

Green Paper 07 — The Civic Nervous System

Green Papers: Notes Toward Planetary Guardianship

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Author's note — AI co-creation. These papers are working notes authored by Lars A. Engberg. They were drafted and edited in conversation with an AI language model (*GPT-5 Thinking mini*). The AI assisted with phrasing, organization, and initial drafting; the author curated, edited, and is fully responsible for substantive claims, omissions, and interpretations. Where passages were substantially shaped by the AI, this is indicated in the editorial log. The work is offered as field notes and an experiment in collaborative composition rather than a finished, peer-reviewed product.

Abstract

Democracies behave like nervous systems: they sense, amplify, dampen, and adapt. When those sensing and regulatory capacities fail, civic life becomes reactive and prone to polarization. The metaphor directs attention to rhythms, feedback, and repair.

1. Sensing and amplification

Public institutions and media act as sensors. They must detect slow changes and acute events. Sensory overload occurs when every signal is treated as an emergency—amplifying noise and eroding deliberation.

2. Rhythms and feedback loops

Healthy civic systems have rhythms. Designing feedback loops that are appropriately paced helps prevent oscillation between complacency and panic.

3. Attention infrastructure

Platforms, institutions, and public rituals distribute attention. Investment in attention infrastructure means designing channels that privilege evidence, mitigate manipulative incentives, and sustain collective attention on long-term matters.

4. Legitimacy, overload, and participation

Participation is meaningful only when institutions can absorb and respond to inputs. Overloading institutions manufactures cynicism. Legitimacy comes from reliable responsiveness, not empty consultation.

5. Repair mechanisms

Systems will fracture. Civic repair is the set of practices that restore trust and recalibrate relationships—public inquiries, mediated processes, and institutional humility. Repair should be routine and funded, not exceptional.

6. Practical implications

1. Design distinct channels for urgent signals and for slow deliberation.
2. Build institutional capacity for repair: standing mediation bodies, funded civic repair teams.
3. Measure legitimacy not only by participation rates but by absorptive capacity and follow-through.
4. Protect civic rhythms: set periods for deep listening separate from news cycles.
5. Encourage local institutions as distributed sensors and buffers for national systems.

Methods / Editorial note

These Green Papers are written as field notes and working reflections. The drafting process combined (1) authorial writing and revision, (2) iterative prompts to an AI language model for drafting and editing, and (3) conventional editorial revision. Key practices:

- **AI assistance:** The AI produced early drafts and suggested language; the author reviewed and revised every paragraph.
- **Sourcing:** The papers use a “working bibliography” as orientation rather than a formal literature review. Citations are selective; empirical claims should be verified before formal use.
- **Verification:** The author is responsible for verification of cited sources and accepts responsibility for errors. Prior to academic submission, each reference and empirical claim should be independently checked and expanded.
- **Versioning:** Each paper carries a version line (v0.1). Substantial revisions will be tracked in a change log at Planetary Guardians / Spiralweb.

Closing questions

- How do we design attention economies that reward stewardship rather than outrage?
- What institutional forms best absorb citizen input without collapsing under volume?
- Which rituals or practices can slow civic life without silencing urgent voices?
- How to institutionalize repair so it becomes ordinary rather than exceptional?
- What metrics track a civic system’s nervous health?

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