itself. The mechanism works at the level of cultural infrastructure, where content is evaluated, sorted, and acted upon. This is the cultural-sociological specification of anaesthetic publicity, and it connects directly to the strong programme's concern with the autonomy and causal efficacy of cultural structures. Kreiss (2017) has demonstrated empirically how partisan identity fractured civic epistemology during the 2016 US presidential election, showing how civil and uncivil coding distinctions collapsed under partisan pressure. His analysis confirms the empirical reality of civil sphere fragmentation. Anaesthetic publicity provides a structural-cultural account of how such

fragmentation can become a continuous condition of communicative life under platform-autocratic formations.

Reed's (2011) account of interpretation and social power reinforces this specification. Culture works through the interpretive frameworks actors bring to situations, and power becomes culturally effective by structuring which interpretive frameworks are available, legible and costly to sustain. The oligarch-platform sovereign exercises symbolic power in the Bourdieusian sense (Bourdieu, 1991) less by determining any individual citizen's beliefs than by structuring the interpretive conditions under which citizens encounter political reality. The claim in this article is deliberately not that platform power eliminates interpretive agency at the level of the individual decoder. Hall's (1980 [1973]) encoding/decoding model remains in force. Citizens continue to produce negotiated and oppositional readings of dominant messages, and saturated environments may multiply such readings. Anaesthetic publicity does not foreclose oppositional interpretation, but it forecloses aggregation by limiting the conversion of dispersed individual readings into shared focus, common framing and sustained solidarity. The destruction therefore operates at the level of collective capacity, which is especially where civil sphere theory locates democratic solidarity as an achievement. When the infrastructure through which interpretations might be pooled and coordinated is owned and algorithmically managed by actors whose interests align with democratic paralysis, the cultural autonomy that Reed (2011) identifies as the precondition of meaningful collective interpretation is systematically obstructed in the aggregate.

Collins's (2004) interaction ritual chain theory provides the micro-sociological mechanism through which this structural destruction operates at the level of political subjectivity. Collins argues that collective action depends on emotional energy, a diffuse sense of confidence, enthusiasm and solidarity generated through successful interaction rituals in which participants achieve shared attention and a shared emotional mood. Successful rituals accumulate emotional energy and make collective action possible. Failed rituals drain it, leaving participants less capable of sustained engagement even when grievances and political information remain available. Collins's original formulation emphasized bodily co-presence, and the extension to digital interaction is contested in the sociological literature (Knorr-Cetina and Bruegger, 2002; Summers-Effler, 2010; Turner, 2002). Recent studies help specify the extension. Tavory and Hoynes (2025) distinguish between the reproduction of interaction order and the potential transformation of selves and relationships. Vassenden et al. (2026) distinguish rituals of face, which defend the presented self, from rituals of effervescence, which generate emotional entrainment. With these distinctions in view, the article does not claim that digital platforms replicate the bodily co-presence of face-to-face ritual. It points out that platforms selectively harvest some ritual ingredients, including partial shared attention, emotional contagion, and symbolic boundary-making, while foreclosing others. Platform interaction privileges rituals of face and the order-reproducing dimension of ritual through identity defence, outrage display and in-group and out-group marking. It fails to provide the mutual bodily entrainment and ritual closure through which, for Collins, shared attention culminates in collective effervescence. The problem is therefore not the absence of emotion, but the misdirection of emotional energy. Where genuine effervescence occurs online, it is frequently channelled into tribal, outrage-driven, or authoritarian solidarities instead of the

civil solidarity on which democratic agency depends. Anaesthetic publicity names both the depletion of emotional energy and its re-canalization away from democratic ends. This article is not the first to bring micro-sociology into contact with civil sphere theory. Revers (2025) and Revers and Coleman (2026) mobilize interaction and performance to explain the interactional and cultural drivers of polarization and the struggle for recognition; Watts and Horgan (2025) theorize the non-civil scaffolding through which interaction ritual shapes the civil sphere; and Horgan (2024) connects interaction ritual, conversation analysis, and the moral dimension of cultural sociology. The present contribution differs in its object and direction. These studies largely examine how interaction generates antagonism, recognition, or solidarity. This article examines the cultural destruction of the affective preconditions of solidarity under platform autocracy and links that destruction to the inversion, drawn from Benjamin (2008 [1936]) and Buck-Morss (1992), of aestheticization into anaesthetization.

Berlant's (2011) concept of cruel optimism illuminates why citizens remain attached to digital political engagement despite its repeated failure to produce collective effects. Dean (2009) anticipated this paradox in her analysis of communicative capitalism, clarifying how the more one communicates, the less one's communication matters when the circuit of digital political discourse is designed to circulate messages without producing effects. Eyerman's (2006, 2019) account of cultural trauma adds a further dimension, provided that its collective level is preserved. Cultural trauma is not individual psychological injury. It is a collective process through which shared meaning is shattered and must be reconstructed before political agency can be restored. Anaesthetic publicity does not produce an event-based cultural trauma in Eyerman's classical sense. It creates a chronic and eventless erosion of the interpretive frameworks, civic codes, and narrative resources through which a political community ordinarily makes shared meaning. The cultural repair required before democratic mobilization becomes possible is especially the work that continuous saturation obstructs.

The theoretical position connecting these resources to the article's core concept draws on Benjamin (2008 [1936]) and Buck-Morss (1992). Benjamin's aestheticization thesis identified how interwar fascism concentrated political attention through spectacle, rendering domination beautiful, sublime and thrilling. Buck-Morss recovered the original Greek meaning of 'aesthesis' as sensory perception and traced its dialectical reversal into 'anaesthesia', arguing that modernity produces a synaesthetic system in which simultaneous overstimulation and numbness destroy the organism's capacity for political response. The contemporary condition inverts Benjamin's diagnosis. The central problem confronting democratic politics today is not the aestheticization of politics, but its anaesthetization. The cultural sensorium is overwhelmed to the point where political perception is dulled and collective response becomes difficult to sustain. Table 1 summarizes the analytical distinction between Benjamin's aestheticization thesis and the concept of anaesthetic publicity developed here.

Four intellectual predecessors require differentiation. Debord's (1994 [1967]) society of the spectacle theorizes the concentration of social life into a unified representation that produces passive consumers of a singular image. Anaesthetic publicity names the opposite condition, in which social life is dispersed across competing representations and citizens become disoriented navigators of cacophony. Baudrillard's hyperreality is a

Table 1. From aestheticization to anaesthetization.

Dimension	Benjamin's Aestheticization (1936)	Anaesthetic Publicity
Mode of power	Concentrates attention on a singular spectacle	Disperses and depletes attention across infinite stimuli
Media ecology	Cinema, radio, mass rally	Algorithmic platforms, viral content, AI-generated media
Subjective effect	Affective mobilization and ideological absorption	Affective exhaustion and political paralysis
Relationship to truth	Replaces truth with myth	Renders truth indistinguishable from noise
Political function	Produces enthusiastic consent	Produces incapacitated acquiescence
Communicative logic	Monopoly of the message	Saturation of the environment

philosophical claim about the relationship between signs and referents that operates independently of identifiable structural agents. Anaesthetic publicity is a sociological claim about a specific cultural mechanism produced by specific agents within specific institutional arrangements. Postman (1985) anticipates part of the capture model through his account of how television’s entertainment logic depoliticizes public thought, but he does not theorize informational flooding as a political mechanism. Rancière (1999) theorizes the distribution of the sensible as a political structure that determines who can appear as a legitimate political actor. Anaesthetic publicity theorizes the destruction of the affective preconditions for political appearance itself. For anaesthetic publicity to function as an analytical tool instead of a synthetic metaphor, it must be separated from its causes and effects, and it must remain answerable to evidence. Three specifications are important. First, the concept occupies a distinct explanatory space. Fragmentation describes a structural condition; anaesthetic publicity identifies an affective mechanism through which emotional energy is depleted and re-canalized. Spectacle helps explain the concentration of public attention; anaesthetic publicity explains its dispersal. Hyperreality remains chiefly a philosophy of the sign; anaesthetic publicity offers a sociological mechanism with identifiable agents. Communicative and surveillance capitalism illuminate the political economy of attention, yet they leave less developed the cultural coding and solidarity-depleting processes, which are at the centre of anaesthetic publicity. Second, the concept has observable indicators. Its prevalence would be marked by exhaustion among the most politically engaged, news avoidance as protective withdrawal, reported difficulty distinguishing reliable from unreliable information, and forms of engagement that generate visibility without durable collective mobilization. Third, the concept has a clear condition of disconfirmation. In contexts where communicative saturation is high but the structural preconditions identified by the concept are absent, anaesthetic publicity would not predict the collapse of democratic capacity. The Nordic cases discussed later in this article provide this scope condition and therefore serve as the concept’s internal falsification test, not as a simple counter-example.

Srnicek (2017) demonstrates that digital platforms are structurally ill-suited to function as public spheres because they are proprietary infrastructures optimized for surplus value extraction rather than reasoned deliberation. Zuboff (2019) shows how surveillance capitalism creates an asymmetry of knowledge that undermines autonomous political judgement. These contributions clarify the political economy of platform power, while leaving the cultural dimension less fully specified. From a Bourdieusian perspective (Bourdieu, 1993), the oligarch-platform sovereign represents a formation in which the economic field and the field of cultural production collapse into a single subject position, making the accumulation of capital and the governance of symbolic production part of the same operation. Piketty’s (2020) analysis of civilizational-scale wealth concentration provides the material foundation for this development, since extreme capital accumulation makes possible the acquisition of communicative infrastructure and the erosion of the separation between economic wealth and communicative power that democratic theory has traditionally presupposed. Alexander and Mast (2006) illuminate the cultural consequence by showing how democratic political performance depends on the relative autonomy of the communicative field. Democratic cultural performance loses the institutional conditions of its possibility when that autonomy is abolished. The oligarch-platform sovereign should be understood as a Weberian ideal type, not as a description of one individual. Its defining condition is the fusion or structural alignment of three powers: (i) economic capital; (ii) ownership of communicative infrastructure; and (iii) political authority, which liberal-democratic theory has assumed to be at least partially separated. This condition is most fully embodied, at the time of writing, by Musk, in whom the three converge in one person; yet the concept does not require full convergence. Equivalent effects can be approximated where distinct actors, such as an aligned platform owner, a partisan media ecosystem and a sympathetic state, are structurally coordinated. Berlusconi and Erdoğan, treated in a later section of this article under the capture model, represent earlier and partial approximations to the ideal type. Framing the figure in this way guards against over-personalization because the analytic object is the structural alignment of powers, not the biography of any one oligarch or the informal influence of wealthy actors with close political connections. Table 2 documents the genealogy of this process.

Table 2. The oligarch-platform sovereign: A typology of media-political power.

Phase	Historical Figures	Communicative Reach	Relationship to State	Mode of Power
Phase I: Press Baron (1880s to 1960s)	Hearst, Northcliffe, Hugenberg	Newspapers and print media	Indirect influence through narrative	Mediated through editorial control
Phase II: Media Oligarch (1990s to 2010s)	Berlusconi, Murdoch	Broadcast media and transnational ecosystems	Direct office or systematic political shaping	Concentrated through ownership of channels
Phase III: Oligarch- Platform Sovereign (2020s onward)	Musk	Ownership of communicative infrastructure itself	Fusion of platform ownership and executive state power	Architectural through design of the communicative environment

Methods

I employ comparative-historical analysis combined with Weberian ideal-type construction to develop a mid-range cultural-sociological framework for understanding how platform-autocratic formations systematically deplete the affective preconditions of democratic life. The methodological approach follows the abductive characteristic of cultural-sociological theorizing, in which theoretical frameworks are constructed through a sustained dialectical movement between conceptual elaboration and empirical illustration (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014). The aim is to identify and demonstrate the plausibility of a specific cultural mechanism, ‘anaesthetic publicity’, across a selected range of historical and contemporary cases, consistent with the approach of culturally oriented comparative-historical sociology in which the identification of generative cultural mechanisms takes analytical priority over the statistical demonstration of correlations (Steinmetz, 2004).

The article examines six cases organized into two groups. The first comprises three historical cases selected to ground the comparative typology in well-documented empirical contexts. The second comprises three contemporary cases selected to demonstrate how the cultural mechanisms identified historically have been transformed, intensified and structurally consolidated under platform-autocratic conditions. Cases are selected on the basis of theoretical relevance, following the approach of analytical generalization characteristic of comparative-historical sociology (Mahoney and Rueschemeyer, 2003). The three historical cases are Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Franco’s Spain, each of which developed communicative closure in a systematic and thoroughly documented form whose eventual collapse provides a comparative baseline against which the structural resilience of contemporary saturation models can be assessed. The three contemporary cases are Silvio Berlusconi’s Italy, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Turkey, and Elon Musk’s acquisition and transformation of Twitter/X, which together trace the developmental arc of the oligarch-platform sovereign from a paradigmatic early instance through an incremental regulatory variant to its fully realized contemporary form. The comparative rationale rests on controlled contrast. Across the six cases, two elements remain constant, an autocratic relationship to public communication and the shared erosion of democratic agency. Variation lies in the communicative mechanism, whether closure, capture, or saturation, and in the form of political subjectivity that each mechanism produces. The historical cases anchor the prior registers and supply a comparative baseline, especially the entropic visibility of closure, which tends to generate the oppositional consciousness it seeks to suppress. The contemporary cases trace the emergence of saturation. No single case could establish this, since identifying the novelty of saturation requires the registers against which it becomes visible.

The article draws on three categories of evidence. Historical-archival scholarship grounds the comparative typology in established empirical research. Systematic comparative data from V-Dem 2025 (Nord et al., 2025), Freedom House Freedom on the Net 2025, and the EU Media Pluralism Monitor provide quantitative indicators of democratic erosion, media ownership concentration, and communicative infrastructure across national contexts. Survey-based research from the Reuters Institute Digital News Report

2025 and Pew Research Center 2025 provides cross-national evidence that the cultural formation theorized as anaesthetic publicity is observable at the level of political subjectivity. All three categories are used illustratively, not inferentially, because the article does not claim to test a causal hypothesis. It seeks to demonstrate the plausibility of the proposed mechanisms across a theoretically diverse range of cases. Two implications of this stance should be stated plainly. First, the survey and index data are used as consistency checks. They show that the cultural formation theorized in this study is observable across different measurement systems and that its distribution is consistent with the proposed mechanism. They do not, by themselves, demonstrate that anaesthetic publicity produced the outcomes described. Second, the strength of the argument lies in the convergence of several independent indicators pointing in the same direction. This convergence is therefore treated as corroborative evidence, not as quantitative validation or causal confirmation. Any causal language in the article should be read within this abductive framework, as part of a plausibility-establishing argument that identifies a mechanism for further empirical investigation.

The Nordic democracies present the most important apparent counter-case and must be addressed directly. Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland and Iceland consistently score highly on V-Dem democratic quality and Freedom House internet freedom indices despite high platform penetration. If platform saturation alone were sufficient to produce democratic paralysis, these cases would be difficult for the framework to accommodate. Their significance lies precisely in this limit. V-Dem data and the EU Media Pluralism Monitor consistently record low media ownership concentration and robust public media funding in these markets. Freedom House Freedom on the Net consistently rates them among the freest digital environments globally. The framework predicts that anaesthetic publicity's capacity to damage democratic cultural resources is attenuated where its structural preconditions are weak or absent, including oligarchic ownership concentration, weakened public media, and thin civil society. The Nordic cases therefore show that communicative saturation does not inevitably produce democratic paralysis when the cultural infrastructure of democratic life remains institutionally robust. They function as a scope condition and as an internal falsification test. Saturation is present, but the structural preconditions are not, and the predicted collapse of democratic capacity does not follow.

Three Registers of Autocratic Communication and The Paralytic Subject

The relationship between autocratic power and public communication has assumed historically distinct forms. The typology developed in this article organizes these forms into three ideal-typical registers. All three registers coexist in the present, layered upon one another with shifting relative weight, and their juxtaposition illuminates what is novel about the contemporary condition while guarding against the assumption that the past has been simply superseded. Table 3 summarizes the typology across six analytical dimensions.

Table 3. Three Registers of Autocratic Communication.

Dimension	Closure Model	Capture Model	Saturation Model
Historical paradigm	Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, Franco's Spain	Berlusconi's Italy, Erdoğan's Turkey	Musk's Twitter/X, Russian information warfare
Primary mechanism	Censorship, monopoly, silencing	Ownership concentration, hollowing of editorial independence	Informational flooding, algorithmic amplification
Relationship to public sphere	Abolishes it	Preserves its form, empties its content	Overwhelms its participants
Communicative logic	Monologue from state to subject	Oligarchic ventriloquism	Cacophony
Cultural formation produced	Affective clarity and oppositional solidarity	Affective manipulation through apparent pluralism	Affective exhaustion and epistemic incapacitation
Mode of political control	Fear and enforced conformity	Manufactured consent through spectacle	Paralysis through overload

The Closure Model

The establishment of the Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda in March 1933 under Joseph Goebbels represents the most systematic attempt in modern European history to subordinate all communicative channels to the ideological requirements of a single political regime (Ross, 2008). The Editors Law of October 1933 transformed journalists into de facto state functionaries who required registration, demonstrated racial purity, and conformity with ministerial directives as conditions of professional practice (Welch, 2001). The *Gleichschaltung*, the forcible alignment of all public institutions with National Socialist ideology, extended communicative control beyond formal media into every sphere of civil society. The subsidized production of the *Volksempfänger*, or “People’s Receiver,” an inexpensive radio designed for mass ownership, ensured that state propaganda reached directly into the domestic sphere and completed a communicative architecture of unprecedented comprehensiveness.

Fascist Italy combined systematic silencing with spectacular public performance. Mussolini’s regime operated through the Ministry of Popular Culture, enforcing censorship of the press and controlling the allocation of newsprint, while simultaneously cultivating the theatrical dimension of political power through choreographed crowds, balcony addresses, and the cult of the leader’s body as national symbol (Berezin, 1997; Falasca-Zamponi, 1997). This is the aestheticization of politics that Benjamin (2008 [1936]) identified as it aims for the rendering of domination as beautiful and the substitution of spectacle for deliberation. Franco’s Spain represents the longest-lived version of the closure model. The 1938 Press Law, operative for nearly three decades, subordinated all journalistic activity to the state and required that published content serve the purposes of national unity and Catholic moral order (Sinova, 1989).

The cultural formation produced by the closure model is, paradoxically, one of affective clarity. Citizens under conditions of communicative closure know that they are being suppressed, and this certainty, however dangerous to express openly, can become a foundation for political solidarity and clandestine organization. As Ben-Ghiat (2020) argues, visible censorship produces the oppositional consciousness it seeks to prevent. Wagner-Pacifi (2017) illuminates the mechanism further by demonstrating how politically charged events of visible suppression crystallize into culturally consequential oppositional narratives, providing the symbolic resources through which resistance constructs its identity and sustains its motivation across time. Underground press networks in Fascist Italy, clandestine cultural production in Franco's Spain, and the survival of oppositional memory within the communicative desert of Nazism all testify to this structural limitation (Peukert, 1987; Preston, 2012; Pugliese, 2004). The closure model's entropic tendency operates through this mechanism. The more complete the communicative monopoly, the more vulnerable it becomes to any crack in the edifice of official truth, since such cracks can become sites of political awakening.

The Capture Model

Berlusconi's Italy demonstrates that control of the public sphere can be achieved without resort to the heavy-handed apparatus of classical censorship. Berlusconi did not imprison journalists on any systematic scale, abolish elections, suppress opposition parties, or establish a Ministry of Propaganda. His actions were, again for these reasons, structurally more insidious. Berlusconi constructed a communicative environment in which formal pluralism coexisted with substantive homogeneity, and he did so by combining ownership of Italy's dominant commercial television network with control of the state broadcaster through political appointment, while using his political office to advance legislation favourable to his commercial interests (Ginsborg, 2005; on the resulting epistemic culture see Molé Liston, 2020). The citizen encountered multiple channels, programmes, apparent choices, yet the ideological bandwidth within which political reality was framed had been narrowed in advance by the interests of a single proprietor whose commercial survival depended on the perpetuation of his political protection.

Erdoğan's Turkey after 2013 illustrates the capture model in a context where democratic institutions, though formally operative, were already fragile. The systematic transfer of independent media organizations to regime-friendly owners through sales and politically motivated regulatory interventions, combined with the imprisonment of journalists on terrorism charges and the weaponization of tax audits and licensing procedures, produced a communicative environment in which formal media diversity persisted even as substantive editorial independence was progressively eliminated (Yesil, 2016). Freedom House Freedom on the Net 2025 documents the ongoing and severe deterioration of internet freedom in Turkey, consistent with its status as one of the countries experiencing the most sustained decline over the report's 15-year measurement history. The Turkish case is particularly instructive because it demonstrates how the capture model operates incrementally, through a series of individually justifiable legal and regulatory actions that collectively transform the communicative landscape without producing a single dramatic rupture sufficient to mobilize sustained opposition. The cultural

formation produced by the capture model is affective manipulation through apparent pluralism. Domination operates at the level of ownership and editorial orientation, not explicit prohibition, and this structural invisibility makes it more durable and more difficult to resist than classical closure.

The Saturation Model

The saturation model represents the emergent register of autocratic communication and the one in which anaesthetic publicity finds its purest expression. Its rationale differs fundamentally from either closure or capture. The objective is not to monopolize or control the communicative environment but to flood it so thoroughly that the cultural and affective preconditions for critical political judgement are overwhelmed rather than suppressed or manipulated.

The Russian approach to information warfare, documented by Paul and Matthews (2016) as the firehose of falsehood model, exemplifies the mechanism of saturation in its most deliberate state-directed form. The aim with the saturation model is not to persuade the audience that a particular version of events is true but to exhaust its capacity to determine what is true at all. The epistemic foundations of democratic deliberation are not so much undermined as drowned when a political event can be met with dozens of simultaneously circulating counter-narratives, considering that each of these events is supported by pseudo-evidence and amplified by networks of automated accounts.

Musk's acquisition of Twitter/X in October 2022 represents the most fully developed contemporary instance of the saturation model within a platform-autocratic framework. The transformation of Twitter into X was not simply a change of ownership. It reconfigured a communicative infrastructure. The dismantling of trust-and-safety capacity, the reinstatement of previously barred accounts, the algorithmic down-ranking of external links alongside the up-ranking of the owner's own content, and the conversion of verification from a credibility signal into a paid subscription together altered the conditions under which messages achieve visibility and credibility (Vaidhyanathan, 2018). The measurable consequence has been a reshaping of the platform's public, with right-leaning audiences expanding, particularly among young men, while progressive users have reduced engagement or migrated to alternative platforms (Newman et al., 2025). Musk's role in the Department of Government Efficiency adds a further element to the case, since it brought economic capital, communicative infrastructure, and executive authority into unusually close proximity. A three-point decline in US internet freedom during the coverage period from June 2024 to May 2025, driven by government pressure on online speech and expanded digital surveillance, provides the broader institutional setting in which this convergence occurred (Freedom House, 2025). The case warrants fuller treatment because it carries much of the article's theoretical weight. It also clarifies the strategy-versus-structure question. The saturation produced by engagement-optimized models is, in the first instance, a structural effect, not a directed campaign. Outrage and exhaustion emerge as by-products of optimization for attention. Saturation shades into strategy when an owner with aligned political interests declines to mitigate these effects or actively amplifies them. The Russian firehose (Paul and Matthews, 2016) occupies the deliberate pole of this continuum; engagement-driven platform saturation occupies the

structural pole; and the Musk/X case sits between them, as a structural effect that can be politically tolerated, amplified, and exploited. Anaesthetic publicity, then, does not need a single planner behind it, although it can serve one.

The saturation model's most distinctive feature is the structural complementarity between platform architecture and populist political communication. Populist formations and platform architectures are not coincidental allies. Their communicative strategies are structurally complementary because each depends upon and amplifies the other. Populist political communication intensifies resentment, fear and tribal outrage, thereby generating the affective registers that platform engagement architectures are optimized to circulate and monetize (Moffitt, 2016). The oligarch-platform sovereign and the populist politician are structurally complementary figures because the populist generates the affective raw material the platform circulates, while the platform provides the distribution infrastructure the populist needs for audience construction. Laclau (2005) demonstrated how populist reason constructs antagonistic collective identities through emotional address. He could not have anticipated the degree to which the infrastructure of that emotional address would itself come to be owned by figures whose political interests align with democratic delegitimation. This platform–populism nexus produces anaesthetic publicity at industrial scale by saturating the communicative environment with affective stimuli that individually demand response and collectively ensure exhaustion.

The empirical signature of the saturation model at the level of political subjectivity is documented by the Pew Research Center's December 2025 survey. Approximately half of American adults report feeling worn out by the amount of news available. Two-thirds have stopped getting news from a specific source. Six in ten have reduced their overall news intake. Trust in national news organizations has fallen 20 percentage points since 2016, reaching 56% in September 2025 (Pew Research Center, 2025). These figures do not describe the political apathy of an uninformed citizenry. They indicate the affective exhaustion of a citizenry that is informationally saturated and culturally strained.

The Paralytic Subject

The preceding section theorized the structural mechanisms through which the three registers of autocratic communication produce distinct cultural formations. This section theorizes the form of political subjectivity that anaesthetic publicity produces at the individual level. Sustained political attention is the capacity to hold a problem in view long enough to analyse, judge and respond to it collectively, which is essential to prevent totalitarian rule (Arendt 1951). It is therefore a cognitive and affective precondition for democratic agency. Anaesthetic publicity works to erode this precondition through three interlocking cultural mechanisms that the theoretical framework of this article allows us to specify.

The first mechanism operates through Collins's (2004) interaction ritual chain framework. Collins demonstrates that emotional energy, the diffuse motivational charge enabling sustained collective engagement, is generated through successful interaction rituals. Platform architectures exploit selected ingredients of interaction ritual while

preventing the accumulation of the emotional energy that collective action requires. The viral political moment delivers the appearance of collective effervescence without its substance. It produces an affective discharge that leaves the participant spent, subjectively engaged, and only weakly connected to sustained collective mobilization. Berlant's (2011) concept of cruel optimism captures the subjective dimension, since citizens experience themselves as politically active precisely when they are most fully absorbed within a communicative architecture designed to convert political energy into engagement metrics. This is connected to the central paradox of communicative capitalism. The more one communicates, the less one's communication matters (Dean, 2009). Han (2015, 2017) extends this through his diagnoses of the burnout society and psychopolitics, arguing that the self-exploiting dimension of the contemporary attention economy produces a subject who experiences communicative saturation as a demand placed upon the self and interprets that demand as freedom even as it weakens the conditions for effective political agency.

The second mechanism operates through Eyerman's (2006, 2019) account of cultural trauma, with an important qualification. Cultural trauma, as Eyerman theorizes it, is a collective process and one classically precipitated by a discrete event or series of events around which a community must labour to reconstruct shared meaning. Anaesthetic publicity does not fit this template straightforwardly, and the difference is analytically productive. Saturation does not produce the individual psychological trauma of the paralytic subject. It creates a chronic and eventless erosion at the collective level, gradually destabilizing the interpretive frameworks, civic codes and narrative resources through which a political community ordinarily makes shared meaning. It is therefore better understood as a trauma without event, distinguished from Eyerman's event-based model by its diffuse and cumulative character, and located at the level of the collective. So understood, it still requires the laborious cultural reconstruction that Eyerman describes before political agency can be restored. This reconstruction, the slow rebuilding of the interpretive and affective infrastructure of collective action, is particularly what the saturation model's continuous operation works to prevent. Alexander's civil sphere provides the target of this destruction by directing attention to the sacred codes of civil discourse that cultural trauma damages and that democratic repair must reconstruct.

A third line of consistency comes from experimental evidence, though its bearing on the argument must be stated carefully. Bail et al. (2018) conducted a randomized experiment in which Twitter users were paid to follow a bot retweeting content from political figures of the opposing party for one month. The results complicate the deliberative model of platform engagement. Exposure to opposing views increased political polarization among Republicans and produced no significant moderating effect among Democrats. The experiment therefore shows that platform exposure does not automatically generate the cross-cutting dialogue deliberative theory predicts. This does not, and cannot, demonstrate the existence of anaesthetic publicity as a general mechanism. It does, however, disconfirm the deliberative counter-hypothesis that cross-cutting platform exposure fosters mutual understanding. The finding that platforms can intensify affective division instead of softening it is consistent with the depletion and re-canalization of emotional energy theorized in this study. Read in this way, the experiment also

points to one channel, polarization, through which platform architecture becomes implicated in the wider crisis, while complementing institutional and political-economic accounts instead of displacing them.

The Pew Research Center's 2023 survey provides the empirical signature of this triple mechanism operating at the level of political subjectivity. It was found that 65% of Americans always or often feel exhausted when thinking about politics. Only 10% frequently feel hopeful and 4% excited. Among highly politically engaged adults, the exhaustion figure rises to 72%, exceeding the general population average by seven percentage points (Pew Research Center, 2023). This finding directly complicates the assumption that political exhaustion reflects disengagement, since the most engaged citizens are also the most depleted. This is the pattern one would expect if platform architectures were exploiting and exhausting the interaction ritual conditions that collective action requires. At the same time, these patterns should be read as strong corroborative evidence for the mechanism proposed in this article, not as standalone proof. The same distributions may also reflect partisan polarization, institutional distrust, or wider shifts in political culture. This does not weaken the argument; it clarifies its scope. Anaesthetic publicity is not presented as the sole cause of these outcomes. It functions as a cultural-affective mechanism that helps explain how political attention is drained, redirected, and prevented from becoming durable collective action. Its value lies in specifying a process that existing accounts of polarization and political economy tend to leave underdeveloped. The convergence of exhaustion, avoidance, confusion and failed mobilization therefore provides meaningful support for the concept, while leaving room for other forces to operate alongside it.

The temporal dimension of affective depletion reinforces this analysis. Each event that passes without generating the organized collective response it might once have prompted depletes the citizen's sense of political self-efficacy by reducing the likelihood that the next event will generate a response. Pew's December 2025 finding that six in ten Americans have reduced their overall news intake documents the protective withdrawal of the exhausted, not the disengagement of the apathetic. Reuters Institute 2025 confirms the cross-national reach, with 58% of respondents across 48 markets reporting that they feel unable to distinguish truth from falsehood online (Newman et al., 2025). Stiegler (2010, 2015) describes this as a generalized proletarianization of knowledge, since the dispossession of the means of cognitive self-governance mirrors the dispossession of the means of material production in classical accounts of proletarianization. The paralytic subject is not ignorant. The paralytic subject is dispossessed of the cultural resources through which knowledge can be converted into political judgement and judgement into collective action.

The distinction between passivity and paralysis is therefore analytically essential. The paralytic subject may be intensely engaged in the performative sense cultivated by platform architectures, such as posting, sharing, expressing outrage, declaring solidarity. Yet this engagement is structurally severed from the forms of collective political action that would be necessary to challenge existing distributions of power. Table 4 summarizes the distinct subjective formations produced under each of the three registers of autocratic communication.

Table 4. The paralytic subject under three registers of autocratic communication.

Dimension	Closure Model	Capture Model	Saturation Model
Subjective condition	Fear, conformity, clandestine resistance	Passive consumption, occasional scepticism	Exhaustion, epistemic incapacitation, compensatory engagement
Relationship to information	Scarcity creates hunger for truth	Managed abundance creates false confidence	Overwhelming excess destroys the capacity for discernment
Political response	Underground organization and clandestine solidarity	Periodic protest and electoral challenge	Diffuse anxiety, hashtag activism, and burnout
Affective register	Clarity of oppression	Managed ambivalence	Depleted indifference
Mode of resistance	Seek alternative channels	Develop critical media literacy	Requires infrastructural transformation

Discussion: The Cultural Preconditions of Collective Action and the Cultural Destruction of Democratic Agency

The first implication of the preceding findings concerns cultural sociology’s theorization of collective action. The dominant tradition, drawing on Swidler’s (1986) toolkit theory, Alexander’s (2006) civil sphere theory and Collins’s (2004) interaction ritual chain framework, has identified cultural repertoires, symbolic codes and emotional energy as resources from which collective political agency is constructed. The analysis of anaesthetic publicity shows that these resources can be systematically targeted, captured, and depleted by structural agents operating within communicative infrastructure. Standard models often assume that shared grievances and available cultural resources are sufficient for collective action to emerge when political opportunity structures permit. Anaesthetic publicity identifies a third condition. Collective action also requires emotional energy (Goffman 1967) that has not already been captured and exhausted by the simulated interaction rituals of platform engagement. This is the condition that the saturation model weakens.

The implications extend to the cultural sociology of social movements. The contemporary period has witnessed a paradox. Movements with substantial popular support have repeatedly struggled to translate mobilizational energy into durable political change. The Black Lives Matter movement generated the largest protest mobilization in American history in the summer of 2020, yet produced limited durable institutional change. The climate movement commands majority public support across the democratic world yet consistently struggles to generate the legislative responses the science demands. Anaesthetic publicity provides a cultural-sociological explanation for this difficulty. The platforms that movements depend upon for audience construction, message distribution and solidarity building are owned and algorithmically managed within infrastructures whose structural incentives favour attention, circulation and exhaustion. The emotional energy generated through online organizing is partially captured and dispersed by the

platform's engagement structure before it can accumulate into the sustained collective solidarity that movement success requires under adversity. The movement that goes viral achieves the appearance of collective effervescence, including shared attention, emotional intensity and symbolic solidarity, without necessarily crossing the threshold into the moral solidarity that Collins identifies as the precondition of sustained collective action. The contrast with movements that have succeeded is instructive. Sachs and Alexander (2023) demonstrate how sustained feminist mobilization successfully pressed the civil sphere's codes against presidential power because it maintained the moral solidarity that platform-mediated activism often depletes. Zelinsky (2025) shows how the tactical weaponization of collective trauma by populist actors blocks democratic deliberation, a dynamic that operates synergistically with the affective exhaustion anaesthetic publicity produces.

Norris and Inglehart's (2019) cultural backlash theory, which accounts for the rise of populist authoritarianism as a counter-revolution against the values of educated cosmopolitan elites, offers a complementary explanation operating at a different analytical level. Cultural backlash accounts for the ideological content of the populist reaction. The civil sphere literature documents the mechanisms through which populism threatens democratic coding infrastructure. Kivisto and Sciortino (2023) show that civil sphere theory has developed to theorize impediments to liberal democratic solidarity, while Alexander et al. (2020) demonstrate how populist formations systematically exploit and corrode the sacred codes of civil discourse. Anaesthetic publicity accounts for the communicative mechanism through which that reaction is amplified and democratic opposition to it is simultaneously exhausted.

The oligarch-platform sovereign represents a formation in which relative autonomy is dissolved through ownership or structural control of the infrastructure through which cultural production circulates. The oligarch-platform sovereign controls the conditions under which content achieves visibility, credibility, and social reach. When oligarchs owned mines and factories, their influence over public discourse was mediated through lobbying and philanthropy. When they own the infrastructure of discourse itself, that mediation collapses, and the production of symbolic goods becomes subject to the same imperatives that govern the production of any other commodity. This structural account invites the causation objection. Does anaesthetic publicity cause democratic erosion, or does it coincide with it? The article does not claim anaesthetic publicity as a singular efficient cause. It claims that the oligarch-platform sovereign's structural position creates cultural conditions under which democratic erosion can accelerate, and that this claim is supported by convergent evidence from V-Dem, Freedom House, the EU Media Pluralism Monitor, the Reuters Institute and Pew, as discussed earlier. The causation runs from structural position through cultural mechanism to political subjectivity. This is a generative mechanism in Steinmetz's (2004) sense, a structured process producing determinate cultural effects under specifiable conditions. The strength of this claim lies in the convergence of five independent measurement systems, each using different methodologies and targeting different dimensions of the phenomenon, all pointing in the same direction. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) and Mounk (2018) identify institutional erosion, economic inequality, and elite defection as political-structural conditions. Anaesthetic publicity operates within this context. Institutional accounts identify the political-structural conditions; anaesthetic

publicity specifies the cultural mechanism through which those conditions are reproduced and deepened at the level of everyday communicative experience.

The responses most commonly proposed to the crisis of the contemporary public sphere, including more speech, better information and enhanced media literacy, presuppose the attentional and affective capacities that anaesthetic publicity depletes. They treat the problem as one of informational quality when it is also one of communicative infrastructure. Media literacy education assumes the cognitive and attentional capacity to evaluate competing information claims, yet communicative saturation weakens precisely this capacity. Fraser (1990) argued more than three decades ago that the counter-public spheres that emerged in response to the exclusions of the bourgeois public sphere challenged its foundational assumptions. Any serious attempt to resist anaesthetic publicity must similarly begin from the recognition that the problem is not the corruption of an originally democratic communicative space alone. It is also the construction of new communicative arrangements adequate to a historical situation in which existing forms of public discourse have been absorbed into the rationale of oligarchic-platform power. Fraser's (2022) argument about the need to de-commodify the conditions of democratic reproduction applies with particular urgency to the communicative domain. Negt and Kluge's (1993) articulation of communicative spaces organized outside and against the dominant structures of the bourgeois public sphere remains vital for thinking about democratic repair under conditions of saturation.

The Nordic scope condition identified in the previous section provides empirical grounding for institutional resistance. Public media funding, civil society organizational density, and distributed communicative power constitute forms of structural resistance to anaesthetic publicity, and the Nordic cases demonstrate that such resistance is achievable within democratic institutional frameworks. Platform-autocratic formations exploit structural vulnerability. Reconstructing the cultural infrastructure that counters this vulnerability is the long-term democratic project that resistance to anaesthetic publicity requires. The struggle over communicative infrastructure is therefore inseparable from the struggle over the civic institutions through which emotional energy is generated, sustained, and directed toward collective democratic ends. The same energy that platforms may capture can also be channelled toward building more robust communicative systems that resist the cultural destruction of democratic agency.

Conclusion

This article began with an empirical puzzle that existing cultural sociology and public sphere theory have not adequately resolved. V-Dem 2025 documents that autocracies now outnumber democracies globally for the first time in 25 years, that freedom of expression is worsening in 44 countries at a record rate, and that almost half of all autocratizing governments are actively spreading disinformation. The article's core argument is that platform-autocratic formations weaken democratic agency by capturing and depleting the affective preconditions of collective action through a culturally specific mechanism. They do so by damaging the interpretive and coding infrastructure through which the civil sphere reproduces itself. The oligarch-platform sovereign contributes to this process by dissolving the relative autonomy of the field of cultural production and

reorganizing the communicative environment according to the combined imperatives of capital accumulation and democratic paralysis. The platform–populism nexus amplifies this process further by generating affective raw material at an industrial scale. The cultural formation this produces, theorized through Benjamin and Buck-Morss as anaesthetization, through Collins as the depletion and re-canalization of emotional energy, and through Eyerman as a collective trauma without event, generates a paralytic subject who is informationally aware, affectively engaged, and politically incapacitated. The three-register typology demonstrates that this formation is historically specific. The closure model produced affective clarity and oppositional solidarity; the capture model produced affective manipulation through apparent pluralism; and the saturation model produces the cultural formation of affective exhaustion and epistemic incapacitation that anaesthetic publicity identifies.

Conceptually, the article introduces anaesthetic publicity as an analytical tool identifying a cultural mechanism the discipline has not fully theorized. It helps explain the anomaly that existing fragmentation theory cannot account for, in other words the coincidence of communicative abundance with democratic paralysis and the concentration of political exhaustion among the most politically engaged. Theoretically, it extends civil sphere theory and interaction ritual chain theory to the platform-autocratic context by showing how platform architectures can weaken the cultural coding mechanisms through which democratic life reproduces itself by generating the form of collective effervescence without its substance. Comparatively, it provides a historically grounded three-register typology distinguishing between qualitatively different cultural formations as each produces a distinct political subjectivity.

The Nordic scope condition offers the most important analytical closing point. The saturation model may prove more structurally resilient than its predecessors in contexts where democratic cultural infrastructure is already fragile, and considerably less resilient in contexts where that infrastructure, from public media funding and civil society density to distributed communicative power, remains institutionally robust. Every previous register of communicative autocracy eventually encountered its limits. The closure model collapsed in Italy in 1943, Germany in 1945, and Spain through the gradual transition after 1975, and in each case the collapse was driven partly by the entropic dynamics of a system that made its repression visible enough to generate the oppositional consciousness it sought to prevent. Whether the saturation model's capacity to absorb dissent by drowning it in noise, instead of silencing it directly, confers a structural resilience its predecessors lacked remains the central open empirical question.

Cultural sociology can bring into focus the conditions under which democratic agency becomes possible or fades out. Democratic life depends on a civil sphere through which a relatively autonomous domain organized around solidarity, justice, liberty and inclusion can sustain collective life (Thorpe and Alexander, 2026). If anaesthetic publicity names a situation in which communicative environments drain the affective and interpretive resources of democratic action, the central question is no longer why citizens fail to act. The more difficult question concerns how the capacity to act is eroded. From this vantage point, the reconstruction of democratic life hinges on whether the cultural infrastructure that sustains interpretive clarity, symbolic boundaries, and shared emotional investment can be restored or reconfigured under conditions of saturation. This shifts the

analytical burden away from individual dispositions and toward the organization of communicative life itself. It becomes necessary to ask who controls the channels, how meaning circulates, and under which institutional guarantees cultural production retains autonomy from market imperatives and political capture. Where such conditions persist, even in attenuated form, anaesthetic tendencies may be interrupted, slowed, or partially reversed. Where they have been dismantled, democratic agency loses the ground on which it could re-emerge. The struggle is therefore not only over speech, representation, or access, it is also over the infrastructures that make collective meaning-making viable. This article does not claim to resolve that struggle. It demonstrates its mechanism, situates it historically, and specifies its conditions. In a moment when democratic erosion advances without spectacle, that exposure helps render visible the gradual disarming of the public's capacity to think, interpret, and act together.

Cultural sociology is especially well equipped to confront this terrain. At its best, it refuses the comfort of surface explanations and instead tracks how meaning, emotion, and power are organized, circulated, and hollowed out. This article therefore invites future cultural sociologists to move decisively toward the infrastructures of culture, including the architectures of platforms, the political economy of attention, the institutional conditions of symbolic autonomy, and the fragile circuits through which emotional energy is generated and sustained. Cultural sociology has rich ontological and epistemological resources for studying how meaning is engineered, affect is extracted, and publics are assembled only to be dispersed. This is not a call for disciplinary expansion for its own sake. It is a call to take seriously the idea that democratic life stands or falls with the conditions cultural sociology is well positioned to analyse. If democratic agency is being undone in the circuits of communication, then cultural sociology is not peripheral to the diagnosis. It sits at the centre of the problem and, potentially, at the centre of its reconstruction.

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Author biography

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