The End of Democracy?

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The American congressman Newt Gingrich was an unlikely candidate for stardom in a media increasingly obsessed with appearances. As a young Republican politician at the beginning of his career, Gingrich looked every inch what he had been until quite recently – a history professor in the 1970s. Even the most sympathetic observer of the forty-year-old Gingrich, with his scowling baby face, his big suit and his thick mass of greying hair, would probably have paused before reaching for the word 'telegenic'. At least, this optimistic critic might have noted, Gingrich had lost the sideburns and the enormous serial-killer glasses which he had worn in his days as an academic. And yet for all his aesthetic limitations, Gingrich was about to prove himself an early master of politics on screen. For, unlike almost all of his colleagues in the Washington of the early 1980s, Newt Gingrich understood television. 'The number one fact about the news media is they love fights,' he later observed. 'When you give them confrontations, you get attention.'

Newt Gingrich and television arrived in Congress at almost exactly the same time. In 1979, the US government authorised the broadcasting of the proceedings of the House of Representatives. C-SPAN, the new channel that carried footage from the House, was born of a mood of penitent idealism in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal under the Nixon administration. The idea was to open up democracy to the people. Viewers would be able to tune in at any time of the day to watch their elected representatives at work. p. 128

Gingrich noticed a unique opportunity in the way C-SPAN broadcast the proceedings of the House of Representatives. The rules governing the House allow for members to make 'Special Order' speeches on any topic for an hour at the end of every day. Most congressmen and women had usually cleared off by that point. But Gingrich saw that it was a chance to get in front of the cameras and speak about whatever he liked. After all, he reasoned, many of his colleagues would drive a considerable distance to speak to an audience of a couple of hundred people. On C-SPAN he could address an audience of perhaps 200,000.

And so beginning in May 1984, Gingrich and some of his fellow Republican congressmen began using their Special Order speeches to explosive effect. They would stand at the podium in the House of Representatives lambasting their Democratic opponents. The Democrats were corrupt. They were 'blind to communism' and even promoting 'communist propaganda'. To many viewers watching at home on television, the spectacle of an idealistic new congressman standing up for his

beliefs and taking on his enemies so directly might have seemed brave and inspiring. Many perhaps wondered why the Democrats refused to defend themselves from such serious charges. The reason was that it all looked quite different in real life. Anyone actually present in the chamber would have
p. 129 seen something quite bizarre: a furious Gingrich was denouncing row after row of empty seats. As always, by that time most congressmen and women from both sides had left. The confrontation was an illusion.

Gingrich got away with his trick because the rules governing the way Congress was televised on C-SPAN dictated that only the speaker's upper body and face could be shown by the cameras. Viewers had no way of knowing Gingrich was speaking to a virtually empty room. Before long, to his scarcely concealed delight, he got the scandal and the attention he was looking for. His speeches succeeded in infuriating his Democratic opponents. In retaliation the Democratic Speaker of the House of Representatives, Tip O'Neill, broke protocol to demand that the C-SPAN cameras pan over the chamber to show the absurdity of what Gingrich was doing. Then 'all hell broke loose', writes the historian Julian Zelizer in his book *Burning Down the House*: 'Democrats scrambled back into the chamber to take their seats, some with their jackets hastily tossed on, eager to challenge Gingrich' and 'Republicans booed and hissed as the Democrats spoke'. This was what Gingrich had wanted: fights, drama and attention. Gingrich had become, as he gloated to the newspapers, 'famous'. It was a shabby trick. But it was also a minor masterpiece of media manipulation.

As Zelizer writes, Gingrich understood 'that chaos plays better in front of the cameras than order. The serious business of government, negotiating agreements and passing legislation, makes for
p. 130 boring stories. Good old-fashioned fights, verbal or otherwise, attract eyeballs.' Cameras love personality too. And Gingrich, despite his unprepossessing appearance, provided the drama with an outrageous and memorable central character. Viewers and the media were hooked. One newspaper gushed that 'the House of Representatives TV Show' on C-SPAN had become 'more turbulent than a *Dynasty* cliffhanger, more riveting than the evening news, and at times funnier than anything on *Foul-Ups, Bleeps and Blunders*'.

A new political era had arrived. In a pamphlet titled *Language: A Key Mechanism of Control*, Gingrich offered advice to conservatives who wanted to cut through and 'speak like Newt' in order to win audiences. When describing Democrats, he suggested, they needed to use words like 'corruption', 'traitors', 'sick', 'radical', 'shame', 'pathetic', 'steal' and 'lie'. As Gingrich put it in a formula that has acquired almost the force of a Newtonian law in twenty-first-century politics: 'conflict equals exposure equals power'. Democracy had taken a crucial and dangerous step into the age of the screen.[1]

Speaking in 1969, Marshall McLuhan – a more subtle media theorist even than Newt Gingrich – argued that 'TV is revolutionizing every political system in the Western world'. McLuhan believed that electronic media were 'retribalizing' Western society, returning us to an electronically connected 'global village' that would resemble the warring villages of our tribal past. 'The [electronic] global village absolutely ensures maximal disagreement on all points,' McLuhan stated. The electronic
p. 131 future was going to be 'divisive' and 'full of fighting'. He also thought television was 'creating a totally new type of national leader, a man who is much more of a tribal chieftain than a politician'.

[1] For Newt Gingrich and C-SPAN, see Julian Zelizer, *Burning Down the House: Newt Gingrich, the Fall of a Speaker, and the Rise of the New Republican Party* (New York: Penguin, 2020), pp. 62–77; and Kathryn Cramer Brownell, *24/7 Politics: Cable Television and the Fragmenting of America from Watergate to Fox News* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023), pp. 217–26

The idea feels prescient.[2]

In the twenty-first century, politics is growing angrier, stupider and more obsessed with personality. Our democracy is a nineteenth-century vessel, built for calmer waters. I don't think we should assume it will be possible to pilot this fragile ship through the internet's electric storms. Certainly, the voyage so far has been perilous. According to the website Our World in Data, the number of people who have democratic rights has declined dramatically, from 3.9 billion to 2.2 billion people between 2016 and 2025. 'Similarly, the number of people living in liberal democracies fell from 1.2 billion in 2012 to 600 million' in 2025.[3] Even countries like the UK and the US, which remain democratic, have experienced periods of unprecedented instability. Of course, many factors are at play: inequality, economic stagnation, discontent at mass immigration. But under all this there is a fundamental shift: the literate foundations on which liberal democracy rests are crumbling away beneath our feet.

In countries across the world, politicians and voters are finding that the old machinery of democracy is no longer working the way it once did. One man who made this discovery was the Democratic politician Nate McMurray. In 2018, McMurray, who is blessed with a blond and somewhat gawky version of the traditional American square-jawed political good looks, was campaigning for a congressional seat in a rural district of New York. He faced a tough battle in a strongly Republican area. But, as the journalist Margaret Sullivan relates in her book *Ghosting the News*, McMurray did have one 'monumental advantage'. A local paper, the *Buffalo News*, had just reported the story that his opponent, the Republican incumbent Chris Collins, had been indicted for insider trading. We all know how an event like this usually plays out: the scandal breaks, the seemingly nailed-on victor crashes and burns, the underdog surges ahead. But out on the campaign trail the beleaguered McMurray was discovering that was just not how things were going. The familiar democratic script was no longer running the way it was supposed to. Many voters were blithely unaware their congressman was facing a possible jail sentence. 'I'd be going door to door, or meeting with people at a diner or a fair,' McMurray recalled, 'and in the most isolated areas, a lot of people had no idea…People told me I was making it up.' p. 132

And how could they have known? Decades earlier, the *Buffalo News* had had a circulation of 300,000. Nowadays the figure is in the low tens of thousands. For many citizens, the major conduit for political news had dried up. And in the absence of a print newspaper, McMurray realised, people were relying on 'gossip, conservative radio, or social media'. Collins was duly elected. Shortly afterwards he was sentenced to two years in prison (but was subsequently pardoned by President Trump).[4]

A third of all American newspapers shut down between 2004 and 2025. In Britain, 320 newspapers closed between 2009 and 2019. It is increasingly possible to get through life without any exposure to the news at all. The *Financial Times* columnist Simon Kuper has suggested that 'Growing numbers of citizens are oblivious to current affairs, much like most ordinary Britons before the first popular newspaper, the *Daily Mail*, appeared in 1896.'[5] According to one estimate, there may now be fewer local newspapers in the UK than at any time since the eighteenth century; that is to say, ominously, p. 133

[2]The Playboy Interview: Marshall McLuhan', *Playboy Magazine*, March 1969, https://web.cs.ucdavis.edu/~rogaway/classes/188/spring07/mcluhan.pdf

[3]Bastian Herre, 'The world has recently become less democratic', Our World in Data, 6 September 2022, updated April 2026, ourworldindata.org/less-democratic

[4]For Nate McMurray's battle for a congressional seat, see Margaret Sullivan, *Ghosting the News: Local Journalism and the Crisis of American Democracy* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2020), pp. 15–22

[5]Simon Kuper, 'No news is bad news', *Financial Times*, 21 March 2024, ft.com/content/451e7466-7a91-4784-aa37-02993ff0fc9e?syn-25a6b1a6=1

since before the birth of modern democracy.[6] This matters in all kinds of ways. Newspaper readers are not only more informed about politics. They vote more, they volunteer more and they belong to more civic associations. When a newspaper dies it rips away with it a whole part of the ecosystem of democratic life, like an ancient rainforest tree felled by loggers. The loss triggers a change in the political environment. Citizens vote less. And those who keep voting do so more strongly along partisan lines. It happens locally and it happens nationally.[7]

A politician playing in a rather bigger league than Nate McMurray, the former US president Barack Obama, speaking in 2020, also noticed the shift:

> Even as late as 2008, typically when I went into a small town, there's a small-town newspaper, and the owner or editor is a conservative guy with a crew cut, maybe, and a bow tie, and he's been a Republican for years. He doesn't have a lot of patience for tax-and-spend liberals, but he'll take a meeting with me, and he'll write an editorial that says, 'He's a liberal Chicago lawyer but he seems like a decent enough guy, had some good ideas'...But you go into those communities today and the newspapers are gone.

Now, Obama observed, Fox News or a similar station is on 'in every barbershop and VFW [Veterans of Foreign Wars] hall'. And 'the presuppositions that exist there, about who I am and what I believe, are so fundamentally different, have changed so much, that it's difficult to break through'.[8]

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It is important to say that this is not a story about saintly rational liberals and foolish bigoted conservatives. Part of the American right has dived with particular enthusiasm into post-literate politics and thus provides a useful fund of colourful examples. But intransigence and madness are present everywhere across the political spectrum. The progressive left is eminently capable of craziness (I have some unpleasant first-hand experience). According to an impulsive and highly confrontational kind of left-wing activism popular online, every moderately dissenting enemy is a fascist, Halloween costumes are evidence of racism and all mildly provoking alternative viewpoints must be furiously shut down. The point here is not a political one. Rather, it is that where print can be used as a medium of rational persuasion and for the cultivation of sympathy, screens tend to push us towards conflict.

Walter Ong believed that societies without writing are 'agonistically programmed', that is they have an inherent bias towards confrontation. This makes sense. Reading an essay written by your hated enemy is – however irritating their writing style and however intolerably pretentious their use of semicolons – usually a less intense emotional experience than confronting them face to face or watching them on screen. In her book about television and democracy, *In-Your-Face Politics*, the political scientist Diana Mutz describes her mother-in-law's reaction to seeing the then US president George W. Bush on the television: 'As she walked into the room, she turned her head away from the television in disgust. "Aach!" she exclaimed, "I can't *bear* to have that man in my face. It makes me sick to my stomach!" '[9] We're used to the idea that people shout at the television. But we tend not to shout at the books we are reading.

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On the page, invective quickly becomes tedious. In person, we positively relish conflict. It's why we

[6] Alexandra Topping, 'Collapse of local media leaves us all in the dark', *Guardian*, 2 February 2024, theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/feb/02/collapse-of-local-media-leaves-us-all-in-the-dark

[7] Ryan Zickgraf, ' "The Paper" depicts local journalism's sad decline', UnHerd, 8 September 2025, unherd.com/2025/09/the-paper-depicts-local-journalisms-sad-decline/

[8] Lisa Lerer, 'How Obama sees this moment', *New York Times*, 16 November 2020, nytimes.com/2020/11/16/us/politics/obama-interviews.html

[9] Diana C. Mutz, *In-Your-Face Politics: The Consequences of Uncivil Media* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 1

love to watch comedy roasts, debates, rap battles and other ritualised verbal confrontations. Oral societies, Walter Ong observes, citing examples from the *Iliad*, *Beowulf* and the *Mwindo* epic, an oral tale from the Congo, delight in 'flyting' – ritual displays of 'verbal tongue lashings' and grandiose 'bragging'.[10] It is a mode of discourse that is coming back into fashion. A lot of twenty-first-century political 'debate' could be thought of not as debate at all – at least not as literate societies understand the word – but as a kind of 'flyting'.

A good example is the popular YouTube series *Surrounded*, whose episodes often have millions, even tens of millions, of views. Set in a trendily austere warehouse building with exposed brick walls and a concrete floor – I sometimes think of it as the hipster coffee shop from hell – the show takes the form of a kind of rhetorical bear pit.

A typical 'debate' unfolds like this. A famous media personality whose task is to defend an (often outrageous or stupid) opinion sits at a desk opposite an empty chair. At this desk he or she is surrounded by a circle of about twenty hostile (and often poorly informed) members of the public. After a moment of tense silence, an electronic tone counts down from three. At this point the spectators must jump up from their seats and scramble to seize the empty chair opposite the celebrity, sometimes scuffling and falling over in their desperation to assume the hot seat. When one of them has successfully claimed the place, the two antagonists start 'debating', which is to say, they start firing off partisan talking points as rapidly as possible, often yelling over each other in their frantic desperation to speak.

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The quality of discussion is…not inspiring. The viewer can watch participants trying to explain that the earth is not round but, weirdly, the shape of a snow globe ('1 Journalist vs 20 Conspiracy Theorists'), or ranting almost inconsolably that the presidential candidate Kamala Harris slept her way to power ('1 Liberal Teen vs 20 Trump Supporters'). The tone is rarely temperate. 'This is bad for you! You're sitting on live television where millions of people are gonna see – your neighbours and friends – that you support the killing of children!' one debater tells his opponent ('1 Progressive vs 20 Far-Right Conservatives'). Sometimes the debate simply can't race ahead quickly enough for the eager antagonists. 'Come on! Come on!' exclaims another participant with the belligerent glee of a WWE wrestler squaring up to his nemesis: 'Let's go!…You're stalling, you're stalling! Make your point!' There must have been days when the crowd walked away from a day watching gladiatorial combat at the Roman Colosseum feeling more intellectually edified.

Surrounded is preposterous but, as political debate on the internet goes, it is not exactly an outlier. The confrontational bias of the screen seems to be locking us into a kind of political forever war. And it is making serious debate impossible. Much political discussion operates at a similar level of incoherence, inanity and over-simplification. A show like *Surrounded* could not sustain a useful discussion of economics or foreign policy even if it tried (and it really isn't trying). Somehow we have slowly managed to get used to this. But this attempt to run a democracy without a grown-up conversation is a new and dangerous experiment. I don't think we can be at all confident it will succeed.

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One response – and, frankly, it is always a deeply tempting one – is to blame air-headed YouTubers, TikTok influencers and cable news presenters for the whole depressing situation. Attention-seeking opportunists masquerading as 'political commentators' are corrupting democracy in their deranged lust for clicks, likes and views. There is undoubtedly truth in that analysis. But the problem runs much deeper. Increasingly, rational thought is hard to come by anywhere in our political system.

[10] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002 [1982]), p. 43

Until quite recently Western democracies were able to rely on the talents of a highly and at times even exceptionally literate political class. Politicians used to read. Harry Truman, to cite one of my favourite examples of political bibliophilia, was the only twentieth-century US president without a university degree. But he was also remarkably (and to me, disarmingly) bookish. Truman grew up very far from the bright lights and cocktail parties of literary America. He was the son of a livestock dealer in Independence, Missouri. And yet as an earnest and bespectacled schoolboy he spent great tracts of his time in the local library. 'Watched over by a plaster bust of Benjamin Franklin', as his biographer David McCullough relates, Truman marched his way past all the familiar landmarks of
p. 138 a twentieth-century autodidact's self-education: the Bible (which he claimed to have read 'twice through by the time he was twelve'), Plutarch's *Lives*, the complete works of Shakespeare, Plato's *Republic*, Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Eventually, he read every single one of two thousand volumes stored in Independence's library – including all the encyclopaedias. It's an inspiring story but not at all a unique one.[11]

As a bumptious young cavalry officer posted to sweltering Bangalore, Winston Churchill, who likewise never went to university, stormed his way through a very similar programme: Plato, Darwin, Adam Smith, Henry Hallam's *Constitutional History of England*. Firing off letters to his mother back in England, Churchill would demand to be sent Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* in eight volumes or twelve volumes of the works of the Victorian historian Lord Macaulay.[12] Churchill's successor as prime minister and the architect of Britain's welfare state, Clement Attlee, recalled that he read four books a week as a schoolboy. Theodore Roosevelt (if his boast is to be believed) got through a book a day. Margaret Thatcher, reviled by her liberal critics as a philistine housewife, was known to bring up the novels of Dostoevsky in conversation.

No modern politician has a comparable intellectual grounding. Britain and America are now led by what is probably the least literate political class in the history of their respective democracies. President Trump, to cite the irresistible example, is thought to be 'for all practical purposes...no more than semi-literate'. As the president's former economic adviser Gary Cohn once wrote, 'It's worse than you can imagine...Trump won't read anything – not one-page memos, not the brief
p. 139 policy papers, nothing.'[13]

The result is that many modern politicians – as anyone unlucky enough to have watched them debating will quickly conclude – are simply not at home with sustained thought and complex ideas. Men like Truman and Churchill were not perfect politicians but they benefited from habits of attention, powers of imagination and a deep internalised sense of history that can only be bred by reading. Their successors all too obviously live in a glib eternal present, lacking any ability to think beyond the moment-to-moment goldfish-brained chaos of likes, trends and memes.

The difference between the literate and the post-literate political sensibility can be observed most painfully in the way political speech-making has changed. One interesting point of reference is President John F. Kennedy, who is sometimes remembered as the first president of the superficial screen age. A hoary strand of political folk wisdom attributes his 1960 presidential victory over Richard Nixon to the influence of television. Viewers, the theory runs, were persuaded not by the candidates' arguments but by the unfortunate visual contrast between Kennedy's dynamic and toothily grinning youthful good looks and Nixon's characteristically shifty, awkward and unshaven appearance.

[11] David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004 [1992]), p. 49

[12] Roy Jenkins, *Churchill* (London: Picador, 2012 [2001]), pp. 43–5

[13] David A. Graham, 'The president who doesn't read', *Atlantic*, 5 January 2018, theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/01/americas-first-post-text-president/549794/

There may be truth in that but the idea does a disservice to Kennedy, who was also a serious reader. As Jacqueline Kennedy recalled of her husband: 'He'd read walking, he'd read at the table, at meals, he'd read after dinner, he'd read in the bathtub…He really read all the times you don't think you have time to read…He was always reading – practically while driving a car.'[14] Kennedy's literate sensibility was reflected in his style of speaking. Here he is debating Nixon: p. 140

> In the election of 1860, Abraham Lincoln said the question was whether this nation could exist half-slave or half-free. In the election of 1960, and with the world around us, the question is whether the world will exist half-slave or half-free, whether it will move in the direction of freedom, in the direction of the road that we are taking, or whether it will move in the direction of slavery. I think it will depend in great measure upon what we do here in the United States, on the kind of society that we build, on the kind of strength that we maintain.[15]

This short passage bears all the characteristic hallmarks of what Neil Postman called 'printed orality', the tendency of men and women in highly literate cultures to speak like books. It has a complex syntactic structure, it makes a logical argument, it refers to the world of ideas and abstractions, and it draws on history for context. The most infamous example of the decline of coherent thought in politics is Donald Trump's style of speaking. Here is Trump debating Hillary Clinton in 2016:

> We have to have strong borders. We have to keep the drugs out of our country. Right now, we're getting the drugs, they're getting the cash. We need strong borders. We need absolute, we cannot give amnesty. Now, I want to build the wall. We need the wall. The border patrol, ICE, they all want the wall. We stop the drugs. We shore up the border. One of my first acts will be to get all of the drug lords, all of the bad ones. We have some bad, bad people in this country that have to go out. We're going to get them out. We're going to secure the border…[16] p. 141

And so on. The contrast hardly needs spelling out. Trump's speech bears many of the features Walter Ong thought were characteristic of the oral style of discourse. It is rambling and repetitive. He doesn't supply evidence for his ideas. Rather than organising his information analytically via clauses and subclauses in the manner characteristic of literate communication, he merely piles up assertions. And instead of abstractions and ideas, his speech is rooted in the immediate, concrete world: bad people, border walls, drug lords.

Trump is an easy and obvious target, but frankly a version of the same problem (albeit usually less acute) is observable everywhere on the political spectrum. Almost as dismaying are the vacuous truisms and platitudes mouthed by many centrist politicians. In an article on the decline of political rhetoric, the classicist Mary Beard drew attention to a speech by Britain's former Labour leader of the opposition, Ed Miliband:

> I believe we succeed as a society when we move together, not drift apart. These are my basic beliefs, all underpinned by one idea: it is only when working people succeed, that Britain succeeds too. And because of these beliefs, I believe this is the most important election for a generation. p. 142

[14] 'In her voice: Jacqueline Kennedy, the White House Years', John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, jfklibrary.org/visit-museum/exhibits/special-exhibits/in-her-voice-jacqueline-kennedy-the-white-house-years

[15] 'Senator John F. Kennedy and Vice President Richard M. Nixon first joint radio-television broadcast, September 26, 1960', John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-speeches/1st-nixon-kennedy-debate-19600926

[16] 'Full transcript: Third 2016 presidential debate', *Politico*, 20 October 2016, politico.com/story/2016/10/full-transcript-third-2016-presidential-debate-230063

Inspired? Persuaded? This is pretty vacuous stuff. It's not the worst speech in the world but is certainly representative of the usual standard of modern political oratory. Miliband's words could have been spoken by virtually any politician in any democracy at any point in the last thirty years (it is not hard to imagine that bland politicians around the world actually *have* inadvertently managed to deliver an identical speech). As Beard comments, this speech is 'not even pretending to be an argument'. It does not follow a rational line of thought or provide evidence or propose an idea. It is just 'a series of slogans'.[17] Repeating slogans of course is the way to 'cut through' to the public in a distracted and chaotic media environment in which politicians are lucky to have a few seconds of their speech clipped up on a radio bulletin or on the TV evening news. Many modern democratic citizens, of course, lack the attention span to listen to real arguments.

So much of the intellectual strength of politics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was rooted in reading. In Britain, well into the twentieth century, parliamentary speeches were often printed in full in newspapers. Politicians spoke knowing they would be read as well as heard. And, once printed, important speeches were subjected to a detailed analysis that sometimes approached almost the level of literary criticism.

A great coup of the ambitious young Churchill's early career was to have his maiden speech as an MP (arguing for generous peace terms in the Boer War) printed prominently in *The Times*. His ideas and arguments were then praised, picked over and criticised in the rest of the press. Churchill's speech, a reporter from *The Daily News* thought, showed that he was in possession of a 'critical faculty' and provided evidence that 'he can judge and think for himself'. Joseph Chamberlain, who spoke after Churchill, by contrast, delivered a speech 'utterly without elevation…in insight and breadth of treatment it was far inferior to Mr Churchill's'.[18] Democracy in the age of Churchill and even in the age of Kennedy was still defined by print. Politicians had to be able to communicate emotionally and visually but also to argue and reason in a public sphere that still deferred to 'the authority of the better argument'. You wonder what the reporter from *The Daily News* might have made of Trump or Ed Miliband.

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Observing a modern parliamentary debate, you often have the uncanny sensation of watching men and women going through the motions of a dead ritual. Speeches still happen because we know this is how democracy is meant to proceed. But the literate culture that sustained sophisticated argument and rational debate has disappeared. Serious thought has all but emptied out of the system. An analysis in *The Economist* found that the length and sophistication of speeches made in the British Parliament has declined steadily since the 1970s. In 1938, the year before the Second World War broke out, the average parliamentary speech was nearly a thousand words long. By 1970, it was still about nine hundred words. After that, speeches began to get shorter. And notably they started to 'shrink dramatically' after 2015, 'when video functionality appears on Twitter'. By 2024, the average length of a parliamentary speech was just 460 words, as MPs increasingly spoke not for the benefit of each other or for newspaper reporters but for clips on social media.[19] Similar trends towards shorter and less complex speech have been measured in the US Congress and in US presidential debates. Fittingly, a recent analysis suggested that many British MPs were using artificial intelligence to write their speeches for them.

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It sometimes seems ideas, complex arguments and history have been all but phased out of democratic politics. Increasingly, many modern democracies find themselves almost helpless to debate serious

[17] Mary Beard, 'Have modern politicians lost the art of rhetoric?', BBC News, 6 February 2015, bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-31128840

[18] Jenkins, *Churchill*, pp. 95–7

[19] 'Speeches in Britain's Parliament are getting shorter – and worse', *The Economist*, 3 February 2025, economist.com/britain/2025/02/03/speeches-in-britains-parliament-are-getting-shorter-and-worse

issues. It's not happening in Parliament. It's not happening on social media. Most people aren't reading newspapers. What happens to a democracy that forgets how to think?

One grim answer to that question is suggested by a bit of time spent scrolling through the TikTok feed of El Salvador's president, and self-styled 'world's coolest dictator', Nayib Bukele. Here is how a typical Bukele video unfolds. It's night time. Ominous electronic music is thudding softly in the background. In rapid succession we are shown a series of camera shots. A tattooed, crop-headed man stares obstinately from behind a wire fence. Next there's a corridor packed with crouching, frightened, half-naked men. They are all wearing identical long white shorts and their hands are clasped to their heads. The music is growing faster and more intense now. Next we see the men in handcuffs. Soldiers are hauling them onto a coach. Then a drone shot shows lines of the same men, bent double and still half-naked, jogging in a long line into a huge warehouse-like correctional facility, chains trailing from their wrists. All this lasts a little over a minute. p. 145

This is autocracy in the age of short-form video. President Bukele, with his trim hipster beard, dark glasses and leather jacket, is the most-followed world leader on TikTok. Under his administration Bitcoin became an official currency of El Salvador. Bukele's war on violent gangs, so cinematically rendered on his TikTok feed, has restored order to a country that was once the 'homicide capital of the world' – but at a terrible cost to El Salvador's democracy. No government in the world has incarcerated a greater proportion of its population: one in fifty-seven Salvadorans are now in jail. And political opposition has been, as Bukele indelicately puts it, 'pulverised'. Judges have been fired and news organisations silenced. Recent legislation has opened up a path for Bukele to become dictator for life.[20]

Bukele understands he does not need to justify his actions logically through speeches or arguments. He relies instead on short-form visual shock and awe. A 'couple of images on Instagram can have a greater impact than any speech in this assembly', as he remarked in an address to the UN. His feed is full of videos showing different sides of the leader, for he is not only a brute: here is Bukele the beaming family man with wife and children, here is Bukele the podcaster in a backwards baseball cap, here is Bukele relaxing at home...

Bukele's government is alarming evidence of the style of politics that works on a smartphone. To work in a thirty-second video, political communication needs to be fast, arresting and emotional. Strong imagery like guns, flags and men in chains do well. Speeches, arguments and ideas do not. TikTok may not necessarily be the digital pied piper dancing us all towards an inevitable fate of dictatorship and mass incarcerations. But like all media it has its biases. And the kind of politics that works well on TikTok is not liberal. p. 146

There is some persuasive evidence that TikTok usage seems to correlate with an increased vote share for populist parties and the far right. In both Britain and America, populist candidates easily outperform their over-earnest, speechifying centrist rivals on short-video platforms. Videos posted to TikTok in 2024–25 by the party of the British populist leader Nigel Farage garnered almost fourteen times as much engagement as those by his mainstream rivals. TikTok, the writer Ian Leslie argues, is 'rocket fuel for populists':

> Why does [TikTok] benefit populists disproportionately? Because, almost by definition, populism thrives on emotions, not thoughts; on feelings not sentences. Populists spe-

[20] Vera Bergengruen, 'How Nayib Bukele's "iron fist" has transformed El Salvador', *Time*, 29 August 2024, time.com/7015598/nayib-bukeles-iron-fist-el-salvador/

> cialise in providing that rush of certainty you get when you know you're right. They don't want you to think. Thinking is where certainty goes to die.[21]

This is a profound problem for democracy. There are political systems that prefer their citizens not to think. They are called dictatorships. Democracies require their citizens to engage their minds. Citizens and their leaders need to think through rival policy ideas, mull over arguments and come
p. 147 to rational decisions. Sometimes they need to value boring abstract ideas like 'free speech' and 'the rule of law' above more immediate and more satisfying impulses like silencing a hated enemy or bypassing the law in pursuit of a political goal. Evil and irrational political ideas translate much better onto the screen than they do onto the page.

Indeed, in the twenty-first century, some of the canniest politicians barely even try to couch their appeals to the public in the form of rational propositions. Almost perfectly emblematic of the shift towards a mystical and emotional politics emptied of rational thought is the political tendency the journalist Anne Applebaum calls 'the New Obscurantism'. This is a genre of irrational politics that feels almost lab-engineered for the smartphone. 'All across Central Europe,' Applebaum writes, 'a fascination with runes and folk magic aligns with both right-wing xenophobia and left-wing paganism. Spiritual leaders are becoming political, and political actors have veered into the occult.' Nationalism merges weirdly with climate denial and vaccine scepticism. The pre-eminent New Obscurantist is the charismatic former Romanian populist politician Călin Georgescu, who perfected a strange blend of conspiracy theory and woo-woo pseudoscience. He has warned of the dangers of 'subliminal messages' and 'thought control' on the part of his political opponents and broadcast messages like 'Water is alive and sends us messages, but we don't know how to listen to them.' This is politics for a post-literate age, combining charisma, emotionalism and mystical New Age nonsense. As Applebaum writes:

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> The philosophers of the Enlightenment, whose belief in the possibility of law-based democratic states gave us both the American and French Revolutions, railed against what they called obscurantism: darkness, obfuscation, irrationality. But the prophets of…the New Obscurantism offer exactly those things: magical solutions, an aura of spirituality, superstition, and the cultivation of fear.[22]

In all kinds of bizarre ways, the politics of the post-literate future resembles the politics of the pre-literate past. Sometimes, frankly, the echoes are almost too blatant. I am mildly obsessed by Donald Trump's apparent love for the visual style of the eighteenth-century aristocracy (or at least for a debased and kitschified version of that style). At his mansion at Mar-a-Lago in Florida, for instance, he constructed a ballroom in imitation of the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles. The Donald J. Trump Grand Ballroom (as it was inevitably christened) is a triumph of poor taste, adorned with $7 million worth of 24-carat gold and seventeen crystal chandeliers. And at the beginning of his second presidential term Trump had the White House's Oval Office fitted out in gilded rococo style. Lined with paintings and crammed with golden *objets* – gilded urns, cherubs and medallions – it might easily be the private office of an overprivileged and unusually tasteless minor eighteenth-century despot. There are even plans for a triumphal arch, the 'Arc de Trump', a vast marble structure of Napoleonic immodesty topped with a golden statue of the goddess Victory. If built, the Arc de
p. 149 Trump will tower twice the height of the neighbouring Lincoln Memorial. It would be silly to read too much into the parallel but I can't help being fascinated by the fact that, in constructing a political

[21] Ian Leslie, 'Why is TikTok such rocket fuel for populists?', The Ruffian on Substack, 24 May 2025, ian-leslie.com/p/why-is-tiktok-such-rocket-fuel-for

[22] Anne Applebaum, 'The new Rasputins', *Atlantic*, 7 January 2025, theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2025/02/trump-populist-conspiracism-autocracy-rfk-jr/681088/

image, the first post-literate president reached instinctively for a visual style that defined autocratic politics before the age of mass literacy.

The important point is that in the twenty-first century our political culture is once again in thrall to the dazzling world of surfaces: gilded palaces, private jets, military displays and powerful individuals posing with their beautiful families. It really does look like a version of the representational culture of power beloved at Versailles (albeit conspicuously lacking the dignity of the French court). Above all, Trump understands that a visual culture loves a charismatic personality. He dances on stage, gives his rivals amusing nicknames and tells rambling stories and jokes. Like Louis XIV, every hand gesture and every motion of his head is significant and parsed for meaning by courtiers and critics. Unlike Louis XIV, he is fond of sharing artificially generated images of himself. In one, he rides on the back of a lion, clad, weirdly, in a business suit and glancing down commandingly at the viewer. Another shows the president not as the portly septuagenarian of reality but as a grotesquely muscled beefcake wielding a lightsaber, the wattled neck and ageing head emerging bizarrely from the bulging muscle-bound torso. In a video, the president plays the electric guitar in front of a rapturous stadium audience, his candyfloss hair streaming weirdly behind him. Louis XIV, who could command the genius of the greatest painters of his time, might have been puzzled by the crudeness of the imagery but he might also have recognised in Trump a fellow master of the visual language of power. p. 150

It's often been observed that in the twenty-first century the most serious threat to democracy comes not from an ideology like communism or fascism but from the trend towards the domination of politics by a single charismatic individual. Ours is an age of 'strongmen'. Leaders like Russia's Vladimir Putin, India's Narendra Modi and Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan have moved, with greater and lesser degrees of success, to turn their governments into personal fiefdoms. The modus operandi of the strongman is to dismantle the impersonal institutions of the state like the bureaucracy, the judiciary and the impartial civil service. The old officials are then replaced with goons, toadies and hirelings whose loyalties are not to the state or to the rule of law but to the domineering leader. The whole system hangs on the central commanding personality.

'A personal connection between a strongman leader and his disciples is crucial for the establishment of a cult of personality,' writes the journalist Gideon Rachman. And 'with few exceptions, these leaders are very adept users of social media'.[23] Screens allow strongmen to get close to their followers, to appear in their lives as an everyday presence, even a friend. Trump of course is one of the most effective social media users ever to have lived. In India, Prime Minister Modi has his own app. Former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro would chat informally to his supporters every week over Facebook video. President Putin was an early master of the new representational culture. There was a time when the Kremlin seemed to issue images of new feats of Putin machismo on an almost weekly basis. We saw Putin bare-chested and riding a horse, or bare-chested and firing a gun, or bare-chested and fishing (there was a theme). Shades of a similar approach are evident in Argentina's pudgy, shaggy-haired libertarian leader Javier Milei, who went through a phase of bouncing around on stage wielding a chainsaw (a symbol of his aim to cut government spending). Milei has also appeared in a black-and-yellow superhero costume as the freedom-loving 'General AnCap' (a portmanteau for anarcho-capitalist). p. 151

It is a hyper-modern system of power but also a strangely ancient one, depending on a version of the same mystical and charismatic authority that underpinned kingship in pre-democratic Europe. The Trump White House resembles a monarchical court much more than a traditional democratic

[23] Gideon Rachman, *The Age of the Strongman: How the Cult of the Leader Threatens Democracy around the World* (London: Vintage, 2023), pp. 21–2

administration. Like a monarch, lucrative contracts and offices are in Trump's personal gift. The barons (or, rather, tech barons) shower him with praise and gifts. Trusted family members are deployed in key diplomatic postings. All criticism and all objections are overwhelmed by the leader's force of personality. As Trump infamously put it, 'I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody, and I wouldn't lose any voters, OK?'

These new kings can get away with this because they rule in a world in which the vast informational divides which characterised almost all of human history are beginning to re-emerge. Knowledge may once again become the preserve of a privileged few. As long ago as 2005 an article in the *Annual Review of Sociology* warned that the 'era of mass [book] reading' was a brief 'anomaly' in our history: 'We are now seeing such reading return to its former social base', the authors wrote: 'a self-perpetuating minority that we shall call the reading class.'[24] It may be that we will witness the emergence of an elite knowledge class like the scribal 'aristocracy of the written word' we met at the beginning of Chapter Two.

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The very rich have the financial resources to keep their children away from addictive screens. Poorer parents who have to work multiple jobs and who lack the money for childcare do not have such luxuries. Rich children spend significantly less time on screens than their poorer peers. California's Waldorf School of the Peninsula, popular with Silicon Valley tech executives, forbids its students to use almost all technology until after eighth grade. Steve Jobs famously limited his children's use of technology and, as his biographer Walter Isaacson writes, 'made a point of having dinner at the big long table in their kitchen, discussing books and history and a variety of things'. At dinner 'no one ever pulled out an iPad or computer. The kids did not seem addicted at all to devices.'[25]

Meanwhile, many of the ordinary citizens of modern democracies risk finding themselves as helpless, credulous and poorly informed as the subjects of a medieval king. It may be that we are facing an unenlightened future that looks like our unenlightened past – one in which power, wealth and knowledge concentrate at the top of society, and an angry, divided and uninformed public lacks the means to understand, analyse, criticise or change what is going on.

The future is unknowable – nobody can say for certain where all this is heading – but we must be vigilant about the decline of literacy. As knowledge divides re-emerge and tech companies wipe out both literacy and middle-class jobs, we may find ourselves drifting back into a second feudal age. Certainly, there is nothing in our experience of the twenty-first century so far to suggest that we should be complacent about the state of democracy. Vast inequalities of knowledge and wealth were the overwhelming norm throughout human history. Mass literacy is a recent phenomenon. So is mass democracy. We simply don't know whether one can survive without the other.

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[24] Wendy Griswold, Terry McDonnell and Nathan Wright, 'Reading and the Reading Class in the Twenty-First Century', *Annual Review of Sociology* 31, 2005, 127–41, doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.31.041304.122312

[25] Nick Bilton, 'Steve Jobs was a low-tech parent', *New York Times*, 10 September 2014, nytimes.com/2014/09/11/fashion/steve-jobs-apple-was-a-low-tech-parent.html