

Decorative Democracy: How Digital Feudalism Manufactures Dissent and Moral Anger

Peter Ayolov, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", 2026

Abstract

This article develops the concept of 'manufacture of dissent'¹ and 'moral outrage networks'² to explain how digital capitalism reorganises democratic communication around the production, circulation, and monetisation of moral anger. It argues that contemporary democracies are not collapsing but mutating into forms of decorative democracy, in which institutional procedures persist while their deliberative and integrative functions are hollowed out by market-driven media infrastructures. Under conditions of platform capitalism, dissent is no longer primarily a corrective force directed at power but a commodified resource optimised for attention, engagement, and perpetual conflict. Drawing on political economy, media theory, moral psychology, and communication studies, the article analyses how outrage operates as a stable grammar rather than an episodic emotion, structuring trust, untrust, loyalty, and hostility across digital publics. It shows how informational inequality, algorithmic mediation, and strategic interventions such as cognitive infiltration transform dissent into a managed and often ineffectual spectacle, while simultaneously eroding social capital and shared reality. The article further examines the emotional mechanisms of anger and resentment, the rise of grievance politics, and the emergence of performative or kayfabe politics, in which publics knowingly participate in staged conflicts that sustain moral mobilisation without enabling collective resolution. The central claim is that digital capitalism has shifted democratic governance from the manufacture of consent to the manufacture of dissent, producing a communicative environment characterised by permanent polarisation, declining trust, and the planned obsolescence of communication itself. In this environment, political anger circulates freely but rarely translates into structural change, while democracy survives increasingly as form rather than substance.

Keywords

manufacture of dissent; moral outrage networks; digital capitalism; decorative democracy; political economy of communication; moral anger; dissent management; social capital; outrage economy; grievance politics; resentment; cognitive infiltration; kayfabe politics; planned obsolescence of communication; discommunication

Digital capitalism and decorative democracy

This part examines how digital capitalism produces a form of decorative democracy in which democratic institutions persist symbolically while their substantive communicative and deliberative functions are hollowed out. What emerges is not the collapse of democracy, but its

¹ Ayolov, P. (2023). *The Economic Policy of Online Media*. Taylor & Francis.

² Ayolov, P. (2026). *Moral Outrage Networks: The Sociology of Digital Anger*

transformation into a managed spectacle that preserves procedural appearance while surrendering real power to market-driven communication systems. Digital capitalism reorganises political communication according to economic incentives rather than civic norms. In online media ecosystems, conflict, outrage, and polarisation generate attention, and attention generates revenue. Under these conditions, dissent is no longer a corrective force aimed at improving governance or expanding participation. It becomes a commodity optimised for circulation. Media organisations and platforms are rewarded not for resolving disagreements but for sustaining them. The more persistent and emotionally charged the conflict, the more profitable the informational flow. As a result, political communication shifts away from persuasion and consensus-building toward continuous agitation. This transformation aligns with Dan Schiller's analysis of digital capitalism³ as an extension of market logic into all domains of social life. Digital networks do not merely transmit information; they restructure communication itself to conform to advertising-based revenue models. Journalism, education, political debate, and even personal expression become subordinated to metrics of engagement. Accuracy, proportionality, and public interest lose institutional priority unless they contribute to traffic. The marketisation of communication thus inverts traditional democratic values. Instead of communication serving democracy, democracy becomes content within a commercial media environment. Oliver Boyd-Barrett's work on conflict propaganda⁴ demonstrates how this logic intensifies during geopolitical crises. Media coverage of international conflicts increasingly resembles competitive storytelling rather than contextual analysis. Complex realities are simplified into moral binaries that are easily consumed and shared. This process does not require centralised manipulation. It emerges organically from economic incentives that favour sensationalism, emotional framing, and repetition. Disinformation and misinformation are not anomalies within digital capitalism; they are efficient formats within an attention economy that rewards speed and impact over verification. The political consequences of this system are profound. Liberal democracy depends on a minimum level of shared reality and trust in communicative institutions. Digital capitalism erodes both. The constant circulation of competing narratives destabilises political authority without replacing it with a viable alternative. Transparency does not lead to accountability but to suspicion. The exposure of political processes, combined with algorithmic amplification of scandal and outrage, weakens institutional legitimacy. Citizens encounter politics primarily as spectacle, reinforcing cynicism rather than engagement. In response, states increasingly drift toward what can be described as decorative or managed democracy. Elections, parliaments, and legal frameworks remain intact, but their capacity to structure public opinion diminishes. Power migrates toward unelected actors who control communication infrastructures. Digital platforms assume quasi-political roles by moderating speech, filtering information, and shaping visibility. Governments outsource surveillance, content regulation, and behavioural management to private corporations whose primary obligation is profit rather than democratic accountability. This outsourcing creates a structural paradox. Democracies require free and pluralistic communication, yet the same freedoms enable corporate monopolisation of attention and data. Efforts to counter disinformation through regulation or content moderation often reinforce platform dominance by legitimising their role as arbiters of truth. The state appears active while relinquishing substantive control. Democracy persists as form, while its communicative foundation is reorganised according to market imperatives. The result is decorative democracy:

³ Schiller, D. (1999). *Digital capitalism: Networking the global market system*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

⁴ Boyd-Barrett, O. (2016). *Western mainstream media and the Ukraine crisis: A study in conflict propaganda*. London: Routledge.

a political order in which participation is simulated through visibility, engagement, and performative dissent, while real decision-making remains insulated from public influence. Citizens are encouraged to express opinions continuously, yet these expressions are absorbed into data streams that serve commercial optimisation rather than collective deliberation. Political anger circulates freely, but it rarely translates into structural change. Dissent becomes noise rather than pressure. This condition does not represent a deviation from digital capitalism but its logical outcome. A system built on monetising attention cannot sustain communicative equality or durable consent. Instead, it thrives on fragmentation, emotional volatility, and perpetual disagreement. Democratic legitimacy is maintained rhetorically while being eroded materially. Institutions remain recognisable, yet increasingly ineffective at generating trust. Without confronting the economic foundations of digital communication, attempts to repair democracy will remain superficial. Regulatory interventions that ignore advertising models and data extraction merely adjust the surface of the system. Restoring democratic substance requires reasserting communication as a public purpose rather than a commercial resource. Otherwise, decorative democracy will continue to flourish as a stable façade, while dissent, anger, and mistrust are endlessly manufactured beneath it.

Dissent, and the erosion of social capital

Drawing on the contrast outlined⁵ by Noam Chomsky between Aristotle's concern with material inequality and James Madison's strategy of limiting democracy rather than inequality, this section examines how digital capitalism reproduces a Madisonian logic at the level of communication, transforming trust into a scarce resource and dissent into a managed commodity. What is at stake is not simply a crisis of public confidence but a deeper erosion of social capital, understood as the shared norms and informal bonds that allow democratic societies to function without constant coercion or manipulation. In Aristotle's view, democracy was preferable to oligarchy precisely because it rested on a degree of material balance that prevented permanent factional conflict. Excessive inequality threatened civic stability and had to be restrained if collective self-government was to endure. Madison confronted the same structural problem in a context of expanding commerce and social stratification and reached a different conclusion. Rather than limiting inequality, he sought to limit democracy itself by concentrating power in institutions insulated from popular pressure. Chomsky's observation is that this solution did not disappear but became a structural feature of modern liberal systems. Under digital capitalism, this logic migrates from political institutions into communication infrastructures. The contemporary equivalents of Madison's Senate are digital platforms, media conglomerates, and information intermediaries that control visibility, circulation, and access. Inequality is no longer only economic but informational. Control over data, algorithms, and attention allows a small number of actors to shape public discourse while remaining formally outside democratic accountability. This configuration corrodes what Francis Fukuyama defined as social capital: the capacity of people to cooperate spontaneously on the basis of shared expectations and trust. Where social capital is strong, dissent does not threaten cohesion; it is absorbed into ongoing relationships. Where it is weak, disagreement quickly hardens into antagonism. Trust in democratic societies emerges from everyday communication that is perceived as direct, intelligible, and reciprocally oriented. It does not require unanimity of belief

⁵ Chomsky, N. and Barsamian, D. (2013). *Power systems: Conversations on global democratic uprisings and the new challenges to the US empire*. New York: Metropolitan Books.

but presupposes a shared commitment to living together despite differences. Digital capitalism undermines this condition in two interrelated ways. First, online media expose inequalities, corruption, and elite privilege with unprecedented clarity. Secrecy becomes difficult to sustain, and naïve trust in institutions erodes. Second, the same environment rewards strategic communication, public relations, and narrative management designed to compensate for this loss of trust. Spontaneous communication is crowded out by professionally engineered messages, saturating the public sphere with persuasion rather than dialogue. Under these conditions, the traditional model of manufacturing consent loses effectiveness. When publics no longer trust official narratives, consent cannot be reliably stabilised. Elites therefore shift toward manufacturing dissent as a mode of governance. Polarisation, segmentation, and permanent conflict replace consensus-building. The logic of divide and rule is reactivated in communicative form. Publics are split into hostile camps defined by identity, ideology, or moral posture, while structural inequalities remain largely untouched. Dissent becomes a spectacle rather than a corrective, sustaining attention without producing resolution. The semantics of manufacture reveal the paradox at work. Walter Lippmann's notion of the manufacture of consent already implied that public opinion was something made rather than discovered. Edward Bernays went further, openly treating communication as a form of engineering that involved arranging and guiding perception, even at the cost of deception. While such practices were justified as necessary for democratic stability, they inevitably generated mistrust once recognised. Manufactured relations cannot replace genuine social bonds. Over time, they weaken the very legitimacy they are meant to secure. Fukuyama's analysis clarifies why this erosion is so damaging. Social capital is not produced by institutions alone but accumulated through habits, traditions, and informal cooperation extending across generations. It functions as a form of moral infrastructure, enabling societies to withstand crises without fragmenting. When communication systems rely on manipulation and external intervention, this infrastructure decays. Durkheim's concept of anomie captures the resulting condition: a breakdown of shared norms in which individuals feel disconnected from both institutions and one another. In such a context, neither horizontal trust between citizens nor vertical trust in authority can be sustained. The internet remains ambivalent in this regard. It can support the reconstruction of trust through small, cohesive communities grounded in shared experience and direct interaction. These can resemble the associative life described by Tocqueville, where voluntary cooperation counterbalances excessive individualism. At the same time, digital infrastructures easily generate pseudo-communities formed around shallow identities, emotional mobilisation, or external manipulation. Such groups lack durable bonds and are highly susceptible to conflict scripting and exploitation. When trust collapses at scale, states respond predictably by reasserting control through regulation, censorship, and infrastructural fragmentation. Appeals to security, hybrid warfare, or disinformation justify these moves, yet their effect is to protect elites from the political consequences of transparency. Democracy persists formally while substantive participation declines. Consent is simulated through filtering and algorithmic curation, while dissent is channelled into manageable and profitable forms. The tension between trust and dissent cannot be resolved by eliminating disagreement or perfecting techniques of opinion management. Dissent is indispensable to democratic life, but when it is systematically manufactured and commodified, it becomes a symptom of systemic dysfunction rather than a source of renewal. Without rebuilding social capital and restoring conditions for spontaneous communication, democratic order drifts toward decorative forms that preserve institutional appearances while hollowing out their social foundations.

Cognitive infiltration and anger management

Building on Cass R. Sunstein's analysis in 'Why Societies Need Dissent' (2005) and his later intervention⁶ with Adrian Vermeule in 'Conspiracy Theories' (2008), this section examines how contemporary liberal democracies move from tolerating dissent to administratively managing it through strategies of cognitive infiltration, thereby transforming dissent itself into an object of governance. Within the broader framework of the manufacture of dissent, Sunstein's work offers one of the most explicit theoretical justifications for state intervention in the informational environment of digital societies. Sunstein's starting point is not hostile to dissent. On the contrary, he insists that dissent is indispensable for democratic health. Drawing on classical studies of conformity and obedience, he argues that individuals are structurally inclined to silence themselves in the face of majority opinion and authority. Dissenters therefore perform an essential epistemic function: they interrupt groupthink, expose error, and expand the range of available social options. In this sense, dissent contributes directly to social capital by preventing moral stagnation and cognitive closure. A society without dissent is not harmonious but fragile, prone to catastrophic error once its dominant assumptions fail. Yet Sunstein situates this defence of dissent within a broader concern about the destabilising effects of digital communication. In *Republic.com 2.0* and later works, he warns that the internet allows citizens to construct information cocoons in which they encounter only reinforcing views. Algorithmic filtering and voluntary self-selection reduce exposure to disagreement, intensifying polarisation rather than deliberation. The paradox is that unlimited communicative freedom may undermine the conditions under which democratic consent is possible. When individuals no longer share a minimal informational commons, trust in institutions and in one another erodes. To address this problem, Sunstein advances the idea of libertarian paternalism, developed with Richard Thaler. The premise is that human decision-making is shaped by cognitive biases and bounded rationality, leading individuals to make choices that are inconsistent with their own long-term interests. Rather than coercing behaviour, institutions may design choice architectures that gently steer individuals toward better outcomes while formally preserving freedom. Applied to communication, this approach legitimises subtle interventions in information environments to promote social welfare, stability, and democratic resilience. The most controversial extension of this logic appears in Sunstein and Vermeule's proposal for cognitive infiltration. Confronted with the spread of conspiracy theories that portray the state as systematically deceptive and malevolent, they argue that such narratives pose a genuine threat to democratic legitimacy. When large groups reject official accounts wholesale, the symbolic authority of law and institutions collapses. In response, Sunstein and Vermeule propose that governments and allied actors should actively enter conspiratorial communities, both online and offline, to introduce doubt, alternative interpretations, and internal disagreement. The goal is not censorship but epistemic disruption: weakening what they describe as crippled epistemologies from within. Cognitive infiltration thus represents a shift from suppressing dissent to multiplying and fragmenting it. Rather than eliminating oppositional narratives, the state seeks to dilute them by fostering internal disagreement and competing interpretations. In effect, dissent is neutralised by excess. Genuine dissidents find their voices submerged in a sea of manufactured controversies, counter-claims, and diversionary debates. Dissent becomes omnipresent yet politically ineffective. This model fits seamlessly into the broader logic of the manufacture of dissent under digital capitalism. Online environments already reward conflict, novelty, and emotional intensity. Cognitive infiltration

⁶ Sunstein, C. R. and Vermeule, A. (2008). 'Conspiracy Theories'. Harvard Public Law Working Paper.

exploits these dynamics by adding strategically guided noise to an already saturated information space. The result is a form of managed pluralism in which opposition exists everywhere but coherence emerges nowhere. Public debate appears vibrant, yet structural critique rarely consolidates into collective action. Critics have identified troubling historical resonances in this approach. Journalists such as Glenn Greenwald and scholars such as David Ray Griffin have compared cognitive infiltration to earlier programmes of covert surveillance and disruption, most notably COINTELPRO. These initiatives were likewise justified as necessary for national security and social order, yet they frequently targeted legitimate political movements and eroded public trust once exposed. The lesson is not merely historical. In digital environments, infiltration scales easily, operates invisibly, and blurs the boundary between persuasion and deception. The deeper problem is the effect on social capital. Trust depends on the belief that communication is not systematically manipulated and that dissent is not pre-scripted by power. When citizens suspect that both agreement and disagreement are engineered, cynicism replaces engagement. Even well-intentioned interventions risk accelerating the very mistrust they seek to prevent. A society that comes to view dissent as an administrative variable rather than a moral practice loses the capacity for genuine self-correction. Sunstein's work thus reveals a central tension in contemporary democracy. Dissent is celebrated in principle but constrained in practice. It is encouraged as long as it remains diffuse, fragmented, and manageable, and treated as dangerous when it threatens to coalesce into sustained opposition. Cognitive infiltration exemplifies this shift from democratic pluralism to technocratic containment. Within the framework of the manufacture of dissent, this strategy represents a decisive step toward discommunication. Communication no longer aims at mutual understanding or collective problem-solving, but at strategic interference in meaning-making processes. Instead of strengthening trust, such interventions risk normalising manipulation as a permanent feature of public life. In the long term, dissent managed from above cannot substitute for dissent arising from lived experience, moral conviction, and autonomous association. A democracy that relies on cognitive engineering to stabilise itself may preserve formal freedoms, but it does so at the cost of the trust and social capital on which democratic life ultimately depends.

American rage and the political economy of anger

Steven W. Webster's analysis⁷ in 'American Rage: How Anger Shapes Our Politics' (2020) can be read as empirical confirmation that the grammar of outrage is not a side-effect of contemporary politics but a functional mechanism within a media environment where dissent is manufactured as a durable resource. Webster's core claim is that anger has become the dominant public emotion in twenty-first-century American politics, and that its dominance has predictable political consequences: anger tightens partisan loyalty, accelerates distrust in government, and weakens commitment to democratic norms. In other words, anger does not merely express disagreement; it reorganises collective behaviour so that the conditions for shared deliberation steadily deteriorate. Webster's argument is especially useful for a chapter concerned with the manufacture of dissent because it treats anger as both an affective state and a repeatable political technology. Anger is not only a feeling that citizens 'have'; it is a response that elites can reliably 'invoke'. The significance of this shift is structural. When anger becomes the preferred political instrument, the public sphere is transformed into an arena of mobilisation

⁷ Webster, S. W. (2020). *American Rage: How Anger Shapes Our Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

rather than a space of persuasion. Consent becomes secondary, because what matters is not whether citizens believe a policy is right, but whether they remain energised, loyal, and hostile to the opposing camp. A key contribution in Webster's work is the insistence that anger functions as a partisan bonding agent. Loyalty can be sustained even when trust in one's own leaders is low, because anger toward the out-group is a stronger adhesive than admiration for the in-group. This is the logic of negative partisanship. Political identity becomes organised less around shared goods than around shared enemies. The consequences are profound for democratic stability, because political conflict is no longer episodic and policy-driven but permanent and identity-sustaining. The system requires antagonism to reproduce itself. Webster links this dynamic to the broader media environment. Anger is not difficult to produce, but it is difficult to sustain without a steady stream of provocations. Digital media provide precisely such an infrastructure: constant content turnover, personalised distribution, and an attention economy that rewards intensity. Under these conditions, outrage ceases to be exceptional and becomes habitual. What appears as spontaneous public anger is often a patterned response to repeated rhetorical cues, narrative templates, and adversarial framing. The point is not that anger is 'fake', but that it is strategically cultivated because it works. The relationship between anger and trust is central to Webster's diagnosis. Trust in government is not simply undermined by scandals or failures; it is eroded by the very emotional regime that produces electoral mobilisation. Anger encourages suspicious interpretations, hostile attributions, and a readiness to treat institutions as captured by enemies. This intensifies a feedback loop: distrust makes anger easier to provoke, and anger makes distrust more plausible. Once this loop becomes stable, democratic legitimacy becomes increasingly decorative. Institutions remain, elections continue, and political rituals persist, yet the shared belief that opponents are legitimate competitors, rather than existential threats, weakens. Webster also argues that anger weakens democratic norms, including tolerance, respect for minority positions, and willingness to accept procedural defeats. The mechanism is not complicated. Anger narrows attention and encourages reliance on group cues rather than reflective judgement. Political reasoning becomes a form of moral alignment: people adopt positions because they signal loyalty to a camp. This is the grammar of outrage at work, converting politics into a continuous sorting process in which language functions less as argument than as identity-marking. For a theory of manufactured dissent, Webster's most pessimistic conclusion is also the most revealing: anger is likely difficult to reverse because it is too effective. If anger reliably increases turnout and loyalty, political actors have little incentive to abandon it. The strategic use of anger becomes rational within an electoral marketplace and even more rational within a digital attention economy. This is the point where anger ceases to be a pathology of politics and becomes a stable input to political production. The American case is not merely national. It functions as a model of how contemporary democracies can slide from deliberation to permanent mobilisation when digital communication rewards conflict. Anger unifies factions against an enemy while corroding the generalised trust required for collective governance. This is why the manufacture of dissent cannot be treated as a rhetorical style. It is an economic and institutional arrangement that makes outrage productive, turning social division into a renewable resource. The final implication is bleak but clarifying. When anger becomes the dominant public emotion, dissent ceases to be a corrective addressed to power and becomes a commodity circulated for attention. The result is miscommunication as a condition of public life: people speak past one another in mutually sealed moral communities. At its limit, this becomes discommunication, where communication's function is reversed, and instead of producing unity, trust, and consent, the system manufactures dissent, hostility, and alienation as its normal output.

The emotional engine of grievance politics

Drawing on the article⁸ ‘Grievance Politics: An Empirical Analysis of Anger Through the Emotional Mechanism of Ressentiment’ by Tereza Capelos, Mikko Salmela, and Gabija Krisciunaite (2022), this part reframes contemporary political anger as a structured affective process that aligns closely with the grammar of outrage and the planned obsolescence of communication. What appears publicly as anger is, in many cases, not anger proper but resentment: a slow, sedimented emotional mechanism that transforms grievance into hostility without producing agency, resolution, or collective repair. The central contribution of this work is the distinction between anger and resentment, a distinction that is essential for understanding how grievance politics operates within late-modern media systems. Anger proper is a discrete, short-lived emotion with a clear object and an action tendency. It arises in response to perceived injustice or obstruction and often motivates protest, correction, or confrontation. By contrast, resentment is not action-oriented. It emerges when anger, envy, shame, or humiliation cannot be acted upon and is therefore repressed. Over time, these blocked emotions are transmuted into morally righteous indignation, hatred, and rage, accompanied by a durable sense of victimhood and powerlessness. This transformation is crucial for a theory of manufactured dissent. Resentment produces intense moral language without political efficacy. It sustains emotional arousal while discouraging concrete action. In this sense, it is ideally suited to a communication environment organised around outrage rather than deliberation. The resentimentful subject speaks constantly, accuses relentlessly, and identifies enemies obsessively, yet remains politically inert. Communication becomes expressive rather than instrumental, a performance of grievance rather than a means of change. Capelos and colleagues conceptualise resentment as an emotional mechanism rather than a single emotion. It operates by converting the inputs of grievance politics, deprivation, humiliation, inefficacious anger, into antisocial outputs such as hatred and destructive indignation. This mechanism relies on a set of psychological defences, including projection, splitting, denial, and reaction formation. These defences simplify a complex social world into binary moral categories: innocent victims versus corrupt enemies, pure in-groups versus degenerate out-groups. Such simplification aligns perfectly with the rhetorical economy of outrage-driven media. Empirically, the authors demonstrate that expressions widely labelled as ‘anger’ overwhelmingly display the markers of resentment. Analysing interview material drawn from widely cited accounts of American political discontent, they find persistent patterns of victimhood, envy, powerlessness, destiny, and transvaluation. What is notably absent is efficacy. Individuals in resentment do not articulate plausible paths for political action, nor do they express confidence in their capacity to influence outcomes. Instead, grievance is narrated as fate. The past is idealised, the present is experienced as irredeemably corrupted, and the future is foreclosed. This has direct implications for the grammar of outrage. Resentment thrives on repetition and rumination. Its etymological root, re-sentire, to feel again and again, captures its temporal structure. Grievances are relived rather than resolved. In digital environments that reward repetition, amplification, and emotional intensity, resentment becomes self-reinforcing. The same narratives circulate endlessly, acquiring moral weight through sheer persistence. Communication no longer aims at persuasion or coordination but at the reaffirmation of wounded identity. A key finding of the study is the prevalence of anti-preferences. Resentimentful politics is organised less around positive programmes than around negations: anti-elite, anti-immigrant, anti-feminist, anti-

⁸ Capelos, T., Salmela, M. and Krisciunaite, G. (2022). ‘Grievance Politics: An Empirical Analysis of Anger Through the Emotional Mechanism of Resentiment’, *Politics and Governance*, 10(4), pp. 384–395.

institutional positions. These stances provide emotional satisfaction without requiring political competence or compromise. They also fragment the public sphere into antagonistic camps that share hostility but not constructive goals. From the perspective of system stability, this fragmentation is functional. It produces noise rather than opposition, heat rather than pressure. Resentment also explains the paradox of high emotional mobilisation combined with political disengagement. While resentment generates intense affect, it discourages participation in democratic practices. Individuals remain attached to grievance while withdrawing from institutions they perceive as irreversibly hostile. This is the condition in which miscommunication becomes structural. Speech circulates, but understanding collapses. Positions harden, but coordination fails. For the broader argument of this chapter, resentment clarifies why the contemporary politics of anger rarely leads to transformation. The system does not need to suppress dissent when it can metabolise it. Resentment produces dissent that is loud, moralised, and endlessly communicative, yet strategically harmless. In this sense, it represents the emotional substrate of manufactured dissent. The final consequence is discommunication. When resentment dominates, communication reverses its traditional function. Instead of producing trust, unity, and negotiated consent, it generates suspicion, division, and permanent antagonism. The grammar of outrage, fed by resentment, does not merely reflect social fragmentation; it actively reproduces it as a stable political condition.

Kayfabe and pseudo-politics

Building on the analytical framework developed in 'Manufacture of Dissent' (2024), this part examines how second-degree cybernetics and the logic of kayfabe converge to form a dominant model of contemporary political communication, in which publics knowingly participate in staged realities that organise anger, loyalty, and dissent. In digital environments, political life increasingly unfolds as a shared performance: participants recognise the artificiality of narratives yet continue to act as if they were authentic, because this collective pretence generates emotional rewards, visibility, and power. Niklas Luhmann's concept of second-degree cybernetics, the observation of observation, captures a crucial shift in media systems. Communication no longer describes social reality directly but reflects on its own representations, creating a recursive loop in which reality is encountered primarily through mediated constructions. Audiences are not naïve victims of manipulation. On the contrary, they are often fully aware of framing techniques, agenda-setting, and narrative scripting. What changes is not knowledge, but consent. Individuals voluntarily accept pseudo-realities because participation offers belonging, orientation, and affective intensity. Awareness of manipulation no longer disrupts belief; it becomes part of the game. The concept of kayfabe, originating in professional wrestling, provides a powerful metaphor for this condition. Kayfabe refers to the maintenance of a scripted fiction as real through collective agreement. Wrestlers, promoters, commentators, and audiences all collaborate in sustaining the illusion that staged conflict is authentic competition. The crucial point is not deception but complicity. Everyone involved understands the fiction, yet public acknowledgment of it is prohibited. The rule is simple: never break kayfabe. This logic now extends far beyond entertainment and has become a structural principle of political communication. In politics, kayfabe operates through polarised roles, exaggerated antagonisms, and ritualised scandals. Leaders perform as heroes or villains, media organisations frame conflicts as moral dramas, and audiences align emotionally with preferred characters. The spectacle thrives not on factual accuracy but on narrative coherence and emotional charge. Conflict must be continuous, visible, and personalised. As in professional

wrestling, one side must always play the antagonist, absorbing outrage and sustaining attention. Political success increasingly depends on performative intensity rather than deliberative competence. Empirical research on information diffusion confirms why this model is so effective. Studies on the spread of online content demonstrate that false or fictional narratives travel faster and reach wider audiences than factual reporting, largely because novelty and emotional stimulation drive engagement. Fiction outcompetes truth not because people cannot distinguish between them, but because fiction is better suited to the economies of attention that govern digital platforms. In this environment, visibility replaces verification, and virality becomes the primary criterion of relevance. Kayfabe politics also connects to older traditions of political illusion. Walter Lippmann's idea of the pseudo-environment, Edward Bernays' defence of propaganda as a democratic necessity, and George Orwell's concept of doublespeak all describe communication systems in which fabricated narratives stabilise power. What distinguishes the contemporary moment is voluntary participation. The audience does not merely endure illusion; it demands it. Like the greengrocer in Václav Havel's parable, individuals display slogans they know to be false, not always out of fear, but because conformity offers security and advantage. Second-degree cybernetics intensifies this dynamic by dissolving the boundary between observer and participant. Media institutions observe audiences observing media, and political actors adjust performances accordingly. Communication becomes self-referential theatre. Journalists acknowledge the spectacle while continuing to stage it. Politicians denounce media manipulation while exploiting it. Audiences mock the drama while eagerly consuming it. The result is a stable system of mutual pretence in which everyone benefits individually, while collective rationality erodes. This transformation has profound consequences for democratic life. Consent is no longer grounded in argument, evidence, or shared standards of truth, but in emotional alignment with narratives. The illusion of choice between opposing spectacles replaces substantive political alternatives. Dissent is not eliminated; it is scripted, monetised, and recycled as entertainment. Moral anger becomes a renewable resource, endlessly regenerated through performative conflict. Kayfabe politics therefore represents not the corruption of democracy from the outside, but its reconfiguration from within. When governance adopts the logic of performance, the governed are no longer persuaded; they are entertained. The danger lies not in isolated falsehoods, but in a communication culture structured around collective self-deception. Restoring communicative integrity requires recognising that the central problem is no longer ignorance, but the widespread willingness to know and pretend otherwise.

The Planned Obsolescence of Communication

Developing the argument advanced in 'The Economic Policy of Online Media: Manufacture of Dissent' (2024), this final section of *The Grammar of Outrage* conceptualises the planned obsolescence of communication as a structural feature of digital capitalism, in which information is designed to decay rapidly, public attention is continuously redirected, and democratic deliberation is displaced by monetised volatility. Communication no longer aims at durable understanding or shared meaning but is organised around speed, novelty, and emotional arousal, following the same economic logic that governs consumer goods in late capitalism. The consent of the governed has historically depended on relatively stable communicative orders. From mythological narratives to national ideologies, large societies relied on shared stories that endured over time, even after belief weakened. These narratives did not need to be empirically true in a scientific sense; they needed to be socially binding. Over time, however,

every ideological system loses symbolic power. What once unified communities becomes banal, ritualised, and emotionally hollow. In such conditions, political language ceases to inspire conviction and survives only as habit, administration, or coercion. The contemporary media environment represents a decisive break from even this residual stability. Digital communication accelerates ideological decay by flooding the public sphere with incessant replacement. Information is no longer meant to last long enough to sediment into collective memory. Instead, it is produced for immediate consumption and rapid disposal. News items resemble consumer products with deliberately shortened life cycles. Their value lies not in truthfulness or civic relevance but in their capacity to generate clicks, outrage, and engagement before being superseded by the next item. In this sense, communication itself becomes a form of junk production, analogous to junk food or planned-obsolete electronics. This transformation undermines the epistemic foundations of democracy. Democratic systems presuppose a minimum of shared reality within which disagreement can occur. When facts are continuously displaced by emotional narratives, and when novelty outweighs verification, the possibility of informed consent collapses. Falsehood spreads more efficiently than truth because it is better adapted to the attention economy. Emotionally charged stories create instant bonds between strangers, forming transient communities of anger or fear that dissolve as quickly as they appear. These affective publics resemble ideological nations without territory, history, or responsibility. The economic incentives driving this process are concentrated in the hands of digital oligarchies whose revenues depend on advertising and behavioural prediction. Accuracy, social cohesion, and long-term trust are externalities rather than objectives. Moral anger becomes a particularly valuable commodity because it heightens focus, reduces distraction, and increases engagement. Marketing research has demonstrated that anger sharpens goal-directed behaviour, making individuals more decisive consumers. This logic transfers seamlessly into political communication, where outrage sustains attention without requiring understanding. Angry audiences are profitable, but they are not well equipped for democratic judgement. In this environment, dissent undergoes a qualitative transformation. Traditionally, dissent functioned as a corrective mechanism, allowing citizens to challenge power in the name of shared norms. Under conditions of planned obsolescence, dissent is detached from deliberation and repurposed as spectacle. It becomes endlessly reproducible content rather than a political act aimed at reform. Moral conflict is intensified, personalised, and commodified, while structural issues remain obscured. The result is a paradoxical situation in which societies appear permanently politicised yet are increasingly incapable of collective decision-making. Attempts to address these dynamics have re-emerged periodically in media criticism. The MacBride Report articulated an early vision of a fairer global information order, yet its proposals were marginalised in favour of market-driven models. More recent interventions, including whistle-blower testimonies from within digital corporations and documentaries exposing platform incentives, confirm that the dysfunctions of online media are not accidental. They are intrinsic to a system organised around attention extraction and rapid informational turnover. Disinformation, polarisation, and moral panic are not failures of the system but its outputs. Regulatory initiatives such as the European Union's Digital Services Act signal growing recognition of the problem, particularly the link between advertising models and the amplification of harmful content. Proposals for public-service-oriented internet infrastructures revive earlier ideals of communication as a public good rather than a commodity. Yet such measures confront formidable resistance from entrenched economic interests and cultural habits shaped by years of algorithmic conditioning. The persistence of the planned obsolescence model suggests that technical fixes alone are insufficient. The deeper challenge

is theoretical and normative. Communication research itself has often adapted to commercial and political demands, prioritising metrics, persuasion, and optimisation over critique. Earlier traditions of critical media analysis warned of systematically distorted communication and the dangers of subordinating public discourse to power and profit. These warnings were frequently dismissed as ideological or outdated. Today, their relevance is difficult to deny. The erosion of communicative durability accelerates social fragmentation and weakens the capacity of democratic institutions to command legitimacy. The planned obsolescence of communication therefore marks more than a media crisis; it signals a civilisational strain. When information is engineered to expire, memory dissolves, accountability weakens, and shared purpose becomes elusive. Chaos acquires economic value, while order appears inefficient. Reversing this trajectory requires more than nostalgia for past media systems. It demands a renewed commitment to communicative integrity, understood as the capacity of societies to sustain meaningful, truthful, and enduring public discourse in the face of economic pressures that reward its opposite. The end result of the planned obsolescence of communication and the grammar of outrage is not improved public understanding but systematic miscommunication, where meaning is fragmented, accelerated, and emptied of stabilising reference points. At its extreme, this process culminates in discommunication: a condition in which communication no longer aims at mutual comprehension but at strategic disruption, emotional mobilisation, and permanent conflict. Instead of producing unity, trust, and consent, the contemporary media system reverses the normative function of communication by manufacturing dissent, anger, hatred, and division, thereby alienating individuals and groups from one another and from any shared public reality.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the contemporary crisis of democracy is less a matter of institutional breakdown than of communicative reconfiguration. Under conditions of digital capitalism, democratic forms persist while their substantive capacities for deliberation, trust-building, and collective judgement are progressively hollowed out. What emerges is a condition of decorative democracy, in which participation is simulated through visibility, engagement, and expressive dissent, while real power over communication infrastructures migrates toward market-driven platforms and information intermediaries. Democracy survives symbolically, but its communicative foundations are reorganised according to economic incentives that privilege conflict, emotional arousal, and perpetual instability. Central to this transformation is the shift from the manufacture of consent to the manufacture of dissent. In environments saturated by algorithmic mediation and attention-based revenue models, dissent no longer functions primarily as a corrective addressed to power. Instead, it becomes a commodified resource, optimised for circulation rather than resolution. Moral anger, grievance, and outrage are not incidental by-products of political life but structurally valuable outputs. They sustain engagement, reinforce identity boundaries, and generate predictable patterns of loyalty and hostility that stabilise polarisation without threatening underlying economic or political arrangements.

The analysis has shown that this dynamic has profound consequences for social capital and trust. Digital capitalism simultaneously exposes inequality, corruption, and elite insulation while incentivising communicative strategies designed to manage the resulting legitimacy deficits. Spontaneous communication is displaced by engineered messaging, and dissent is

fragmented into manageable, mutually antagonistic publics. The erosion of trust does not lead to democratic renewal but to a communicative environment dominated by untrust, suspicion, and moralised hostility. In such conditions, disagreement hardens into antagonism, and deliberation gives way to accusation. Strategies of dissent management, including cognitive infiltration and algorithmic moderation, illustrate the paradox at the heart of contemporary liberal governance. Dissent is publicly celebrated as a democratic virtue yet administratively constrained when it threatens to coalesce into sustained opposition. Rather than suppressing dissent outright, power increasingly neutralises it through multiplication, fragmentation, and saturation. Opposition becomes omnipresent but politically ineffective, submerged in a continuous flow of outrage, counter-outrage, and performative conflict. Democracy appears vibrant, yet its capacity for collective decision-making steadily diminishes.

The emotional economy of anger further stabilises this arrangement. Anger and resentment provide intense moral energy while discouraging agency, repair, and compromise. They generate expressive participation without structural leverage. In digital media systems that reward repetition and escalation, grievance becomes self-reinforcing, transforming political communication into a theatre of permanent mobilisation. Kayfabe politics captures this condition with particular clarity: publics knowingly participate in staged conflicts, aware of their artificiality yet willing to sustain them because they provide belonging, orientation, and affective reward. Knowledge of manipulation no longer disrupts belief; it is incorporated into the performance. At its limit, this process culminates in the planned obsolescence of communication. Information is designed to expire rapidly, attention is continuously redirected, and meaning fails to sediment into shared memory or durable norms. Communication proliferates, yet understanding recedes. Instead of coordinating action or sustaining consent, the system produces miscommunication as a default condition and discommunication as its extreme form. Speech no longer aims at mutual comprehension but at strategic disruption, emotional mobilisation, and the maintenance of permanent conflict.

The implications of this analysis are not merely diagnostic but normative. Attempts to repair democracy that focus solely on institutional reform, content moderation, or media literacy remain insufficient if they leave untouched the economic foundations of digital communication. As long as outrage is profitable and attention extraction governs communicative life, democratic legitimacy will remain decorative rather than substantive. Reasserting communication as a public purpose rather than a commercial resource is therefore not an auxiliary concern but a democratic necessity. Without restoring conditions for durable meaning, trust, and spontaneous cooperation, democratic societies risk stabilising themselves around perpetual dissent, emotional volatility, and managed antagonism, preserving the appearance of self-government while hollowing out its substance.

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