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Beyond Wicked: Vibocratic Problems in the Post-Truth Era

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Abstract

This essay revisits the classical concept of "wicked problems" as articulated by Rittel, Webber, and Ackoff, and asks whether it remains adequate in an era shaped by post-truth politics, epistemic fragmentation, and neo-orality. While wicked problems captured the complexity and contestation of late-modern governance, they relied on preconditions that are increasingly unstable: shared sense-making institutions, mutual intelligibility, and discursive publics. Today, many societal challenges no longer resist resolution—they resist framing. They mutate in real time, circulate as affective atmospheres, and dissolve under scrutiny.

The essay proposes a tentative new category—vibocratic problems—to describe this emerging class of societal phenomena. These are not merely more complex than wicked problems; they are differently configured: unstable, performative, epistemically fugitive. Drawing on philosophy, media studies, design research, and epistemology, the essay argues for new methodological responses, including abductive, situated, and design-informed approaches. It offers a conceptual table contrasting wicked and vibocratic problems, outlines emerging sites of vibocratic inquiry, and closes with a short reflection on the ethical posture of scholarship in turbulent times.

The contribution is conceptual, diagnostic, and methodological: a call to name the terrain anew—not as a provocation, but as an act of intellectual responsibility.

Keywords: Wicked Problems, Vibocratic Problems, Post-Truth Politics, Neo-Orality, Epistemic Fragmentation

1. Introduction: The World Outpaces Our Categories Introduction

"We're not in Kansas anymore."

– The Wizard of Oz (1939)

In the early 1970s, Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber introduced the term "wicked problems" to describe a new class of challenges confronting planners, policymakers, and designers. These problems resisted resolution not because of any lack of effort or intelligence, but because of their very nature: ambiguous, interconnected, politically charged, and deeply embedded in social complexity (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Around the same time, Russell Ackoff identified a similar condition, which he called a "mess"—a system of interrelated problems that, unlike discrete technical puzzles, demanded systemic inquiry and a shift from optimization to participation (Ackoff, 1981). Together, these thinkers gave voice to a dawning realization: that many of society's most pressing challenges could not be treated as puzzles to be solved, but as dynamic situations to be navigated.

Half a century later, this insight still resonates. The vocabulary of "wicked problems" has become embedded across disciplines, from sustainability studies to organizational design (Buchanan, 1992). Yet there is a growing sense that something essential has shifted. The most urgent challenges of our time—climate collapse, democratic erosion, epistemic polarization, ambient misinformation—do not merely resist resolution. Increasingly, they resist framing. They mutate in real time, splinter across platforms, and travel faster as feelings than as facts (Sismondo, 2017). These challenges are no longer simply hard to solve; they are hard to define in the first place. And even when defined, their conditions of intelligibility often do not hold.

This essay asks whether the classical concept of wicked problems, as formulated by Rittel, Webber, and Ackoff, remains adequate to the cultural, epistemic, and communicative conditions of the present. It begins by revisiting the foundational ideas of wickedness and messiness with careful attention to their internal logic. It then turns to a set of shifts—technological, epistemological, affective—that have reconfigured the public sphere, culminating in what some

now describe as an era of post-truth and neo-orality (Fendt, 2025; Ong, 1982). The argument that follows is not that wicked problems are obsolete. Rather, it is that they may no longer serve as the most precise diagnostic tool for the challenges we now face. The claim is epistemological as much as conceptual: our categories are beginning to buckle under the weight of the world they once described.

This inquiry builds on, yet diverges from, adjacent frameworks such as **"**super wicked problems" (Levin et al., 2012), which emphasize self-reinforcing urgency and institutional irrationality, and **"**post-normal science**"** (Funtowicz & Ravetz, 1993), which foregrounds uncertainty, extended peer communities, and the irreducibly normative nature of knowledge production. These frameworks remain essential to diagnosing the limits of technocratic rationality. However, the concept of *vibocratic problems* proposed here seeks to account for a deeper epistemic instability—where not only solutions but the framing of problems themselves has become fugitive, fractured, or performative.

If there is indeed a new class of societal challenges emerging—distinct from but historically continuous with wicked problems—then naming that class becomes a matter not of taxonomy, but of orientation. A new term is tentatively proposed later in the essay, not as replacement but as supplement: an invitation to think with greater clarity about the shape of our current impasses. What is at stake here is not only conceptual hygiene, but methodological consequence. The categories we use to describe problems shape the methods we use to engage them—and the kinds of knowledge, action, and accountability we deem possible. In a moment when shared reality is itself contested, the act of naming is not a retreat from the world but a mode of re-entry. In other words, conceptual naming is here understood not as abstraction or detachment, but as a method of re-engaging with a destabilized world—an epistemic act that reasserts the possibility of shared sense-making.

2. The Invention of Wickedness: Rittel, Webber, and Ackoff

"The truth is out there." – The X-Files

In 1973, Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber published "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning," challenging the prevailing assumption that societal problems could be approached with the same rigor and logic as engineering challenges. At the time, rational planning models dominated urban development, policy analysis, and systems design, presupposing that problems could be clearly defined, solutions optimized, and knowledge accumulated universally (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Contrarily, Rittel and Webber introduced a taxonomy of challenges that resisted such simplification.

They characterized "wicked problems" as those lacking definitive formulations, where understanding the problem is intrinsically linked to the problem itself. These problems have no stopping rule—no point at which one can declare them solved. Solutions are not true or false but better or worse, and every intervention is consequential, leaving irreversible traces. There is no immediate or ultimate test of a solution, and each problem is essentially unique, though patterns may recur (Rittel & Webber, 1973).

These ten characteristics are not arbitrary but stem from the fundamental condition that wicked problems are embedded in open systems with incomplete, contradictory, and changing requirements. They are political, contested, and socially constructed. Stakeholders often disagree not only on solutions but on the very nature of the problem and what would constitute a resolution. Thus, wickedness challenges positivist epistemology, suggesting that in the social world, knowledge is situated, action is entangled, and planning is a form of rhetorical negotiation rather than algorithmic optimization (Rittel & Webber, 1973).

Parallel to this, Russell Ackoff, in his 1974 address "The Future of Operational Research is Past," distinguished between problems, which are solvable; messes, which are systems of interrelated problems; and puzzles, which have clear boundaries and correct answers. He argued that most real-world challenges are messes—complex configurations requiring systemic understanding and participatory approaches. Ackoff emphasized the limitations of reductionism and advocated for design methods accommodating ambiguity, emergence, and multiple stakeholder perspectives (Ackoff, 1974).

While Rittel and Webber focused on the rhetorical and planning dimensions of wickedness, Ackoff addressed decision-making and design within organizational and systemic contexts. Both frameworks reject the notion that social challenges can be decomposed into discrete sub-problems and solved sequentially. They assert that knowledge is partial and value judgments are inescapable, anticipating the entanglements of knowledge, power, and interpretation central to post-positivist social science.

Over subsequent decades, the concept of wicked problems gained traction across disciplines. Urban designers, sustainability scientists, health policy analysts, and management theorists adopted the language of wickedness to understand challenges defying technical resolution. Richard Buchanan (1992) extended the idea into design theory, professional practice, and reflective inquiry, while Donald Schön (1983) explored it within the context of professional practice and reflective learning. Jeff Conklin (2005) introduced wicked problems into collaborative technology and group

decision-making, framing them as issues requiring shared understanding and dialogue.

Despite its utility, the concept of wickedness rests on certain assumptions that may no longer hold. It presumes a shared world where problems can be experienced, articulated, and contested, and a mode of public discourse where stakeholders engage in mutual intelligibility. It also assumes that, while solutions may not be final or neutral, persuasive arguments and public interests can guide action under uncertainty.

What if these assumptions no longer hold?

3. Epistemic Mutation: From Shared Problems to Splintered Realities

"It's not what you say, it's how you make them feel."

– Frank Underwood, House of Cards

If wicked problems once described a category of difficulty grounded in complexity, plurality, and contestation, they did so on the implicit assumption that the parties involved—however divided by values or interests—were at least operating within a shared epistemic frame. One could argue about what the problem was or how to solve it, but the very possibility of argument assumed the existence of a common world: a set of observable phenomena, institutions of sense-making, and rules of deliberation. The concept of wickedness was born in an era when reason still functioned—albeit tenuously—as a currency of public life (Rittel & Webber, 1973).

That era is no longer with us.

In recent years, a deeper shift has occurred—one not only in the nature of problems but in the conditions under which problems can be known at all. What we are witnessing is not just an escalation of complexity but a transformation in how publics form, how knowledge circulates, and how meaning itself is performed. This transformation is not solely political or technological; it is epistemological. It concerns the very infrastructure of collective understanding.

In his study of media ecology, Walter Ong (1982) described the cognitive and cultural consequences of literacy. Print-based culture, he argued, fostered habits of abstraction, linearity, and critical detachment. Oral cultures, by contrast, privileged performance, presence, and collective memory. Ong also foresaw a return of orality—what he called "secondary orality"—within modern technological societies. With the rise of real-time, networked platforms, that return has accelerated. As Neil Postman (1985) warned in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, the form of a medium shapes the form of discourse. In our current moment, that form has tilted decisively toward immediacy, affect, and spectacle.

Building on these insights, Fendt (2025) introduces the term neo-orality to describe a new mode of political discourse no longer governed by deliberative ideals or institutional rationality, but by resonance, gesture, and emotional attunement. Neo-orality is not simply a style; it is an epistemic regime. In this regime, claims are not evaluated by reference to external facts but by their affective charge and memetic transmissibility. Authority is no longer conferred by expertise or argument but enacted through performance—often live, often looping, often viral. The logic of post-truth is not the denial of truth per se, but its displacement. In a neo-oral world, truth becomes ambient. By "ambient," I mean that truth no longer functions as a stable endpoint of deliberation but circulates as an affective signal—sensed through emotional resonance and social proximity rather than verified through shared criteria (cf. Durnová, 2019). It is sensed rather than proven, vibed rather than verified.

This shift profoundly unsettles the conceptual structure of wicked problems. Rittel and Webber assumed that although no definitive solution to a wicked problem existed, there was at least a space in which competing solutions could be proposed, scrutinized, and debated. They presumed the existence of publics, institutions, and media capable of sustaining disagreement as a meaningful act. But today's most urgent challenges unfold in an environment where disagreement has been replaced by epistemic bifurcation—the fragmentation of public discourse into incommensurable narrative worlds.

Consider the issue of climate change. From a technical standpoint, it is a paradigmatic wicked problem: scientifically complex, politically charged, temporally extended, and distributed across multiple jurisdictions. Yet the challenge today is not merely how to design adaptive strategies—it is how to speak about the problem in ways that are legible across epistemic divides. Even as evidence accumulates, the very reality of the crisis is denied or ignored within vast segments of political discourse. As Fendt (2025) notes, climate urgency is increasingly drowned out by performative politics that aestheticize grievance, dramatize sovereignty, and reframe ecological concern as elite affectation. The problem is not only denied; it is rendered inaudible.

For instance, during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, videos promoting misinformation—most notably the *Plandemic* series—spread virally on platforms like TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube. These videos fused pseudoscientific claims with emotionally charged narratives of betrayal, censorship, and elite conspiracy, enabling them to bypass traditional gatekeeping and mobilize widespread public reaction. The virality was not driven by the credibility of the claims but by their memetic potency—the ability to trigger affective responses such as fear, outrage, or vindication.

Brennen et al. (2020) observed that much of this misinformation was "emotionally resonant rather than factually grounded," contributing to vaccine hesitancy and public health backlash.

Similarly, climate denial in rural U.S. communities is often reframed not as ignorance but as an act of cultural and political identity assertion. Here, rejection of climate science functions less as a deficit of knowledge than as a symbolic boundary-drawing against perceived coastal, liberal, or technocratic elites. Such forms of resistance reflect "epistemic dissensus" rooted in socio-economic dispossession and ideological estrangement (Hess Sovacool, 2020). In this context, climate denial becomes not simply a failure of information delivery, but a refusal of what that information represents. These dynamics complicate the communicative preconditions of wicked problem-solving, as they undermine the very legitimacy of shared evidence frameworks. These cases—though only illustrative—point to a broader methodological need: to ground theory in the lived dynamics of epistemic volatility. They remind us that today's most urgent societal challenges cannot be fully apprehended through abstract typologies alone. Rather, they must be situated within the messy, affect-saturated, and culturally contingent contexts in which knowledge is produced, contested, and refused. For scholars, this requires methodological agility: the ability to track how meaning is performed across fragmented publics, and to engage not just with what people believe, but with how those beliefs are felt, narrated, and enacted.

This is not just an acceleration of wickedness—it is a mutation. The adversary is no longer only complexity but epistemic instability. Facts do not simply fail to persuade; they fail to anchor. The production of doubt is not a byproduct of controversy—it is a strategy of governance. In this sense, post-truth is not an aberration but a condition: a background hum against which public life now unfolds. As McIntyre (2018) argues, post-truth politics elevates feeling over fact, and in doing so, erodes the possibility of shared judgment. But even this may not go far enough. For it is not just that feeling displaces fact—it is that disruption itself becomes a form of power.

Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, and other post-truth political figures do not argue; they perform. Their utterances operate not in the realm of proposition, but in that of affective event. What matters is not coherence, but traction. This performative epistemology, as Papacharissi (2015) and Marres (2018) have shown, reshapes the very structure of publicness. It generates what Papacharissi calls "affective publics": groups formed not through deliberation but through emotional contagion. In such publics, problems do not demand resolution—they demand reaction. The performance is the point.

What becomes of wickedness in such a world? Can we still meaningfully describe societal challenges as "problems" in the Rittelian sense when the frame through which they would be rendered public has itself fractured? When the notion of "public" is no longer singular but plural, platformed, and algorithmically sorted? When the act of stating a problem is already a performance of allegiance, rather than an invitation to dialogue?

The erosion of shared sense-making institutions—news media, universities, public service broadcasting, and even language itself—means that the concept of a wicked problem now rests on increasingly unstable foundations. Problems are not merely complex and contested. They are contested *as problems*. The very claim that something is a matter of public concern has itself become partisan, even tribal. What Rittel and Webber assumed to be the battleground of *solutions* has become a battleground of *recognition*. The wickedness is no longer only in the solution space—it is in the ontological status of the problem itself.

Philosopher Charles Taylor (2007) describes the "social imaginary" as the way people imagine their social existence, the narratives and symbols they share. In the current landscape, we may no longer share enough of that imaginary to even begin disagreement productively. Similarly, the philosopher Miranda Fricker (2007) has described *epistemic injustice* as the harm done when people are excluded from the practices of knowledge creation or denied credibility. In a vibocratic context, this becomes systemic: entire communities may not just be disbelieved—they may be rendered *unhearable*.

Sunstein (2009) and Nguyen (2020) have deepened the diagnosis of our epistemic condition by examining the architecture of *epistemic bubbles* and *echo chambers*—two subtly distinct phenomena that increasingly dominate online discourse. In bubbles, alternative views simply do not appear. In chambers, dissent is actively discredited. Both rupture the epistemic preconditions for wickedness. If wicked problems are hard because they require engagement across perspectives, vibocratic problems are harder still because they collapse the precondition of mutual *visibility*.

In this context, we must ask whether "wicked problem" still describes the kinds of societal phenomena we now face, or whether it inadvertently obscures the deeper mutations underway. For wicked problems presume contestable solutions, debated within a shared cognitive space. But what we increasingly encounter are not misaligned goals or tangled causes—they are performative crises, situations in which the act of naming, framing, or diagnosing becomes itself a terrain of political struggle.

If wickedness described problems that were hard to solve because of their systemic complexity and normative plurality, then today's problems may be hard to *recognize* because of their aestheticization, fragmentation, and instability. The

category error would be to treat them as if they still operated within the discursive ecology of wickedness, when in fact they emerge from a different cognitive and communicative substrate entirely.

What that new substrate consists of—and whether it demands a new conceptual category—is the question to which the next section turns.

4. Toward Conceptual Precision: The Edge of Wickedness

"If you can name it, you can tame it." – Toni Morrison

The temptation, when faced with a shifting world, is to stretch existing concepts until they snap. Wicked problems, as defined by Rittel, Webber, and Ackoff, are indeed expansive. They accommodate uncertainty, plurality, interdependence, and normative conflict. They are non-linear, unbounded, and require ongoing negotiation. Their strength lies in their capacity to hold complexity without reduction. But no concept is infinitely elastic. And the time may have come to ask—carefully, rigorously—whether the term "wicked" is beginning to fray at its conceptual seams (Rittel & Webber, 1973; Ackoff, 1974).

To determine this, we must be precise. The question is not whether today's challenges are still complex, nor whether they remain contested or socially constructed. They are. The deeper issue is whether the epistemic and communicative preconditions that made wicked problems diagnosable and discussable still obtain. Wickedness, in its classical formulation, presumes a world in which stakeholders disagree, but can still recognize one another's arguments as arguments. It presumes a discursive ecology in which problems can be formulated, options proposed, trade-offs weighed, and decisions made—however imperfectly, and however entangled with power.

But in the current environment—saturated by algorithmic amplification, fractured into epistemic enclaves, and animated by performative politics—those preconditions are no longer reliable. The difficulty is not only that people disagree about what to do. It is that they disagree, often irreconcilably, about what is happening, about whether something is a problem at all, and about what constitutes legitimate knowledge. The epistemic field itself is unstable. And that instability is not incidental—it is structured into the architecture of the digital public sphere (Zuboff, 2019; Harsin, 2015).

Here, then, is the distinction that must be drawn. Wicked problems are characterized by contested goals and complex systems. But they presume a minimally shared world. The challenges we increasingly face—what we might cautiously begin to call post-wicked—are not only complex and contested, but contested at the level of ontology. They are not just wicked; they are epistemically fugitive. They are no longer problems in the classical sense, but performances, events, atmospheres. They dissolve under scrutiny or metastasize under amplification. That is, attempts to pin down the problem often cause it to morph, fragment, or vanish from view, as attention cycles shift and interpretive coherence breaks down. Such problems do not simply lack solutions—they lack stable referents (Latour, 2004; Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

To speak of a new category, then, is not to abandon wickedness, but to acknowledge its limits. This is not an act of conceptual rupture but of refinement. Rittel and Webber were responding to the limitations of linear planning paradigms in the 1970s. Their brilliance lay in capturing the sociopolitical entanglement of knowledge and action. But the planning environment they addressed—one structured by institutional expertise, print culture, and technocratic legitimacy—has changed. The media ecology has changed. The affective rhythms of public life have changed. The ability to engage in collective sense-making has been eroded by structural transformations that make the idea of "the public" a volatile, mediated fiction (Dean, 2009). The proposal of vibocratic problems does not arise in isolation. It builds upon a lineage of problem typologies that have attempted to grapple with complexity beyond the technical. **Super wicked problems,** for instance, capture problems exacerbated by the very systems meant to solve them, such as climate change (Levin et al., 2012). Similarly, the lens of **post-normal science** emphasizes uncertainty, disputed values, and the breakdown of traditional expertise, advocating for inclusive, reflexive forms of inquiry (Funtowicz & Ravetz, 1993). Yet, vibocratic problems introduce a distinct dimension: epistemic dislocation. They emerge not only from intensified complexity but from the collapse of shared epistemic frames. As Grundmann (2021) notes, in many post-truth arenas, "disagreement no longer revolves around evidence, but around the status of evidence itself"—a condition that demands new conceptual tools and a reconsideration of what counts as inquiry.

What, then, might we call these new conditions?

A name, if it is to be useful, must do more than provoke. It must clarify. It must trace a meaningful conceptual boundary—sufficiently distinct to justify its existence, yet tethered to the lineage from which it departs. "Tangled problems" might appeal, but the term is already implicit in wickedness, which is defined by interdependency and causal ambiguity. "Metastable crises" suggests a dynamic instability, but lacks intuitive resonance. "Performative impasses" draws attention to the theatrical dimension of today's public discourse, but risks sounding temporary or staged.

One tentative candidate—still a sketch, not yet a sculpture—is "vibocratic problems." The term is inelegant, perhaps, but points to the condition Fendt (2025) describes as "truth vibed rather than verified." These are problems governed not by

evidence or deliberation, but by the affective atmospheres that surround them. They circulate as memes, moods, symbolic triggers. Their traction comes not from argument but from aesthetic affinity and emotional synchrony. They are structured not by logic, but by vibocracy—a term that captures the de facto governance of publics by resonance, spectacle, and symbolic immediacy. Vibocratic problems can be tentatively defined by three interlocking characteristics:

- First, they exhibit **epistemic fugacity**—a condition in which knowledge constantly dissolves, mutates, or is refracted through affective filters before it can stabilize as shared understanding. In such environments, truth becomes volatile: not absent, but evasive.
- Second, they are shaped by **affective amplification**—where traction is secured not through deliberation or coherence, but through emotional resonance, symbolic charge, and aesthetic immediacy. This logic privileges what Papacharissi (2015) calls *affective publics*—constellations of individuals connected not by ideology but by shared moods, gestures, or intensities.
- Third, vibocratic problems operate within **platform-contingent sense-making**, where algorithmic infrastructures mediate what counts as salient, what circulates, and what is discarded. Visibility becomes engineered; reality becomes personalized and, often, polarized.

These problems are complex—and they are dynamically unstable, circulating across digital ecologies in ways that resist containment, framing, or consensus. As van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2018) argue, the architecture of platform society now plays a constitutive role in organizing public attention and structuring epistemic possibility. Vibocratic problems thus require not just new labels, but new tools for tracing how problems emerge, mutate, and mobilize publics under these entangled conditions.

To propose such a term is not to solidify it. Naming here is not prescription, but diagnostic inquiry. It is a hypothesis: that the kinds of challenges emerging in a neo-oral, post-truth society are different in kind, not only in degree. They are not simply more wicked, but differently configured. They demand different methods, different metaphors, different epistemological commitments. To make this distinction more tangible, Table 1 offers a comparative overview of wicked and vibocratic problems across a range of dimensions. Drawing on real-world examples—from urban zoning disputes to TikTok-driven outrage cycles—it illustrates how today's most urgent challenges diverge not only in complexity, but in the very logics by which they are framed, felt, and contested. The table situates these differences within recognizable social and political arenas—urban planning, climate policy, misinformation ecosystems—making the abstract argument vivid and grounded. By presenting each criterion alongside concrete contexts, empirical cases, and scholarly references, the table underscores the lived relevance of this shift and invites readers from multiple disciplines to locate their own terrains within the vibocratic condition.

This shift has implications not only for theory, but for practice. If our challenges are now vibocratic—unstable, performative, affect-saturated—then we cannot meet them with tools designed for a discursive world that no longer exists. We cannot solve what cannot be stabilized. We cannot deliberate in the absence of a shared stage. What we can do, perhaps, is find new ways of working inside the noise: improvisational, situated, abductive forms of inquiry that move with, rather than against, the rhythms of a transformed public sphere.

This is not a call for resignation. It is a call for intellectual courage—the kind Rittel and Ackoff modeled in their own time. They did not expand existing paradigms; they named the fact that the ground itself had shifted. That ground is shifting again. The question is whether we are prepared to notice—and whether we are willing, once more, to name it.

Table 1. Empirical comparison of wicked and vibocratic problem dynamics

Criteria	Wicked Problems	Vibocratic Problems	Social/Political Contexts	Examples	References
No clear problem definition	Ambiguous, plural, can be refined through deliberation	Flickering, emotionally charged, often symbolic	Deliberative democracy, policy planning	Deliberations over urban zoning laws in multicultural cities	Rittel & Webber (1973); Buchanan (1992)
No stopping rule	No end-point; solutions are iterative and evolving	Attention and outrage cycles define problem lifespan	Long-term planning, urban development	Ongoing debates about carbon pricing and policy milestones	Rittel & Webber (1973); Ackoff (1974)
Solutions judged better/worse, not true/false	No correct answer, only options of varying quality	Solutions are performances or loyalty tests	Healthcare reform, climate adaptation	Design of inclusive healthcare systems in racially divided regions	Conklin (2005); Schön (1983)
No immediate or ultimate test of a solution	No single benchmark or definitive test	No evaluation beyond virality or resonance	Public health, educational systems	Effectiveness of pandemic responses across jurisdictions	Brown (2009); Reason & Bradbury (2008)
Every solution is a 'one-shot' operation	Every intervention alters the context irreversibly	Each gesture is recontextualized and memetically re-used	Sustainability transitions, city planning	Failure of centralized response plans after Hurricane Katrina	Schön (1983); Ackoff (1974)
No right to be wrong	Practitioners are accountable; no safe trial zone	Actors rewarded for brazenness, not correction	Public budgeting, social equity debates	Public backlash against failed reform efforts in pensions	Fendt (2025); McIntyre (2018)
No enumerable or exhaustively describable solutions	Solution space cannot be mapped in advance	Interventions mutate rapidly and unpredictably	Infrastructure planning, migration systems	Refugee crisis planning at EU borderlands	Benkler et al. (2018); Gillespie (2018)
Each wicked problem is essentially unique	Every context yields a distinct instance	Viral problem-types reappear but resist generalization	Disaster preparedness, environmental justice	COVID-19 and socioeconomic disparities in testing/vaccine rollout	Haraway (1988); Marres (2017)
Every wicked problem is a symptom of another	Problems are embedded in wider systems	Often weaponized as proxies in ideological wars	Poverty, housing, systemic inequality	Homelessness framed through policing, not housing rights	Fricker (2007); Mouffe (2018)
Problem framing depends on worldview	Stakeholder beliefs shape framing and approach	Framing tied to affective alignment, not deliberation	Transitional justice, cultural diversity	School curricula fights in culturally split regions	Papacharissi (2015); Ong (1982)
Problem mutability	Moderate; changeable, but stable enough to study	High; forms evolve in days or hours	Platform politics, algorithmic governance	AI-generated outrage cycles (e.g., TikTok “15-Minute City” backlash)	Fendt (2025); Marres (2017)
Testability of claims	Difficult, but generally possible with effort	Contested; testability itself politicized or irrelevant	Climate denialism, vaccine skepticism	Hashtag disinformation campaigns during extreme weather events	McIntyre (2018); Lewandowsky et al. (2020)
Nature of public discourse	Rhetorical, agonistic, but still semi-coherent	Tribal, memetic, emotional, polarized	Meme warfare, online mobilizations	#EndSARS and #FreedomConvoy protests	Papacharissi (2025); Abidin (2021)
Dominant media ecology	Print and broadcast; slow, deliberative, curated	Platform-based, algorithmic, meme-driven	TikTok geopolitics, Telegram disinformation	Russian deepfake diplomacy targeting EU elections	Postman (1985); Zuboff (2019)
Role of experts	Mediating; sometimes challenged, still legitimate	Displaced or aestheticized; experts reframed as elites	Post-truth populism, climate silencing	Modi's livestreamed nationalism; Bolsonaro's TikTok martyrdom	Ginsburg & Huq (2018); Simpson (2017)
Epistemic coherence	Partial but accessible through situated knowledge	Fragmented; coherence is tribal, not epistemic	Digital tribalism, conspiracy belief systems	Anti-vax TikTok channels as epistemic communities	Papacharissi (2025); Hahl et al. (2018)
Researcher stance	Reflective practitioner, systemic co-inquirer	Embedded ethnographer, sense-maker, critical participant	Participatory action research, activist scholarship	Hybrid activist-academic climate communication labs	Van de Ven & Johnson (2006); Reason & Bradbury (2008)
Affected social/political contexts	Urban planning, environmental policy, public health	Digital populism, identity wars, platform extremism	Media ecosystems, protest movements	Pro-Palestinian and anti-woke meme alignments online	Benkler et al. (2018); Fendt (2025)

5. Implications for Inquiry—Researching in the Vibocratic Age

"The abyss is not something you face. It's something you enter."

— *Jean-Luc Godard*, paraphrased from interviews

To name a new category of societal challenge is more than a semantic act. It entails consequences for knowledge, for method, and for the ethical posture of research itself. If we are now contending not only with wicked problems but with something more volatile—vibocratic problems, performative and epistemically fugitive—then our approaches must be recalibrated. The world has shifted. Inquiry must follow.

The first shift concerns truth. The post-truth condition is often misunderstood as a loss of truth or a surrender to relativism. But what is at stake is more subtle—and more insidious. In vibocratic contexts, truth does not disappear; it is displaced. It no longer functions as the terminus of argument but as an ambient signal, a quality sensed rather than demonstrated, performed rather than verified. Facts, in this condition, do not persuade; they resonate—or they do not. Their status is determined not by coherence or correspondence but by affective synchrony with the surrounding symbolic atmosphere (Durnová, 2019).

This does not mean that truth no longer matters. It means that the conditions under which it can matter have changed. And to recognize this is not a capitulation—it is the beginning of epistemic repair. Repair does not begin by reasserting facts more loudly. It begins by tracing why facts fail and how they are replaced by affective proxies, symbolic cues, or narrative allegiance. In this way, the scholar becomes not the last defender of objectivity but the cartographer of its erosion—and perhaps, of its slow reassembly (Fuller, 2018).

Second, time is fractured. Wicked problems evolve; vibocratic problems erupt. Their half-life is measured in trends, not policy cycles. The researcher must become agile—not reactive, but present. Long-form inquiry remains necessary but must now be coupled with fast reflexive sense-making: tracking memetic shifts, monitoring algorithmic amplification, mapping how meaning mutates under the velocity of virality. This is not about speed for its own sake. It is about attunement: the capacity to perceive emergent dynamics before they harden into dogma.

Philosophers like Walter Benjamin have long argued that truth is not timeless but temporal—a flash of recognition in the "now of knowability" (Benjamin, 1927/1996). In the vibocratic age, this temporality is compressed. The window for epistemic intervention narrows. Researchers must learn to operate within these fleeting moments, capturing the transient configurations of meaning before they dissipate.

Third, methods must evolve. Observation at a distance no longer suffices. The epistemic field itself is unstable. To research vibocratic phenomena is to inhabit them—to navigate ambiguity alongside those who live it, to co-construct frames without presuming resolution. This is where approaches like Participatory Action Research (Reason & Bradbury, 2008) and Design Thinking Method (Fendt, 2025) prove vital. These are not simply methodological options; they are responses to the collapse of externality.

Design Thinking Method, in particular, offers a structured yet generative mode of inquiry: empathetic, abductive, iterative, and pragmatically situated. It recognizes that problems are co-constructed with stakeholders, that hypotheses must emerge from lived context, and that research outputs can be prototypes rather than static claims. Crucially, DTM does not abandon rigor—it reconfigures it. By embedding theory in iterative experimentation and grounded stakeholder engagement, it creates knowledge that is both valid and alive. Especially in contexts of political complexity and epistemic volatility, such approaches do not supplement conventional methods—they supersede them in utility.

Finally, there is the question of stance. Vibocratic problems are not solved. They are survived, navigated, and occasionally re-figured. In this light, the scholar's task is less that of analyst and more that of companion provocateur—a reflective, humble participant in knowledge systems that no longer promise coherence. This is not to endorse fatalism. It is to practice a form of intellectual courage: to ask not only "what is the problem," but "what must I become to engage it?"

This courage is quiet, unglamorous, and relentless. It resists the seduction of explanatory closure. It holds space for uncertainty without surrendering to it. It acknowledges that in the vibocratic condition, no truth is self-evident, no method neutral, no problem stable. And yet it persists—in inquiry, in description, in slow, collaborative rebuilding of sense.

This reconfiguration of problems also reshapes the terrain of inquiry. Scholars interested in working inside the epistemic volatility of the vibocratic age might want to explore sites where meaning is unstable, affectively charged, and socially consequential. Emerging research contexts could include:

1. **Algorithmically-mediated protest movements:** Study the symbolic choreography of online-fueled protests—whether anti-lockdown, pro-democracy, or far-right insurgencies—where coherence is less important than memetic resonance. The researcher becomes a decoder of affective semiotics, tracking how grievances are assembled into aesthetic solidarity. What emerges is not just resistance, but a politics of performance.

2. **Localized climate politics in contested communities**: Work in towns or regions where climate science is mistrusted, reframed as elite ideology, or actively politicized. Engage with farmers, city councils, or citizen groups navigating wildfires, droughts, or flooding—while denying or deflecting their structural causes. Understanding these paradoxes could unlock new forms of climate communication and co-created intervention.
3. **Platform-native misinformation ecologies**: Immerse in digital subcultures—Telegram channels, TikTok loops, YouTube rabbit holes—where misinformation is not passively consumed but actively styled, iterated, and socially bonded. Research here involves following narratives across platforms, understanding their emotional payload, and mapping their epistemic logic. The aim is not to fact-check, but to grasp how mistrust becomes a worldview.
4. **The epistemic lives of youth in online publics**: Investigate how young people build political and moral understanding in meme-heavy, irony-laden, remix cultures. Fieldwork might involve digital ethnography in gaming servers, fandom spaces, or group chats where sincerity and satire blur. These spaces often incubate future publics—shaping how reality is negotiated before formal adulthood.
5. **Counter-publics in fragile or declining democracies**: Study how political discourse mutates when deliberation gives way to orchestrated theatricality, ambient propaganda, and state-aestheticized truth. Researchers might work alongside local journalists, civil society actors, or online creators resisting narrative capture. What is at stake is not simply democratic erosion, but the disappearance of shared reality.
6. **AI-mediated discourse environments**: Explore how meaning-making changes when authorship is opaque, messages are auto-generated, and agency is distributed. Situate yourself within emerging contexts like GPT-powered classrooms, synthetic influencers, or political bots. The challenge is not only ethical but ontological: What does "discourse" mean when no human stands behind the words?

These are not speculative spaces—they are the present's new epistemic frontlines. Researching them may require immersion, humility, ethical reflexivity, and methodological experimentation. But the stakes are real: to understand how knowledge, belonging, and politics are being reassembled in real time.

Perhaps this is what research now demands: not mastery, but co-presence. A willingness to listen beneath the noise, to make knowledge with others who do not share our terms, and to offer language—not as verdict, but as invitation. To speak, not from above the fray, but from within the tangled, flickering, sometimes maddening terrain of shared life.

And perhaps this is how the concept of problem itself might be redeemed—not as a call for solution, but as a call for response. If Table 1 grounds the distinction in the messiness of lived examples, Table 2 pulls the lens back**.** It offers a distilled comparison across key dimensions—how problems behave, how meaning circulates, what counts as knowledge—and draws out the shifting implications for inquiry itself. This table is not an appendix; it is a diagnostic tool. It responds to the reviewer's call for precision by clarifying what is at stake when we move from wickedness to vibocracy: not just a different kind of problem, but a different kind of epistemic terrain—one that demands new ways of noticing, naming, and navigating.

Table 2. Conceptual Distinctions and Research Implications across Key Dimensions

Dimension	Definition	Wicked Problems	Vibocratic Problems	Key Source	Implication for Inquiry
Problem Ontology	What kind of thing is a "problem"?	Problems are complex, plural, and socially constructed	Problems are unstable, symbolic, and performative	Rittel & Webber (1973); Latour (2004)	Researchers must account for the shifting ontological status of problems—problems may not 'hold still' long enough to be studied.
Problem Definition	How is a problem recognized or formulated?	Ambiguously defined but open to stakeholder negotiation	Evoked through emotion, identity, and aesthetic resonance	Buchanan (1992); Fendt (2025)	Problem recognition itself becomes a political and affective act; framing must be traced ethnographically.
Communication Logic	How is meaning negotiated?	Agonistic, rhetorical, aims for mutual intelligibility	Affective, memetic, and tribal	Ong (1982); Papacharissi (2015)	Inquiry must include memetic and emotional pathways; discourse analysis alone may miss underlying sense-making.
Knowledge Basis	What counts as valid knowledge?	Situated, provisional, dialogical	Contested, ambient, refracted through virality	Haraway (1988); Durnová (2019)	Researchers must work with volatile, plural, and platform-dependent epistemic environments.
Solution Evaluation	How are interventions judged?	Better or worse, context-sensitive, ethically debated	Based on virality, loyalty, or emotional traction	Schön (1983); Marres (2017)	Evaluation must consider affective resonance and symbolic uptake, not just technical efficacy.
Temporality	How does the problem evolve over time?	Iterative, long-term, slowly changing systems	Rapid, ephemeral, shaped by attention cycles	Ackoff (1974); Zuboff (2019)	Researchers need methods attuned to fast-shifting, non-linear, media-responsive problem dynamics.
Actor Accountability	How are actions interpreted?	Practitioners are held responsible for impact	Actors are rewarded for performance, not correction	McIntyre (2018); Fendt (2025)	Inquiry must account for performativity and symbolic reward systems, not just institutional accountability.
Media Ecology	What infrastructure mediates discourse?	Print, expert-driven, slow and curated	Platform-based, algorithmic, fast and affective	Postman (1985); van Dijck et al. (2018)	Must include platform ethnography and attention to algorithmic shaping of salience.
Role of Experts	Who produces and validates knowledge?	Still credible, though contested	Displaced, aestheticized, or recoded as elite bias	Ginsburg & Huq (2018); Grundmann (2021)	Researchers must engage with the symbolic status of expertise, not presume its authority.
Epistemic Stability	Can coherence be achieved?	Partial coherence through reflective processes	Fragmentation dominates; coherence is tribal	Nguyen (2020); Hahl et al. (2020)	Inquiry must be reflexive, tracking epistemic ruptures and constructing coherence experimentally.
Researcher Stance	How does the researcher relate to the problem?	Reflective practitioner, co-inquirer	Embedded participant, signal-tracker, critical ethnographer	Reason & Bradbury (2008); Fendt (2025)	Requires participatory, flexible, and abductive methods that foreground presence and iteration.

6. In Lieu of Conclusion

"You're already in it. Stop pretending you're not."

– *Laurie Anderson*, from *Home of the Brave* (1986)

The concept of wicked problems has served us well. It gave form to the kinds of challenges that defied linear thinking—those entangled with values, institutions, and deep societal disagreement. But the conditions under which that concept was born have changed. The public sphere has fragmented. Knowledge circulates through emotion, not just logic. Problems now behave differently. They mutate, perform, and often evade the frameworks we bring to them.

This paper has attempted to articulate the contours of that shift. Not to discard what came before, but to test whether our current tools remain adequate to the realities we face. Some challenges today resist not only solutions, but legibility. They do not sit still long enough to be diagnosed. They flicker, accelerate, aestheticize themselves, and slip between epistemic cracks.

I have proposed one possible label—*vibocratic problems*—not as dogma, but as an invitation. If the name does not hold, so be it. But the pattern it attempts to name is, I believe, already with us.

This is not a rejection of truth. It is a call to examine how truth now moves—how it is sensed, signaled, disrupted, and sometimes reconstituted. The task before us is not simply to defend knowledge, but to understand the architectures in which it is made and unmade. We cannot continue as if the conditions of inquiry have not changed.

This paper proposes a conceptual distinction between wicked and vibocratic problems; it has mapped the shifting epistemic and communicative conditions that make such a distinction necessary; and it has argued for situated, abductive, and participatory forms of inquiry as responses adequate to this new terrain. I do not claim to have mapped this terrain fully. But I do believe that the terrain has changed, and that our concepts, methods, and scholarly responsibilities must move with it. Not because we are trend-chasing, but because we are trying—seriously—to name the world as it is.

What comes next must be collaborative, experimental, and methodologically diverse. But it must also be intellectually brave. Not louder, not purer—but clearer. And willing to risk language where silence has become complicity.

We are not outside these dynamics. None of us are. But perhaps that is precisely what gives us the right to speak.

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