

Three Earths: A way of understanding our present moment

Lorella Praeli and Ai-jen Poo

We are at an inflection point in history, one that feels both familiar and unprecedented. Democratic institutions—the ones that, for decades, we were told would outlast any one administration or political cycle—are unraveling. Not all at once, and not always visibly. But slowly and methodically, they are being hollowed out from within. The scaffolding is still there—elections are held, courts still issue rulings, the press still publishes, but the substance, the norms, and the accountability, are all eroding. And perhaps most alarmingly, it's happening in ways that aren't just predictable—they're textbook.

We've seen this before, in other countries and other contexts. Start with delegitimizing and defunding universities, intimidating law firms, and demonizing journalists. Undermine the courts. Manufacture a climate of fear where dissent isn't just frowned upon—it's criminalized. Open defiance of court orders. Deportations without due process. The quintessentially American work to protect the First Amendment and achieve equal justice is characterized as “un-American.”

These aren't one-offs. They are strategic choices. They are out of a playbook to undermine democracy and consolidate authoritarian power. And the people calling the plays are betting that no one will stop them.

At the same time, our collective ability to understand what's happening is coming apart. The world's most powerful companies are laser focused on competing for every second of our attention, distorting our reality with frantic, always-on churn that has become a kind of brain fog machine. It socializes misinformation, fuels polarization, and erodes our shared reality. And that breakdown in consensus isn't just a byproduct—it's a feature. It serves those in power, because if we can't agree on what's real, we can't organize a response.

So here we are facing a dual crisis. The advance of authoritarianism on one side and the capture and shattering of the public's attention and sense of shared reality on the other. Each one compounds the other. And together, they present the defining challenge of our time. The stakes are existential—not just for democracy, but for the economy, the climate, and our basic ability to live together as people of one nation, with a voice and access to justice. We cannot navigate this moment by clinging to the old rules or assuming guardrails will hold. They won't. We must understand how power is operating in our world now and rethink our strategies and relationships to contend for the future, a future worth fighting for.

It's all quite disorienting – to figure out what's new and what's not, how to show up amidst it all, knowing what's at stake. A framework to help us understand the multiple paradigms of reality we must navigate, is what we call the “Three Earths.” We are living in three distinct realities or paradigms at once – what we'll call “Earths.”

- Earth One is the world of liberal representative democracy where institutions, however imperfect, function and serve the public. And there are checks and balances, known channels of accountability, to reform systems, enact change, receive and communicate information and make progress.
- Earth Two is the world where those very institutions - from the courts to government agencies - are actively being dismantled and defunded, the information landscape is fractured, our attention is dominated by those in power, due process is disappearing, the work of making progress is being called “un-American” and civil society is collapsing under pressure to conform to this new reality.
- And Earth Three is the world after Earth Two, a place that we must fight for and build in our values. We face major challenges and powerful forces in that fight– from Artificial Intelligence to climate and demographic change. What happens in Earth Three is also a question for today. Will it be a future that serves the needs and aspirations for opportunity, prosperity, and belonging for all of us, or will power be further concentrated?

These Earths are not separate realms; they coexist, and the choices we make in each will determine which future we will inherit and inhabit. Navigating these three Earths is not just a matter of adapting to the moment—it will shape the course of history.

Earth One: the fading world of liberal democracy

Earth One is the world we have always known—the systems of liberal democracy, with functioning elections, free media, and relatively open discourse. This was the world where through organizing, voting, protesting, lobbying, and pushing for reform, we could move the arc of history toward justice. It was the world where the tools we use to make progress, however imperfect and often biased, could improve systems and make life better. We had agency and the freedom to wield it for change.

But Earth One is crumbling. The systems that we thought were stable, the mechanisms we relied on for change, are increasingly fragile. People still hold onto the belief that the pendulum will swing back—that the system will correct itself in time. But this time is different. We need to face the fact that Earth One's assumptions no longer hold. The political structures that were once seen as reliable and protective are no longer functioning or at our disposal as they once were. The instability is here, and it's accelerating.

In many places in the US, Earth One still lives, and we must continue to use the levers we have when we have access to them. Breathing life into a liberal democracy where it still exists is important and we can't stop trying to make progress and help people see the benefits of democracy at work. But we also need to reckon with the fact that a new reality – Earth Two – is taking hold in real time.

Earth Two: the new reality of crisis, authoritarianism, and attentional dominance

Earth Two is our new world. In this world, the democratic norms and institutions that once served to hold power in check, to guarantee accountability, and ensure due process, are being attacked and dismantled right before our eyes. For some communities, those institutions were always limited. But now, they're under assault on a broader scale, threatening to undermine access to justice and democracy for all of us, not just those living at the margins of society.

Civil society is under direct attack – journalists, art institutions, universities, law firms and NGOs are all facing direct attack from the current Administration. Freedom of speech is reserved for those who agree with the Administration, and the very work of improving American democracy by fighting for justice and fairness is being deemed “un-American.” People are being disappeared from our communities – our caregivers, students, and people who are exercising their First Amendment rights to disagree with the Administration's policies.

This is not a normal pendulum swing. This is a power grab that could take a generation or more to unravel if we don't come together to stop it. But here's the kicker: the distortion of information in our new attention economy makes it incredibly hard to come together. Authoritarians have figured out how to manipulate the attention economy, flood the media landscape with a constant stream of propaganda and lies. As Steve Bannon said, they're “flooding the zone with shit.” And it works. In the chaos, it's hard to even communicate, let alone build the kind of trust and relationships we must, to organize or persuade.

As Erica Chenoweth's research shows, real change against entrenched powers requires mass popular engagement— 3.5% of the population actively resisting. That's 11.5 million people. That's how entrenched power works. It doesn't budge unless it's forced. More than protests; we need unprecedented numbers of people taking more actions at every level of society than we've seen in our lifetimes. This is possible, but to bring the numbers of people we need together and into motion, we'll need a new vision and story about the future.

Earth Three: building the future we want

We can't just fight on Earth Two. We must also be building Earth Three—the world we want to emerge. Earth Three isn't just a reaction to Earth Two; it's a new vision. It is not rooted in nostalgia. It is not a restoration of what was. It's a vision that is rooted in the real experiences and aspirations of the American people for the future.

Earth Three could be multiracial, egalitarian, participatory. A society built on collective care, not private hoarding; on worker dignity, not elite domination. A democracy where wealth doesn't determine who gets heard and where justice isn't just something we talk about but something we live. And it's a future in which the information and attention environment contributes to our individual and collective flourishing—rather than fueling our fragmentation or domination.

But here's the hard truth: we can't get to Earth Three without surviving and learning what it takes to be powerful in Earth Two. If we don't build the kind of courage, movements, and coalitions necessary in this moment, the story of the future will be written for us. We may just be stuck on Earth Two for a long, long time.

That means laying the groundwork for the future now. In the streets. In our workplaces. In legislatures at every level. In neighborhoods and in the culture. In our communities online and in person. The question is no longer whether we engage. But rather, how and how often, and in what context. The time to answer that question is now.