

THE SYNTHETIC PUBLIC: EPISTEMIC AGENCY AND THE EROSION OF DEMOCRATIC DELIBERATION IN THE AGE OF LLMS

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ABSTRACT: The article examines the emergence of “synthetic public” caused by the proliferation of network technologies, highlighting the resultant threats to epistemic agency and democratic deliberation. Key areas of analysis include simulation mechanisms, how public opinion is artificially manufactured, theory of deliberative democracy as the foundation of democratic political discourse, deliberation and simulation as opposing political tendencies, social epistemology as a normative analysis of ways to organize political discourse, the erosion and collapse of epistemic activity, and elections, which blur the dichotomy between “organic” public opinion and technologically mediated content. The article concludes that the synthetic public is not a step toward true democracy, but a harmful way to imitate and circumvent it. Finally, the article asserts the urgent need to safeguard citizens’ epistemic autonomy in the age of Large Language Models (LLMs).

KEYWORDS: Synthetic Public; Simulation of Public Opinion; Epistemic Agency; Political Discourse; Deliberative Democracy; Large Language Models (LLMs)

I. INTRODUCTION

The role of artificial intelligence in society is undergoing a fundamental transformation, shifting from the passive delivery of information through search functions to the active formation of meanings, opinions, and social interactions during discourse. Whereas previously, AI-powered search engines (e.g., Google, Microsoft Bing, Yahoo!, etc.) functioned like librarians, providing a list of sources and leaving it up to the user to analyze them, debate them, and draw conclusions, it is now possible to use discursive AI tools (ChatGPT, Perplexity, Google AI Overviews) that synthesize the answer themselves, offering a “ready-made

opinion” or summary of the discussion. They cease to be intermediaries and become authoritative “arbiters of facts”. Evolving from simple chatbots to complex multi-agent systems capable of imitating human behavior and persuasion, AI is acquiring distinct characteristics of subjectivity and even synthetic publicity. In the political and social sphere, AI is beginning to participate in discussions not as a tool, but as an equal, often indistinguishable from humans, participant in communication. This allows public opinion to be modeled without the participation of the people themselves, forming the phenomenon of the so-called “synthetic public”. Based on the need to know and understand real public opinion, in particular to anticipate future developments and take timely action, optimise management, users of discursive AI tools can successfully meet this need. This intention is a logical continuation and, perhaps in a certain context, the culmination of a centuries-old trend in human development toward a better understanding of oneself. However, this process has a downside: the widespread use of LLMs, the simulation of public opinion, and the rise of the “synthetic public” threaten to cause “epistemic erosion” – a process where citizens lose their status as the primary sources of political meaning. Drawing on the deliberative theory of democracy and social epistemology as a normative framework for political discourse, this study analyzes current trends, risks, and opportunities.

2. MECHANISMS FOR SIMULATING PUBLIC OPINION

Simulating public opinion is a complex set of technological and psychological methods and techniques aimed at creating the illusion of mass support or protest. In order to achieve political or economic goals, the addressers of digital political discourse deliberately disseminate data, texts, audio and video materials of varying degrees of authenticity – from those created by human actors to artificial ones generated by non-human actors, most commonly social bots – along with the manipulation of digital platform algorithms and widespread social surveillance (García-Marzá, Calvo 2024). All types of distorted information are disseminated by politically active forces in accordance with their interests, having the necessary intentions and resources for these purposes. These are the initiators and addressers of political discourse, who bombard their addressees’ audience with messages and narratives that are beneficial to them. These include information and communication simulations aimed at artificially creating the

appearance of a “grassroots” public initiative. In the case of astroturfing, hired actors or automated systems publish reviews, posts, likes, and comments, imitating the sincere support of ordinary citizens for a particular idea. The term itself contrasts the artificial and the natural in public life. If real popular movements are called grassroots, then astroturfing is an imitation of such movements, i.e., “artificial grass”. The name is derived from the brand AstroTurf, a synthetic covering designed to imitate a natural lawn. Technical means may include digital visual processing of heroes and antiheroes, of photos and videos to create an “ideal” appearance on social media that is physically unattainable but is perceived even better, more emotionally charged, and brighter than the real thing could be perceived. “Persona simulation” is the use of LLMs and generative AI to create dynamic, interactive digital profiles that mimic real human behavior, attitudes, and decision-making patterns. Hyper-realistic graphics are used for the propaganda visualization of false events. Exaggerated or not noticeable in real life details make the object “more real than real”. Deepfakes are primarily intended to deliberately create images of people saying or doing things that did not actually happen.

To dominate discussions, fake accounts, “troll armies”, and bot farms are widely used. They are deeply integrated with AI, which allows them to conduct coherent dialogues and adapt to the context. Virtual polls and “rigging”, falsification of ratings and online voting results are used to create a false impression of the popularity of a particular solution. AI-based LLM simulations use large language models to imitate the responses of various demographic groups. Neural networks can generate distributions of opinions that look like real sociological research results. Agent-based modeling (ABM) of the interaction of thousands of virtual “agents” allows one to predict or artificially direct the dynamics of real opinions on social networks. AI slop and Search engine optimization (SEO) allow search results and social networks to be flooded with AI-generated content, marginalizing authentic human perspectives and shaping a curated information environment. Strategic social mechanisms, including the spiral of silence, exploit the fear of isolation by projecting a false majority to suppress alternative opinions. Similarly, cyber-ostracism is simulated to discredit targets and force social distancing from their views. These tactics rely on replacing meaningful discussion with empty rhetoric and formalistic procedures that lack real substance.

In the context of social media, filtering entails that information is either curated (moderated) or algorithmically tailored to align with an individual's specific preferences. By leveraging vast data arrays, encompassing both macro- and micro-level insights, algorithmic systems construct sophisticated behavioral models to steer decision-making across socio-political and consumer domains. Subjected to deterministic targeted influence through recommendation technologies, users often remain unaware of how social media feeds are structured or why certain information is prioritized over others. This algorithmic opacity obscures the selection process for socio-political and consumer-behavior recommendations. Intentional filtering, driven by customizable machine learning and semantic algorithms, systematically promotes specific content while marginalizing others, effectively entrenching users within "filter bubbles". Because recipients rarely verify the accuracy of information that aligns with their behavioral profiles or originates from trusted social nodes – such as peers and friends – a state of epistemic inertia occurs. At this point, the refusal to critically evaluate or fact-check results in a leveling of truth-claims, where authentic facts and synthetic fabrications exert an equal influence over their target audiences.

Utilizing big data and professional engagement tactics, addressers can now target audiences based on their specific value systems, beliefs, and behaviors. By employing multi-channel manipulation and affective engagement methods, senders link targeted emotions to beneficial actions, thereby increasing the precision and effectiveness of reaching every social group. The strategic application of big data and professional media engagement tactics coupled with a reliance on the value-normative and mental-behavioral specifics of diverse information consumer clusters significantly enhances targeting, accuracy, and reach. These methods include multi-channel manipulation via heightened emotional perception and linking specific emotions to actions that benefit the sender, ultimately amplifying the effectiveness of communication to each social group. The effectiveness of such influence can reach near-total levels, making it virtually impossible to evade its reach. Users of traditional media – and specifically digital platforms – are increasingly subject to highly sophisticated, automated persuasion. This involves the deliberate distortion of information to instill manipulative assessments and beliefs that serve the addresser's interests, a process resulting in a form of cognitive capture. The relative freedom of citizens

in modern societies has given way to zombie-like information manipulation mechanisms based on the peculiarities of postmodernism. As a result of the use of these mechanisms, certain points of view of target audiences that are beneficial to the addressers of the discourse prevail, while others are not formed at all. The data on which current algorithms are based can be deliberately falsified or simply become outdated, which also paves the way for disinformation and the deliberate and targeted misleading of mass audiences of users. Compared to misinformation and lies coming from the mouths of traditional politicians, the use of algorithmic mechanisms is characterized by a significantly lower level of responsibility, as it is carried out not by “real people” but by “impersonal”, albeit always precisely targeted, machine algorithms.

3. THE RISE OF THE SYNTHETIC PUBLIC

The “synthetic public” is a sociocultural phenomenon of the digital age, shaped by modern technologies and characterized by the distortion of reality and the creation of the appearance of broad support, active participation, or prevailing public opinion. To achieve this goal, a technological base in the form of bot networks, AI algorithms, and click farms is used to simulate human activity through likes, comments, and reposts. The simplest and most effective techniques are all types of “appeals to the majority/experts/eyewitnesses”. For example, mentioning the results of opinion polls immediately places the recipient of the information in the context of “broad support” for a particular idea, project, or policy by the majority. Referring to expert opinion also creates a “convincing” context and shows what point of view you should adhere to if the recipient does not want to be among the foolish minority or those who are ignorant of the subject. In order to stimulate socio-political processes and public opinion in a direction favorable to the interested initiators of the discourse, information is easily and freely invented, distorted, and replaced, and conclusions and processes are generated that are beneficial to their interests, ideological commitments, or distorted ideas about good and evil. The spread of fake news through networks of accounts that repost content to each other creates the appearance of widespread discussion. Without any factual evidence, let alone a trial with mandatory adversarial proceedings to determine guilt or innocence, it is possible in just a few hours to turn a person into an outcast, a public enemy, a pariah, to expel him or her from society, deprive of the property and freedom, and thus

completely “eliminate” the “unwanted” “competitors”. Information technologies skillfully used by specific addressers to achieve their own goals, including the viral spread of information about problematic events, narrative-type fakes, “bullying of opponents”, and the ability to “cancel” people and companies – allow them to treacherously achieve the most morally despicable but politically or economically advantageous goals in a matter of hours, the achievement of which in the pre-post-truth era could have taken decades of fair competition, or could never have been achieved at all.

Globally, we are witnessing not only a fully formed mechanism for managing public opinion but also a fundamentally new system for producing, transmitting, and processing information. This encompasses the acquisition of knowledge across all areas of public life, including domestic and foreign policy, education, and the arts. These processes occur in both non-professional, everyday discourse and professional political discourse – and both types of discourse are perceived as equal by their audiences in terms of their ability to obtain adequate information. The opinions of the average person and those of a professor with decades of professional experience in any field of human knowledge, from the structure of the political system and economics to virology and quantum mechanics, are perceived by the majority of the population as equal in significance and truthfulness. This occurs because the value-based, ideological, and worldview structures in the minds of addressees are already fully formed, having been assimilated over a lifetime and saturated with vast amounts of information. Cluttered by a blend of facts and fakes, stereotypes and simulacra, this state of consciousness prevents the individual from perceiving new information – whether from a layman or an expert – as credible or worthy of trust. No audience should be expected to change their understanding based on fact-filled, convincing, and evidence-based information. No matter what is said, no matter how convincing and talented the arguments and facts may be, the recipients' opinions will remain the same as before they encountered the factual, real information. A message from a classmate with no medical or biological education about a new mutating virus on social media will influence the opinion of an unlucky recipient much more than the opinion of an academic virologist. Regardless of the narratives disseminated, little changes. Instead, the primary drivers of opinion are niche online contacts and peer-led interactions within everyday communities. Information originating from outside an ideologically

aligned and psychologically comfortable community is neither perceived nor acknowledged. As “convenient” information is universally accepted and “inconvenient” facts are discarded, the boundaries of perception blur. Consequently, the ability to distinguish between synthetic engagement and the authentic reactions of living people is lost, leading to a profound detachment from reality. People begin to live in a comprehensible, comfortable, and familiar “truncated” world: explanations are simple and shared by like-minded people, facts are ignored, truth no longer matters, and detachment from objective reality becomes endless and irreversible. This process of mass retreat into “private” and “individual” realities is characteristic not only of non-professional communities, but also of professional groups of political scientists, sociologists, historians, and psychologists.

The use of large language models (LLMs) and related technologies in the context of electoral audiences is a topic of significant discussion. These technologies have the potential to influence how information is disseminated and perceived within political discourse. In the current digital landscape, synthetic voter models are increasingly used to predict electoral behavior, bypassing the need for real-time discussions or heated public debates. While this saves taxpayers’ money and facilitates research tasks comparable to traditional surveys, digital doubles remain distinct from the results of actual research. More critically, they cannot be considered a legitimate expression of the political will of voters. In the medium and long term, this leads to a systemic decline in trust and the impossibility of verifying information or achieving real public consensus – which becomes a totally artificial construction. This environment strengthens radical viewpoints by silencing authentic discourse, ultimately replacing democratic institutions with “AI slop” and automated opinions: algorithmic products that are increasingly indistinguishable from the voices of real people.

4. THE THEORY OF DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY AS THE FOUNDATION OF POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Deliberative democracy views the legitimacy of power and decision-making not as the result of a simple vote, but as the outcome of free, rational, and reasoned public discussion between free and equal citizens. The term “deliberative democracy” and the normative concept of the priority of reasoned discussion

over simple arithmetic counting of votes were first used in Joseph Bessette's well-known work¹. Deliberation was defined as the process of justifying political decisions through the exchange of arguments (giving of defensible reasons). Unlike the "aggregative" model, where private interests are simply summed up, deliberation aims to find solutions based on the merits of the policy itself. Bessette argued that the Founding Fathers of the United States envisioned a system in which discussion within state institutions would purify and change the opinions of citizens, leading to decisions for the common good. Bessette introduced this term in response to the perception of politics as a struggle between lobbyist interests, seeking to restore the element of seeking the common good through reasonable dialogue to democratic theory. Bessette does not deny majority rule, but introduces the concept of a "deliberative majority." This is a majority that supports a decision not because of a random coincidence of interests, but because it is convinced of its correctness after collective discussion. According to Bessette, during public discussion, participants can change their initial views, arriving at more balanced and socially significant judgments. In the practice of the US representative system, deliberative democracy, according to Bessette, protects the legislative process from the pressure of "fractional interests" and fleeting "passions of the crowd". These ideas, which date back to the American classical republicanism, have become the foundation of modern deliberative democracy theory.

Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action serves as the philosophical and methodological foundation for the theory of deliberative democracy². The philosophical foundation of the theory is the shift in emphasis from individual reason to intersubjective communication in the public sphere – an ideal space where citizens discuss common problems, free from state control and market pressures. Communicative reason serves as the basis for discourse: Habermas argues that the legitimacy of political decisions depends not on majority voting, but on the quality of the preceding discussion. Only those norms are meaningful that all participants could agree on in the course of rational discussion³. The theory of communicative action justifies the possibility of achieving mutual

¹ Bessette 1980.

² Habermas 1981.

³ Habermas 1983.

understanding through dialogue free from coercion. Deliberative democracy transfers the principles of the “ideal speech situation” (equality of participants, reasoned argumentation, absence of any coercion or pressure except for the “force of the best argument”) into political practice, normatively shaping the ethics of political discourse. The procedure of open and rational public discussion, rather than the act of voting itself, is the source of the legitimacy of power. Deliberative democracy offers a political model that embodies the process of reaching consensus in the governance of society. Habermas proposes a “two-track” discursive model in which informal opinion is formed in the broad public sphere (media, associations), and formal decisions are made in parliament and the courts, which must be receptive to arguments from the public sphere.

Joshua Cohen developed Habermas’ ideas, giving them a more concrete political form, often drawing on John Rawls’ theory of justice. Analyzing the institutional dimension and formal conditions of deliberation, Cohen shows what the discussion procedure should look like in order for its outcome to be considered democratic. Participants must not only be equal in legal terms, but also have equal opportunities to influence the outcome of the discussion; they are obliged to support their demands with arguments that can be accepted by others, rather than simply referring to personal interests or power. The deliberation process is a self-sufficient source of legitimacy; a decision is legitimate because it has passed through the filter of honest discussion. Unlike classical democracy, where opinions are fixed, according to deliberative theory, people can change their positions and preferences during dialogue under the influence of arguments. Political decisions must be publicly justified to all those affected by them. Despite the frequent need to make decisions by voting, the ideal goal of discourse remains the achievement of the broadest possible consensus. According to Cohen, the hallmarks of deliberation are the consistency, rather than the singularity, of the discussion process; the commonality of arguments used by all; the status and legal equality of participants within the procedure; the rational justification of decisions by arguments, rather than simply preferences; and the achievement of rationally motivated agreement as a goal⁴. Today, this theory underlies the practices of “citizens’ assemblies”, “parliamentary hearings”, and digital platforms for

⁴ Cohen 1997.

The combined contribution of these thinkers helped shape the modern view of discourse as the foundation of democracy. Unlike the liberal model (where votes are simply tallied), deliberation allows citizens to change their positions during dialogue under the influence of arguments. Laws are binding not because they have been adopted by the majority, but because they have passed through the “filter” of public criticism. The theory requires the inclusion of all interest groups in the discourse, which reduces the risk of “tyranny of the majority” and promotes social integration⁵. Deliberative theory transforms discourse from a simple exchange of opinions into a normative mechanism that makes democracy qualitative and political decisions well-founded.

The latest theories operate in less ideal terms, viewing society as a single deliberative system. Thus, the systemic approach introduces the idea of division of labor, requiring deliberation not from each institution, but only from the system as a whole in the formation of opinions, their filtering, and decision-making. It solves the problem posed by deliberative democracy theory, which is that face-to-face deliberation happens only in small groups, whereas through networked interaction between various platforms, from parliaments to activist groups and the media, the problem of scale can be solved⁶. Hélène Landemore provides a theoretical justification for the “deliberative dilemma” – the conflict between the quality of discussion, which declines as the number of participants increases, and mass participation. She argues that AI can help overcome this barrier through the use of algorithms to structure discussions among millions of people (Mass Online Deliberation) and through the creation of many small groups whose work is coordinated and synthesized by AI (Many Rotating Mini-publics)⁷.

⁷ Landemore 2024.

Colin Megill proposes a technological platform (Polis) for using AI as a neutral moderator capable of automatically synthesizing opinions into unified positions to find consensus through the implementation of LLMs. This approach allows for discussions to be simultaneously mass-scale, equal, and in-depth. Functional and problem-oriented approaches critique “Western centrism” in deliberative democracy theory and analyse discussion practices in the Global South, in countries with high levels of inequality and other political cultures⁸. Some of them touch on environmental deliberation – models of “climate assemblies” where citizens develop long-term strategies to combat climate change that traditional politics ignores due to short-term electoral cycles. In the idea of institutionalizing “mini-publics”, theory moves to the practice of mandatory inclusion of civil councils in the legislative process. Models of random selection of participants for advisory bodies are actively being developed, which should reduce the influence of lobbyists and polarization in society. Concepts are being discussed for legally enshrining the obligation of authorities to hold discussions on key issues before passing laws⁹.

Research teams from Google DeepMind and Stanford University (Christopher Summerfield, Michiel Bakker et al.) have introduced the “Habermas Machine”, an AI system specifically trained to find common ground in groups with opposing views and synthesize them into a single text that is approved by the majority¹⁰. The Stanford Deliberative Democracy Lab (Alice Siu, James Fishkin), focused on integrating AI into democratic processes and scaling public dialogue, has developed the Online Deliberation Platform, where AI manages the order of speeches, monitors politeness, and helps highlight key arguments¹¹. As has been rightly noted, AI systems also offer new opportunities to educate and learn from citizens, strengthen public discourse, help people find common ground, and reimagine how democracies might work better¹². The trends described above allow us to build probable scenarios for changes in AI political discourse and public discussions in the near future. The use of AI to

⁸ Ross 2025.

⁹ Chwalisz et al. 2020.

¹⁰ Volpe 2025.

¹¹ Fishkin et al. 2025.

¹² Summerfield et al. 2025.

create and optimize content aimed at maximum audience engagement can lead to polarization and manipulation of public opinion. Discussions will take place not between people, but between “narratives” algorithmically optimized by AI to maximize the engagement of the target audience. The normative requirement of conscious recognition of other arguments, rather than statistical coincidence of vectors in the latent space of the model, remains significant.

6. SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGY AS A NORMATIVE ANALYSIS OF WAYS TO ORGANIZE POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Social epistemology in its normative dimension serves as a theoretical basis for critical analysis and optimization of the rules of socio-political communication. Unlike descriptive approaches, which record the current state of discourse, normative analysis focuses on developing institutional and ethical standards that ensure the production of reliable knowledge in the public sphere. Its main goal is to develop rules and structures that could ensure the epistemic value of discussion and its characteristics, such as truthfulness, validity, and rationality. The central issue here is the ability of political discourse to arrive at “correct” or valid decisions. Normative analysis views democracy not simply as a procedure for aggregating preferences, but as a cognitive process. Inclusiveness is justified by the need to draw on the widest possible range of local knowledge and cognitive diversity in order to minimize group bias. Deliberation acts as a filter, weeding out logical errors and unreliable information through the mechanism of public critical reflection. The justification of democratic procedures, such as voting or discussion, is based not only on fairness, but also on their ability to make “correct” or competent decisions. With this approach, normative analysis assesses the extent to which the inclusiveness of discourse increases the likelihood of finding the truth.

Norms are developed to prevent the self-isolation of communities and to encourage confrontation with counterarguments. These norms also address disparities in expert knowledge access, the impact of these gaps on participant autonomy, and mechanisms of epistemic injustice. These include testimonial injustice, which deprives certain groups of trust as bearers of knowledge, and hermeneutic injustice, which denies them the conceptual resources to describe their experiences. Normative epistemology provides standards for combating echo chambers, epistemic bubbles, and disinformation. The core premise is the

need for cognitive diversity. This raises a critical question: What are the limits of permissible intervention in public discourse to protect its quality? The solution requires the institutionalization of fact-checking. This marks a transition from individual personal responsibility to systemic verification requirements and the development of clear criteria for expertise. The pursuit of epistemic justice is currently manifesting through research into how social inequalities undermine specific groups as legitimate bearers of knowledge. A normative approach demands the elimination of “testimonial impotence” – where a speaker is ignored due to structural prejudice ensuring that public discourse does not lose vital data. Simultaneously, new standards are emerging for expert-policy interactions, focusing on institutional designs that ensure scientific consultation is transparent and objective, thereby preventing the politicization of truth. Finally, normative discourse analysis aims to combat intellectual vices – minimizing intellectual arrogance, closed-mindedness, and dogmatism in the public sphere, promoting the virtues of intellectual humility and openness. Social epistemology as a normative discipline seeks to answer the question: “How should communication be organized so that society becomes more informed and rational?” Normative theoretical analysis translates the abstract ideals of “truth” and “rationality” into concrete requirements for the organization of discourse. The goal is to foster a socio-political environment where the communication structure itself actively reduces misconceptions and enhances the quality of collective decision-making.

7. THE EROSION AND COLLAPSE OF EPISTEMIC AGENCY

Subjectivity is the ability of a person or group to act as a subject – that is, to actively manage their activities, initiate change, and take responsibility for their choices. Subjectivity manifests in activity as the ability to act not merely under the influence of external circumstances, but based on internal goals, self-awareness (understanding the motives behind one’s actions and their possible consequences), and autonomy (relative independence from the environment, when a person is the cause of their own actions). The actions of the subject are unique, reflecting individual experience, values, and internalized socio-political, ethical, and aesthetic norms. The subject is capable of adjusting their behavior and goals in real-time, demonstrating the essential quality of self-regulation. Ultimately, subjectivity is the measure of a citizen’s freedom – the ability to be the

master of one's own life rather than a mere executor of an external will.

Amid data overload and accelerating AI development, individuals are increasingly delegating analytical functions to algorithms. This outsourcing of cognition leads to a measurable loss of skills in independent research and a broad erosion of epistemic independence. Social media algorithms filter information and restrict access to alternative points of view, which critically narrows the cognitive horizon and makes beliefs less well-founded (the “echo chamber” effect). The realization that one's online conversation partner may be a bot destroys the social fabric and willingness to compromise. Trust in the truth is lost, and the phenomenon of “post-truth” undermines belief in the existence of objective facts. Individuals cease to seek the truth, focusing only on emotionally comfortable content. The rapid consumption of “clip” content impedes the formation of deep logical connections, leading to cognitive fragmentation. This dynamic transforms knowledge into a set of disparate data points and obstructs the holistic perception of socio-political processes. Consequently, the addressee of discourse shifts from an active “cognizer” to a passive “information consumer” whose judgments become highly susceptible to external manipulation.

There is a degradation of public political discourse and an infringement on the epistemic subjectivity of citizens. In AI training samples, data from different social groups may be represented to varying degrees, with some groups being underrepresented. In this case, the individual experience, everyday life, and entire structure of socio-political preferences of representatives of underrepresented groups will be ignored – epistemic injustice occurs. Miranda Fricker describes two types of epistemic injustice that prevent a person from fully participating in the exchange of knowledge¹³. Testimonial injustice occurs when a person is believed less than he or she deserves because of prejudices related to gender, race, age, or social status. Hermeneutic injustice arises when individuals cannot clearly articulate their experience – even to themselves—because society lacks the suitable concepts or vocabulary to describe it. This typically occurs when a culture ignores or marginalizes the experiences of certain social groups.

The 2024 United States of America's presidential elections and the 2024-2025 campaign in the European Union (including the European Parliament elections

¹³ Fricker 2007.

and national elections in Austria, Romania, and Germany) marked a stage of profound transformation of democratic institutions. They demonstrated the decline of deliberative democracy, which presupposes the legitimization of power through open public debate and the search for consensus. A “crisis of mutual tolerance” occurred, with political struggle escalating into an “existential threat”, where the opponent was perceived not as a legitimate participant in the process but as an enemy of the state. In the US, this manifested itself in doubts about the legitimacy of electoral procedures even before the votes were counted. Party platforms and debates gave way to emotional populism and radical rhetoric, demonstrating the decline of meaningful debate (for example, the anti-immigration agenda of the Chega party in Portugal or the PVV Freedom Party in the Netherlands)¹⁴. In some contexts, elections have devolved into a ritualistic imitation of public will under the weight of information overload. This reflects a systemic decline in the individual’s ability to autonomously form, revise, and justify their beliefs.

Retrospective analyses confirm that the 2024 global elections did not witness a catastrophic, AI-driven collapse of democratic systems, but they did experience a fundamental shift in the information environment. Rather than swinging results through large-scale persuasion of undecided voters, AI’s primary impact was the systemic erosion of trust, the pollution of the information space, and the algorithmic polarization of discourse. External and internal actors leveraged AI to create an appearance of mass support for specific agendas, effectively leading to the “artificialization” of public opinion. Consistent with this trend, the 2024 Global Democracy Index fell to a historic low of 5.17¹⁵. Democracy remains under siege in Europe and the United States from fake news, deepfakes, and the surge of far-right parties, which already hold government positions in at least six EU countries by 2025. This instability is compounded by the erosion of traditional media, which has significantly weakened public accountability.

In accordance with the threats to epistemic subjectivity, we can speak of the normative imperative of epistemic sovereignty as the justification for the human right to “non-algorithmic” participation in politics. In order to distinguish one

¹⁴ Otjes 2025.

¹⁵ Democracy Index 2024 2025.

from the other, it is important, as a mandatory requirement, to mark the areas of real and synthetic participation – and this is only possible if the processes of using information dissemination mechanisms are transparent. The most effective way to maintain human subjectivity is to recultivate offline spaces and encourage, at the level of state policy and public organizations, a return to direct, physical, real interaction between citizens.

8. CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of synthetic public is not a step toward true democracy, but rather a way of imitating and circumventing it. Classical democratic theory assumes the existence of an “organic” public – a community of citizens who engage in discussion, form opinions from the bottom up, and thereby influence government decisions. However, in the modern digital age, we are increasingly witnessing the emergence of synthetic public – artificially constructed masses whose political and consumer opinions and behavior are created using algorithms, bot farms, and manipulative technologies. There are several key reasons why this phenomenon harms democracy. First, it replaces authentic participation with imitation – supplanting the “power of the people”, rooted in rational deliberation, with the “synthetic public” or the “power of simulacra”. Rather than capturing the genuine will of citizens, politicians and corporations manufacture an illusion of mass support or outrage, creating a false consensus where none exists. As a result, the democratic process is transformed from a competition of ideas into a competition of technologies for creating “astroturfing” (artificial grass), where artificial voices drown out the real needs of society. Secondly, there is a breakdown in feedback between the authorities and society, the main mechanism of democracy and rational governance. The synthetic public “closes” this cycle on itself. When the authorities rely on data about the opinion of the “digital public”, which they themselves (or their contractors) have constructed, they cease to see the real problems. Problems that go unnoticed and ignored for a long time have no chance of being solved and are guaranteed to lead to the degradation of the public sphere and society as a whole. This is not progress, but a dangerous “detour” that allows elites to ignore complex social challenges by hiding behind convenient approval ratings generated by neural networks. Thirdly, synthetic public poisons the “digital ecology”. When users cannot distinguish between real compatriots and software algorithms, trust as the

foundation of democracy is destroyed. Instead of the rational discourse described by the classics and contemporaries of deliberative democracy theory, the public space is filled with “digital noise” that replaces real public discussion and deprives real participants of their “epistemic weight”. This is a kind of epistemic diversion; in such noise, it is easier to manipulate than to persuade, which leads society away from conscious choice and toward the management of emotions and affects. Fourth, the synthetic public commits a kind of epistemic diversion: it deprives real people of the opportunity to be heard. The voices of marginalized groups, which already struggle to break through to the mainstream, are completely drowned out in the endless stream of synthetic content. This is not an expansion of citizens’ access to politics, but the creation of “digital noise” that serves as a screen for preserving old hierarchies. Fifth, from an epistemological point of view, there is “epistemic injustice”, the ignoring of the experiences of individuals and groups, who thus fall out of the process of democratic deliberation. The phenomenon of the synthetic public, in an attempt to preserve the form of democracy, empties it of its content. It is a technical life hack that allows the masses to be controlled without the need to engage in real, complex, and often conflictual dialogue with them. It is not a tool for the development of democracy and civil society, but an effective mechanism for its neutralization. Political and administrative inaction in the sphere of protecting the epistemic subjectivity of citizens in the age of LLMs inevitably means the transformation of democracy into cybernetic control of preferences, devoid of moral value.

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