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THE RESURGENCE OF THE SPOKEN WORD: FORENSIC ORALITY AND THE CRISIS OF AUTHENTICITY IN THE AGE OF SYNTHETIC MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

The rapid proliferation of synthetic media technologies, including deepfakes, AI-generated voices, virtual avatars, and algorithmically fabricated audiovisual content, has intensified a global crisis of authenticity and epistemic trust. As artificial intelligence increasingly blurs distinctions between the real and the simulated, conventional mechanisms for verifying truth and credibility are becoming less reliable. This article argues that forensic orality offers a culturally grounded response to this crisis by foregrounding embodied speech, dialogic interaction, communal witnessing, performative narration, and oral responsiveness as mechanisms of epistemic verification. Drawing on theories of orality, African oral epistemologies, forensic humanities, media studies, AI ethics, and decolonial thought, the study conceptualises forensic orality as a form of epistemic resistance to synthetic simulation. It demonstrates that African oral traditions historically developed sophisticated systems of truth validation grounded in public performance, memory, rhetorical competence, and communal accountability, while contemporary forms of digital orality continue to foreground human-centred modes of trust and verification. Through a qualitative, conceptual, and interdisciplinary approach, the article contributes to debates on AI ethics, digital trust, human-centred AI, media forensics, and decolonial epistemology by repositioning the spoken word as a critical resource for authenticity and credibility in an increasingly synthetic communication environment.

Keywords: Forensic orality, Synthetic media, Deepfakes, African oral epistemologies, Epistemic authenticity, AI ethics.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of synthetic media technologies has transformed contemporary communication environments and intensified concerns about authenticity, trust, and epistemological verification. Advances in generative artificial intelligence (AI), including deepfakes, voice cloning, synthetic avatars, and AI-generated audiovisual content, have enabled the production of highly convincing simulations that can imitate human speech, appearance, and emotional expression (Chesney & Citron, 2019; Westerlund, 2019). As these technologies become increasingly sophisticated, traditional assumptions regarding the reliability of visual and auditory evidence are being fundamentally challenged.

The implications extend beyond technological innovation. Synthetic media has generated growing concerns regarding misinformation, political manipulation, digital fraud, and the erosion of public trust in communication systems (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020). Existing responses have largely focused on technical detection mechanisms, cybersecurity interventions, regulatory frameworks, and digital forensics (Kietzmann et al., 2020). While these approaches remain important, they often treat authenticity primarily

as a technological problem rather than an epistemological one. Consequently, relatively little attention has been devoted to culturally grounded mechanisms through which societies historically established credibility, validated testimony, and negotiated truth.

This omission is particularly significant when viewed through the lens of oral traditions. Across many African and Indigenous societies, oral performance historically functioned as more than a mode of communication; it served as a mechanism for preserving memory, validating authority, resolving disputes, and establishing communal credibility. Oral epistemologies developed sophisticated systems of truth verification grounded in public performance, dialogic engagement, rhetorical competence, and communal accountability (Ong, 1982; Finnegan, 2012). These traditions offer valuable insights into contemporary debates on authenticity because they foreground human interaction and social validation rather than technological verification alone.

This article argues that forensic orality provides an important framework for understanding authenticity in the age of synthetic media. Building on recent work by Sone (2026), forensic orality is conceptualised as the use of oral performance, testimony, communal witnessing, storytelling, and dialogic interrogation as mechanisms of epistemological verification. Rather than viewing African oral traditions as residual cultural practices, the article positions them as living intellectual resources capable of contributing to contemporary debates on AI ethics, digital trust, and synthetic communication.

The article pursues three objectives. First, it examines how synthetic media contributes to a crisis of authenticity and epistemic trust. Second, it develops forensic orality as a conceptual framework for understanding oral verification and performative credibility. Third, it explores the relevance of African oral epistemologies for contemporary discussions of authenticity in digitally mediated environments. The central argument is that the resurgence of the spoken word reflects not nostalgia for pre-digital communication but the continuing importance of human-centred forms of verification in an era increasingly characterised by algorithmic simulation.

Literature Review

The rapid growth of synthetic media technologies has generated significant scholarly interest across media studies, artificial intelligence, communication studies, and digital ethics. Existing research has largely focused on the technological, legal, and regulatory challenges posed by deepfakes, AI-generated content, and digital misinformation. Compared with oral epistemologies and culturally grounded mechanisms of authenticity verification, less attention has been devoted to them. This review examines scholarship on synthetic media, orality, African oral epistemologies, and forensic humanities to situate forensic orality within contemporary debates on authenticity, trust, and epistemological verification in the digital age.

Synthetic Media and Authenticity

The emergence of synthetic media has generated extensive scholarship across communication studies, media studies, artificial intelligence, and digital ethics. Deepfakes, AI-generated voices, and synthetic audiovisual content challenge conventional assumptions about evidence, identity, and authenticity by making it increasingly difficult to distinguish genuine from fabricated representations (Chesney & Citron, 2019; Westerlund, 2019). Scholars argue that these developments contribute to broader crises of misinformation, trust, and epistemological uncertainty within digital environments (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020). Existing research has therefore focused primarily on technological detection systems, digital forensics, platform regulation, and cybersecurity responses (Kietzmann et al., 2020).

Beyond concerns about misinformation and media manipulation, synthetic media has sparked significant debate within the broader field of AI ethics. Scholars increasingly argue that deepfakes represent not merely a technological challenge but a fundamental ethical concern involving trust, accountability, transparency, and epistemic justice. Floridi and Cows (2019) contend that the rapid expansion of artificial intelligence requires ethical frameworks capable of safeguarding human autonomy, explicability, and social trust. Similarly, Jobin, Ienca, and Vayena (2019) identify transparency, accountability, and trustworthiness as among the most widely shared ethical principles guiding contemporary AI governance.

Recent scholarship has further highlighted the relationship between synthetic media and the broader phenomenon of truth decay. Bennett and Livingston (2018) argue that digital communication environments increasingly facilitate the circulation of disinformation through networked platforms where algorithmic amplification often privileges emotional engagement over factual accuracy. The challenge posed by deepfakes, therefore, extends beyond isolated instances of deception to encompass wider transformations in the production and circulation of knowledge. As Couldry and Mejias (2019) observe, contemporary digital infrastructures increasingly shape not only what individuals know but also how knowledge itself is produced, distributed, and legitimised.

Scholars of digital trust similarly emphasise that trust constitutes a fragile social resource that cannot be sustained through technological innovation alone. O'Neill (2022) argues that trustworthiness depends upon accountability, reliability, and ethical responsibility rather than merely the availability of information. Within synthetic media environments, the proliferation of highly realistic simulations threatens these foundations by introducing uncertainty into communication and verification processes. Consequently, debates surrounding deepfakes increasingly intersect with broader concerns regarding democratic governance, public trust, and the future of credible communication in digitally mediated societies (Paris & Donovan, 2019).

The emergence of generative AI systems has intensified these concerns. Large language models and multimodal AI systems can now produce text, speech, images, and video that closely resemble human-generated content. Bender et al. (2021) caution that such systems may create an illusion of understanding while lacking genuine comprehension, thereby complicating assumptions about authenticity and communicative intent. These developments suggest that contemporary crises of authenticity cannot be addressed solely through technical solutions but require deeper engagement with the social, cultural, and epistemological dimensions of trust.

While this literature provides important insights into the mechanics of synthetic deception, it remains largely technological in orientation. Relatively little attention has been devoted to the cultural and epistemological dimensions of authenticity or to alternative systems of truth verification developed outside contemporary digital infrastructures.

Orality and Epistemological Verification

Scholarship on orality offers a useful counterpoint to technologically driven understandings of authenticity. Ong (1982) argues that oral cultures organise knowledge through memory, participation, performance, and social interaction rather than through textual permanence. Similarly, Finnegan (2012) demonstrates that oral traditions constitute sophisticated systems of knowledge production governed by established conventions of narration, performance, and communal validation.

A key insight emerging from this scholarship is that credibility in oral cultures is often established through social processes rather than documentary evidence alone. Knowledge acquires legitimacy through public

performance, collective memory, and communal recognition. These perspectives are particularly relevant to contemporary debates on synthetic media because they foreground authenticity as a social and performative process rather than a purely technological one.

An emerging body of scholarship on human-centred AI offers additional insights relevant to the present study. Human-centred approaches emphasise that technological systems should remain aligned with human values, social wellbeing, and meaningful human oversight rather than pursuing automation as an end in itself (Floridi, 2023). Within this perspective, trust is understood not merely as a technical attribute of systems but as a relational phenomenon grounded in social interaction, accountability, and shared understanding.

The significance of this literature lies in its recognition that human judgement remains indispensable in contexts involving uncertainty, ethics, and credibility. Crawford (2021) argues that artificial intelligence systems are embedded within broader social and political structures and should therefore be evaluated not only in terms of computational efficiency but also in relation to their social consequences. Similarly, Birhane (2021) highlights the importance of incorporating diverse epistemologies and cultural perspectives into AI governance frameworks to avoid reproducing epistemic exclusion.

These debates resonate strongly with scholarship on orality. Whereas many AI systems seek to automate processes of communication and information verification, oral epistemologies emphasise dialogue, participation, communal witnessing, and relational accountability. The convergence between human-centred AI and oral traditions is therefore significant because both foreground the importance of human agency in the production and evaluation of knowledge. From this perspective, forensic orality may be understood as a culturally grounded human-centred response to the epistemological uncertainties generated by synthetic media and algorithmic communication systems.

African Oral Epistemologies and Forensic Authenticity

African oral traditions provide particularly rich examples of performative systems of epistemological verification. Across many African societies, oral performance historically functioned as a mechanism for preserving historical memory, validating authority, resolving disputes, and maintaining communal accountability (Finnegan, 2012; Mbiti, 1990; Wiredu, 1996). Griots, praise poets, oral historians, and community elders occupied recognised positions as custodians of historical knowledge and social legitimacy.

Recent scholarship on forensic orality extends these discussions by demonstrating how oral performance serves as a mechanism for credibility and truth validation in legal and social contexts (Sone, 2026). Through testimony, storytelling, genealogical narration, communal witnessing, and dialogic engagement, oral traditions developed structured practices for assessing authenticity and accountability. These traditions provide important conceptual resources for contemporary discussions of digital trust because they emphasise human interaction and social verification rather than technological authentication alone.

Although substantial scholarship exists on synthetic media, AI ethics, and digital misinformation, limited attention has been devoted to the relationship between synthetic media and oral epistemologies. Research on deepfakes and AI-generated content largely focuses on technological solutions, while studies of orality have primarily concentrated on literature, folklore, performance, and memory. Consequently, little scholarship examines how oral traditions may contribute to contemporary debates on authenticity, trust, and epistemological verification in digitally mediated environments.

This article addresses that gap by bringing together synthetic media studies, African oral epistemologies, forensic humanities, and decolonial thought to conceptualise forensic orality as a culturally grounded response to the crisis of authenticity in the age of synthetic media.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This study draws theoretically from orality studies, African epistemologies, forensic humanities, and decolonial theory to conceptualise forensic orality as a mechanism of epistemic verification in the age of synthetic media. The framework positions oral performance not merely as cultural expression but as an embodied practice of truth-making grounded in dialogic interaction, communal witnessing, rhetorical immediacy, and performative accountability. In a digital era increasingly characterised by synthetic simulation and algorithmic fabrication, these theoretical perspectives provide important intellectual resources for rethinking authenticity, credibility, and epistemological trust.

Forensic Orality

The concept of forensic orality emerges from the intersection of oral traditions, juridical discourse, and epistemological verification. Sone (2026) defines forensic orality as the structured deployment of oral performance, testimony, storytelling, communal witnessing, genealogical narration, and dialogic interaction as mechanisms for establishing credibility and legitimising truth within social and legal contexts. Unlike purely textual approaches to evidence, forensic orality foregrounds embodied communication, rhetorical responsiveness, memory, spontaneity, and performative immediacy as markers of authenticity. This conceptualisation is particularly significant in the age of synthetic media because contemporary AI systems increasingly simulate textual and audiovisual authenticity while lacking genuine embodied consciousness and dialogic responsiveness. Deepfakes and synthetic speech technologies may reproduce voice patterns and visual appearance, yet they struggle to replicate the complex spontaneity, rhetorical adaptability, emotional reflexivity, and contextual responsiveness embedded within live oral interaction. Forensic orality, therefore, functions as a form of epistemic verification grounded not solely in informational content but in performative presence and dialogic engagement.

The theoretical significance of forensic orality lies in its repositioning of speech as evidence. Within oral traditions, authenticity is not merely asserted but performed publicly through communal interrogation, responsiveness, narrative coherence, and social accountability. Speech consequently becomes an embodied epistemic act through which truth is negotiated, contested, and validated. In contexts increasingly dominated by synthetic communication technologies, forensic orality offers an important counterpoint to algorithmic simulation, foregrounding human presence as a critical dimension of authenticity.

Orality and Epistemology

The study further draws on theories of orality to examine speech as a performative mode of knowledge production. Ong (1982) argues that oral cultures organise thought through relationality, participation, repetition, memory, and communal interaction rather than through detached textual abstraction. In oral epistemologies, knowledge does not exist as static documentation but as living discourse sustained through performance and social participation. Speech, therefore, acquires epistemic authority through immediacy, rhetorical force, and communal recognition.

Finnegan (2012) similarly demonstrates that oral traditions operate through sophisticated systems of memory, performance, rhythm, and narrative structure. Oral discourse is therefore not inferior to textuality but represents an alternative epistemological mode grounded in embodied communication and

performative interaction. This insight is crucial for understanding why oral performance may serve as a mechanism for authenticity verification in the digital age. While synthetic media increasingly disembodies communication through algorithmic simulation, oral interaction retains dimensions of spontaneity, emotional immediacy, hesitation, reflexivity, and dialogic responsiveness that remain difficult to reproduce fully through artificial systems.

The epistemological significance of speech lies precisely in its performative immediacy. Oral communication occurs within a shared temporal and social space where credibility is evaluated collectively through tone, responsiveness, bodily presence, rhetorical competence, and communal witnessing. In this sense, human presence itself becomes epistemologically significant because authenticity emerges not only from what is communicated but from how communication is performed.

Decolonial and African Epistemologies

The article also draws from decolonial theory and African epistemologies to critique Eurocentric traditions that historically privileged textuality as the primary marker of rationality, evidence, and legitimate knowledge. Colonial epistemologies frequently constructed African oral traditions as primitive, irrational, and inferior because they lacked written permanence. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) argues that colonial modernity systematically marginalised Indigenous oral systems through the elevation of Western literacy and textual authority as universal standards of knowledge production.

African epistemologies challenge this hierarchy by foregrounding relationality, communal validation, performative accountability, and oral witnessing as legitimate modes of truth-making. Across many African societies, oral traditions historically functioned as sophisticated epistemic systems through which authority, memory, justice, and authenticity were collectively negotiated. Griots, praise poets, oral historians, and community elders occupied socially recognised positions as custodians of communal truth and historical legitimacy (Finnegan, 2012).

Recent scholarship on forensic orality further demonstrates that African oral traditions developed complex epistemological verification systems grounded in storytelling, genealogical narration, proverbial reasoning, public testimony, and communal interrogation (Sone, 2026). These traditions challenge Eurocentric assumptions that authenticity depends exclusively upon textual documentation or technological verification. Instead, they position authenticity within embodied performance, communal participation, rhetorical competence, and dialogic accountability.

In the age of synthetic media, these African oral epistemologies acquire renewed global significance, offering alternative frameworks for understanding authenticity beyond algorithmic verification systems. Decolonising authenticity, therefore, requires recognising oral traditions not as residual cultural artefacts but as living epistemic infrastructures capable of responding to contemporary crises of digital trust and synthetic simulation.

Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative, conceptually grounded research design informed by interdisciplinary literature analysis. Rather than generating primary empirical data, the study seeks to develop a theoretical framework for understanding forensic orality as a culturally grounded response to the challenges of authenticity and epistemic trust posed by synthetic media. A conceptual approach is particularly appropriate because forensic orality remains an emerging analytical construct requiring theoretical clarification and integration across multiple fields of scholarship.

The study draws on a purposively selected body of literature from communication studies, media studies, artificial intelligence, digital ethics, forensic humanities, African oral literature, folklore studies, and

decolonial scholarship. Sources were identified through searches of Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and other academic databases using keywords such as synthetic media, deepfakes, AI-generated content, digital authenticity, epistemic trust, orality, oral epistemologies, forensic orality, African oral traditions, digital forensics, and AI ethics. Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and influential theoretical works published between 2000 and 2025, while foundational studies on orality and oral traditions were included where necessary to provide historical and conceptual grounding. The reviewed literature was organised into four interconnected areas: (1) synthetic media and digital authenticity; (2) theories of orality and oral epistemologies; (3) African oral traditions and systems of knowledge validation; and (4) contemporary debates on AI ethics, media forensics, and epistemic governance. Through thematic analysis and conceptual synthesis, the study identifies recurring concerns regarding authenticity, credibility, trust, and verification across these bodies of scholarship and explores how they intersect within contemporary digital environments.

The article is conceptual rather than empirical because its primary objective is theory development rather than the measurement of specific social phenomena. It does not seek to test causal relationships or generate statistical generalisations. Instead, it critically synthesises existing scholarship to develop forensic orality as a conceptual framework for understanding authenticity in an age increasingly shaped by synthetic communication technologies. By bringing together insights that are often treated separately, the study contributes a new interdisciplinary perspective on the relationship between oral epistemologies, digital authenticity, and AI-mediated communication. The conceptual development of the manuscript was supplemented by the use of generative AI tools for editorial assistance and structural refinement (OpenAI 2025).

This methodological approach enables the article to move beyond narrowly technological understandings of synthetic media and to examine how culturally embedded systems of knowledge and verification may contribute to contemporary debates on trust, authenticity, and epistemic resilience in digital society.

Synthetic Media and the Collapse of Epistemic Trust

The rise of synthetic media technologies has profoundly destabilised contemporary understandings of truth, authenticity, and evidentiary credibility. Deepfakes, AI-generated voices, synthetic audiovisual productions, and algorithmically fabricated identities increasingly challenge the reliability of digital communication by eroding the distinction between the authentic and the simulated. Contemporary societies are therefore witnessing what may be described as a collapse of epistemic trust, in which visual and auditory representations can no longer be assumed to correspond to reality.

Deepfake technologies constitute one of the clearest manifestations of this epistemological crisis. Through machine-learning systems and generative adversarial networks, AI technologies can fabricate highly realistic videos that imitate facial expressions, vocal patterns, gestures, and emotional performance with alarming precision (Chesney & Citron, 2019). What makes deepfakes particularly dangerous is not merely their deceptive capacity but their ability to destabilise trust itself. Once fabricated audiovisual representations become indistinguishable from authentic recordings, even genuine evidence becomes vulnerable to suspicion and denial. The problem is therefore not simply misinformation but epistemic destabilization.

Global political developments increasingly illustrate the dangers of synthetic media. During electoral cycles in the United States, India, and parts of Europe, manipulated audiovisual content has circulated widely through social media platforms to distort public perception, incite political hostility, and manipulate democratic processes (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020). In 2022, a deepfake video falsely depicting Ukrainian

President Volodymyr Zelensky surrendering to Russian forces circulated online, illustrating how synthetic media may function as geopolitical propaganda. Similarly, AI-generated voice cloning has been deployed in fraudulent financial schemes and political misinformation campaigns where public figures appear to endorse statements they never made. Such developments expose the growing vulnerability of digital communication systems to algorithmic deception.

The crisis is equally significant in African contexts, where weak digital regulation, uneven media literacy, and rapidly expanding social media ecosystems create fertile ground for synthetic misinformation. During electoral processes in countries such as Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa, digitally manipulated political narratives increasingly circulate through WhatsApp, TikTok, Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter), often amplifying ethnic tensions, political mistrust, and social polarisation. In societies already confronting historical crises of governance and institutional legitimacy, synthetic media further intensifies distrust toward journalism, political institutions, and digital evidence.

AI-generated voices represent an especially profound threat because speech traditionally carries assumptions of immediacy, individuality, and human presence. Synthetic voice technologies now reproduce accents, tonal inflections, emotional rhythms, and conversational nuances with near-human accuracy. Yet such technologies fundamentally dislocate speech from embodied identity. A cloned voice may sound authentic while lacking genuine human consciousness, intentionality, and lived experience. Consequently, the human voice itself increasingly becomes susceptible to algorithmic fabrication.

Recent scholarship on forensic orality demonstrates the broader implications of this crisis. Sone (2026) argues that oral traditions historically developed sophisticated systems of performative verification grounded in communal witnessing, rhetorical responsiveness, oral interrogation, memory, and embodied narration. In contrast to synthetic communication systems that privilege replication and simulation, oral epistemologies foreground human presence and dialogic accountability as markers of authenticity. The contemporary crisis of synthetic media, therefore, reveals not merely a technological problem but the consequences of disembodied communication systems detached from communal forms of epistemological verification.

Ultimately, synthetic media generates what Baudrillard (1994) conceptualises as hyperreality, a condition in which simulations increasingly replace reality itself. In such environments, authenticity becomes algorithmically reproducible while truth becomes vulnerable to technological manipulation. The collapse of epistemic trust, therefore, reflects a broader crisis of human communication in which synthetic authenticity threatens to eclipse embodied credibility and social accountability.

The Resurgence of the Spoken Word and Forensic Authenticity

Against the growing disembodiment associated with synthetic media, the spoken word acquires renewed epistemological significance. The resurgence of oral communication in contemporary digital culture reflects not nostalgia for premodern forms of interaction but an increasing recognition that human presence, responsiveness, and social accountability remain important markers of authenticity. As synthetic media technologies blur distinctions between genuine and fabricated communication, oral performance offers alternative mechanisms for evaluating credibility and trust.

Historically, oral traditions functioned as systems of authenticity verification because speech occurred within immediate social contexts where credibility was continuously negotiated through performance, memory, rhetorical competence, and communal participation (Ong, 1982; Finnegan, 2012). Unlike synthetic media, which operates through algorithmic replication, live oral interaction requires

responsiveness to unpredictable human engagement. Authenticity, therefore, emerges not only from informational content but also from the manner in which communication is performed and socially validated.

African oral traditions provide particularly rich examples of such verification systems. Across the continent, griots, praise poets, oral historians, and community elders historically served as custodians of memory, authority, and communal legitimacy. Their authority depended not on documentary permanence but on public performance, social recognition, and collective accountability (Finnegan, 2012). Oral testimony, storytelling, genealogical narration, and proverbial reasoning functioned as mechanisms through which communities evaluated credibility and negotiated truth.

Recent scholarship on forensic orality extends these insights by demonstrating how oral performance continues to function as a mechanism of epistemological verification within contemporary social and legal contexts (Sone, 2026). Through testimony, communal witnessing, dialogic engagement, and performative narration, forensic orality foregrounds human interaction as a means of establishing authenticity. In this sense, African oral traditions offer more than cultural heritage; they provide conceptual resources for rethinking authenticity in an era increasingly characterised by synthetic communication and digital uncertainty.

Contemporary digital culture itself reflects this renewed interest in oral immediacy. Podcasts, live-streamed discussions, oral interviews, community radio, and interactive audio platforms continue to attract audiences partly because they foreground real-time human engagement. Particularly in many African contexts, oral communication often retains high social legitimacy because it remains tied to identifiable speakers, communal accountability, and lived social presence. The resurgence of the spoken word, therefore, represents an important response to the growing crisis of authenticity associated with synthetic media.

Digital Orality and Contemporary Folk Linguistics

The resurgence of the spoken word in the age of synthetic media is not confined to traditional oral communities; it is increasingly manifesting through digital communication platforms. Contemporary digital environments have generated what Ong (1982) famously termed secondary orality, a communicative condition in which technologically mediated speech reintroduces oral modes of interaction into highly literate societies. Unlike primary orality, which exists independently of writing, digital orality emerges through the convergence of speech, text, image, video, and algorithmic mediation. Yet despite its technological foundations, digital orality retains many of the performative, dialogic, and communal characteristics associated with traditional oral cultures.

Platforms such as TikTok have become powerful sites of contemporary storytelling. Through short-form videos, users narrate personal experiences, share cultural memories, perform folklore, recount historical events, and engage audiences through oral performance. Storytelling on TikTok frequently relies upon vocal delivery, narrative timing, audience participation, and performative credibility rather than textual authority alone. Creators who successfully cultivate authenticity often do so through the perceived immediacy of their voices, emotional transparency, and responsiveness to audience feedback. In this sense, TikTok storytelling reproduces important features of oral performance traditions in which credibility emerges through interaction rather than documentation (Abidin, 2021).

Similarly, the global growth of podcasting reflects a renewed public appetite for voice-based communication. Podcasts foreground speech as the primary medium of knowledge transmission and

frequently create intimate relationships between speakers and listeners. Unlike heavily edited textual content, podcasts often reveal hesitation, emotional nuance, humour, spontaneity, and conversational responsiveness. These features contribute to perceptions of authenticity because listeners encounter what appears to be a recognisably human voice situated within a particular social and cultural context. In an era of synthetic media, podcasts increasingly function as spaces where credibility is negotiated through vocal presence and sustained oral engagement (Llinares, Fox, & Berry, 2018).

The expansion of spoken-word poetry and digital performance further illustrates the persistence of oral traditions within contemporary communication cultures. Across Africa and the diaspora, spoken-word artists use YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok to address issues of identity, social justice, gender, migration, and political transformation. These performances derive their persuasive force not merely from linguistic content but from rhythm, vocal modulation, bodily expression, audience interaction, and emotional intensity. As Finnegan (2012) observes, oral performance acquires meaning through its enactment, and contemporary digital spoken-word movements continue to demonstrate the enduring power of embodied communication.

Digital praise poetry provides another striking example of oral continuity within technologically mediated environments. Traditional praise poetry, historically performed by imbongi, griots, and other oral specialists, has increasingly migrated onto digital platforms where performers celebrate political leaders, public figures, cultural icons, and community achievements. While the medium has changed, many of the core principles of oral performance remain intact, including improvisation, audience participation, memory, rhetorical skill, and performative authority. The digital adaptation of praise poetry demonstrates how oral traditions continue to evolve while preserving their epistemological and cultural functions.

Perhaps nowhere is contemporary digital orality more visible than in the widespread use of WhatsApp voice notes across Africa. In many communities, voice messaging has become a preferred mode of communication because it preserves elements of speech often lost in written text, including tone, emotion, emphasis, accent, and contextual nuance. WhatsApp voice cultures illustrate how oral communication remains deeply embedded in everyday social interaction despite increasing digitalisation. Importantly, voice notes often convey a heightened sense of authenticity because recipients associate them with identifiable speakers whose vocal characteristics are difficult to separate from social identity and relational trust. While synthetic voice technologies increasingly challenge this assumption, the popularity of voice messaging nevertheless reflects a broader societal preference for oral forms of communication.

These developments have given rise to what may be described as oral hybridity, a communicative condition in which traditional oral practices intersect with digital technologies, social media infrastructures, and algorithmic systems. Contemporary users move fluidly between speech, text, image, video, emojis, and voice recordings, producing hybrid forms of expression that blur distinctions between orality and literacy. Such hybridity demonstrates that oral traditions are not disappearing in the digital age but are being reconfigured in response to new technological environments. Rather than replacing orality, digital technologies have expanded the spaces within which oral performance can circulate, evolve, and acquire new meanings.

The significance of these developments for forensic orality is profound. The persistence of digital storytelling, podcasting, spoken-word performance, praise poetry, and voice-note communication suggests that societies continue to attach considerable value to oral presence, vocal authenticity, and dialogic engagement. Even within highly mediated digital environments, individuals frequently seek communicative

forms that foreground identifiable human voices and relational accountability. Contemporary digital orality, therefore, reinforces the central argument of this article: that authenticity remains deeply connected to embodied communication and performative interaction. In an age increasingly characterised by synthetic simulation, the continuing appeal of oral forms demonstrates that the human voice retains significant epistemological authority as a marker of credibility, presence, and trust.

Forensic Orality as Epistemic Resistance

The emergence of synthetic media has intensified a profound crisis of authenticity in contemporary communication environments. Deepfakes, AI-generated voices, synthetic avatars, and algorithmically fabricated audiovisual content increasingly challenge conventional assumptions regarding truth, credibility, and evidentiary reliability. As technological systems become capable of reproducing highly convincing simulations of human presence, the distinction between authentic communication and algorithmic fabrication becomes progressively blurred. The challenge confronting contemporary societies is therefore not merely technological but fundamentally epistemological: how can authenticity be established when appearances can be manufactured with unprecedented precision?

Within this context, forensic orality offers a powerful form of epistemic resistance. Rather than relying exclusively on technological detection systems, forensic orality redirects attention toward human-centred processes of verification grounded in dialogue, communal witnessing, oral testimony, performative accountability, and social interaction. It proceeds from the premise that authenticity is not solely a property of information but also a product of communicative relationships through which claims are interrogated, evaluated, and collectively validated. Truth, in this sense, emerges not simply from the content of a message but from the circumstances of its performance, reception, and social scrutiny.

Unlike synthetic communication systems that privilege replication and simulation, forensic orality foregrounds dimensions of communication that remain deeply connected to human presence, including spontaneity, contextual responsiveness, memory, rhetorical competence, emotional reflexivity, and public accountability. These qualities are difficult to reproduce fully through algorithmic systems because they emerge within dynamic social encounters rather than through programmed outputs. Authenticity is therefore assessed not only through technological verification but also through participation in processes of dialogue, interrogation, and communal evaluation.

The significance of forensic orality is particularly evident within African epistemological traditions, where oral forums, public testimony, storytelling, communal dialogue, and performative narration have historically functioned as mechanisms for evaluating credibility and negotiating truth. Across many African societies, legitimacy has often depended on speakers' capacity to demonstrate consistency, accountability, and responsiveness before a community of witnesses. Such traditions reveal that trust is frequently rooted in social presence and communal recognition rather than in documentary evidence alone.

Importantly, forensic orality should not be interpreted as a rejection of technological verification. Oral traditions themselves are susceptible to selective memory, manipulation, ideological contestation, and political influence. The objective is therefore not to replace digital forensics with oral verification but to recognise that technological and human-centred approaches to authenticity can operate in complementary ways. Together, they offer a more robust framework for addressing the challenges posed by synthetic media, misinformation, and algorithmic deception. In this sense, forensic orality contributes to broader efforts to rehumanise communication in digital environments increasingly dominated by artificial forms of representation.

Contemporary Manifestations of Forensic Orality

The relevance of forensic orality extends beyond theoretical discussions and is evident in numerous contemporary communication practices. Despite the proliferation of digital technologies, communities continue to rely upon oral interaction as a means of evaluating credibility, confirming information, and establishing trust. These practices demonstrate that oral verification remains an active and evolving feature of contemporary communication cultures.

One important example is the circulation of information through WhatsApp networks across Africa. During elections, public health emergencies, and periods of political instability, misinformation frequently spreads through digitally mediated channels. Yet individuals often seek verification through trusted oral networks, including community leaders, religious authorities, family members, local radio presenters, and respected elders. Information is therefore not accepted solely because it appears online; rather, it is frequently subjected to processes of oral consultation and communal validation. The persistence of these practices reveals that trust often remains attached to identifiable human voices rather than anonymous digital content.

Community radio stations provide a second illustration of forensic orality in practice. In many African countries, community radio remains one of the most trusted sources of information because it facilitates direct engagement between speakers and audiences. Radio programmes commonly incorporate live discussions, call-in sessions, interviews, and public questioning, creating opportunities for immediate clarification and accountability. Credibility is established through interaction, responsiveness, and public scrutiny rather than through the passive transmission of information. Such practices closely resemble the principles of oral verification that have long characterised African oral traditions.

The rapid growth of podcasting further demonstrates the continuing importance of oral credibility. Long-form interviews and conversational podcasts expose speakers to extended dialogue in which expertise, coherence, consistency, and responsiveness can be assessed over time. Listeners frequently evaluate credibility not only on the basis of factual content but also through vocal presence, rhetorical competence, and the ability to engage critically with complex issues. In this respect, podcasts recreate aspects of oral performance traditions in which trust emerges through sustained communicative engagement.

Perhaps the most explicit manifestation of forensic orality occurs within legal and judicial settings. Courtroom testimony, cross-examination, witness interrogation, and oral evidence remain central to legal processes precisely because truth is often assessed through live interaction. Judges, lawyers, and juries evaluate not only what is said but how it is said, paying attention to consistency, responsiveness, memory, and communicative behaviour. Similar principles are evident in many African customary systems, where public testimony, communal witnessing, genealogical narration, and oral interrogation have historically served as mechanisms for establishing credibility and resolving disputes (Sone, 2026).

Collectively, these examples demonstrate that forensic orality is not merely an abstract conceptual framework but a living epistemological practice that continues to shape contemporary responses to uncertainty, misinformation, and contested truth claims. Even in highly digitalised societies, individuals frequently seek forms of communication that foreground identifiable human presence, dialogic accountability, and social trust. The continued reliance on oral verification suggests that authenticity remains deeply connected to embodied communication and communal evaluation. In an age increasingly characterised by synthetic simulation, these practices reaffirm the enduring significance of the human voice as a marker of credibility, accountability, and epistemic trust.

Implications for AI Ethics and Digital Governance

The concept of forensic orality has implications beyond oral traditions and synthetic media. It contributes to emerging debates on AI ethics, digital governance, and epistemic justice by highlighting the importance of human-centred approaches to authenticity and trust. Current responses to synthetic media frequently prioritise technical detection systems, regulatory interventions, and platform moderation. While these mechanisms remain important, they often overlook the social and cultural dimensions of credibility.

Forensic orality suggests that authenticity should be understood not only as a technological problem but also as a relational and communicative process. Trust emerges through interaction, accountability, and social recognition rather than solely through technical verification. This perspective encourages a broader understanding of digital governance that incorporates cultural practices, community-based verification mechanisms, and local knowledge systems.

The concept also contributes to decolonial discussions of knowledge production. African oral traditions have often been marginalised within dominant global frameworks of evidence and legitimacy. By demonstrating their relevance to contemporary challenges posed by synthetic media, forensic orality repositions oral epistemologies as valuable intellectual resources rather than residual cultural forms. In doing so, it broadens debates on AI ethics by incorporating perspectives from societies whose knowledge systems have historically relied on oral modes of verification and communal accountability.

Future research should explore how forensic orality might inform digital literacy programmes, platform governance frameworks, media verification practices, and public responses to AI-generated content. Such work would contribute to more culturally inclusive approaches to authenticity in increasingly synthetic communication environments.

Challenges and Critiques

Despite its theoretical significance, forensic orality is not without important limitations and critiques. The rapid advancement of AI technologies continues to complicate assumptions about the reliability of oral verification, as synthetic speech systems increasingly approximate human vocal patterns, emotional nuance, and conversational fluency. As generative AI systems evolve, distinguishing authentic speech from synthetic simulation may become increasingly difficult. Consequently, oral verification alone cannot provide an infallible safeguard against algorithmic deception.

One major challenge concerns the technological adaptability of synthetic systems themselves. Contemporary AI models increasingly incorporate real-time conversational responsiveness, emotional simulation, and interactive dialogue capabilities that can mimic dimensions of spontaneity traditionally associated with human speech. Future developments in voice cloning technologies may therefore significantly blur the distinction between embodied oral interaction and synthetic conversational performance. This raises important questions regarding whether oral authenticity itself may eventually become technologically reproducible.

Equally important are the limitations of oral verification in complex, multicultural, and multilingual societies. Oral performance frequently depends upon cultural familiarity, linguistic nuance, rhetorical style, accent recognition, and contextual interpretation. In highly diverse societies such as South Africa, Nigeria, or Cameroon, linguistic plurality may complicate assumptions regarding oral credibility because communicative styles differ significantly across communities. What constitutes rhetorical confidence or authentic performance in one cultural context may be interpreted differently in another. Oral verification

consequently risks reproducing social exclusion if particular linguistic forms or communicative styles are privileged over others.

The article also recognises the danger of romanticising orality. While African oral traditions provide valuable epistemological insights, it would be simplistic to suggest that oral cultures are inherently immune to deception, manipulation, or misinformation. Oral testimony itself may be politically manipulated, selectively narrated, emotionally persuasive, or ideologically constructed. Historically, oral narratives have sometimes reinforced power hierarchies, exclusionary traditions, and political propaganda. Consequently, forensic orality should not be idealised as a perfect alternative to technological verification systems.

Rather than advocating a rejection of digital technology, this article argues for a balanced relationship between technological verification and human-centred epistemological practices. AI-detection systems, digital forensics, oral interrogation, communal witnessing, and performative accountability should function in complementary rather than competitive ways. The challenge is therefore not choosing between technology and humanity but developing integrated authenticity frameworks capable of responding to increasingly complex digital environments.

Discussion

The analysis undertaken in this article demonstrates that contemporary synthetic media technologies have generated not merely a technological crisis but a broader epistemological crisis concerning authenticity, truth, and human communication. Deepfakes, synthetic speech, AI-generated audiovisual content, and algorithmic simulation increasingly destabilise conventional assumptions regarding evidentiary reliability and digital trust. Within such contexts, the resurgence of orality reflects a broader search for embodied authenticity and dialogic accountability in communication systems increasingly detached from human presence.

The study further reveals that authenticity in the digital age cannot be reduced to technological verification systems alone. Existing approaches to synthetic media largely prioritise algorithmic detection, cybersecurity infrastructures, and digital regulation. While such interventions remain necessary, they often neglect the cultural, performative, and epistemological dimensions of authenticity. Oral interaction foregrounds dimensions of immediacy, responsiveness, emotional reflexivity, rhetorical spontaneity, and communal witnessing that are difficult to fully replicate through synthetic systems. The spoken word, therefore, acquires renewed significance as a site of human presence within technologically mediated environments.

The politics of synthetic media also remain deeply significant. Synthetic technologies are not neutral innovations but instruments embedded within broader struggles over power, representation, surveillance, and information control. Deepfakes and manipulated media increasingly shape political propaganda, electoral manipulation, disinformation campaigns, and social polarisation globally. African societies remain particularly vulnerable because uneven digital literacy, weak regulatory infrastructures, and rapidly expanding social media ecosystems create fertile conditions for algorithmic misinformation. In such contexts, African oral epistemologies provide important intellectual resources for rethinking authenticity beyond purely technological frameworks.

The article, therefore, contributes to broader efforts aimed at decolonising digital authenticity. Colonial epistemologies historically privileged textual permanence and documentary evidence while marginalising oral traditions as primitive or unreliable. Yet the contemporary crisis of synthetic media increasingly exposes the limitations of purely textual or technological approaches to authenticity. African oral traditions

historically developed sophisticated systems of communal witnessing, performative accountability, rhetorical interrogation, and oral verification that remain profoundly relevant within contemporary digital culture. Decolonising authenticity consequently requires recognising oral epistemologies as legitimate knowledge systems capable of contributing to global debates on AI ethics, digital trust, and epistemological verification.

Finally, the study demonstrates the growing relevance of forensic humanities within contemporary orature studies. Forensic orality expands traditional understandings of oral literature by repositioning speech as an epistemological and juridical practice concerned with credibility, authenticity, and truth-making. Sone's (2026) intervention is particularly important because it conceptualises African oral traditions not merely as cultural artefacts but as living infrastructures of epistemic verification. In the age of synthetic media, contemporary orature therefore extends beyond folklore and performance studies to address urgent global questions about authenticity, algorithmic deception, digital trust, and the future of human communication.

Conclusion

The rise of synthetic media has fundamentally challenged conventional assumptions about authenticity, credibility, and trust in contemporary communication environments. As deepfakes, AI-generated voices, and synthetic audiovisual content become increasingly sophisticated, technological verification alone may prove insufficient for addressing the broader epistemological challenges posed by digital simulation. The crisis generated by synthetic media is therefore not merely technical but also cultural, social, and epistemological.

This article has argued that forensic orality provides a valuable framework for understanding authenticity in an era increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence and synthetic communication. Drawing on African oral epistemologies, theories of orality, forensic humanities, and decolonial scholarship, it has demonstrated that oral traditions developed sophisticated mechanisms for evaluating credibility through performance, testimony, communal accountability, and social validation. These traditions offer important insights into contemporary debates on authenticity because they foreground human-centred processes of verification that cannot be reduced to technological detection systems alone.

The concept of forensic orality contributes to emerging discussions on AI ethics, media forensics, and digital governance by expanding the range of intellectual resources available for addressing synthetic deception. Rather than treating oral traditions as relics of a pre-digital past, the article positions them as dynamic epistemological frameworks capable of informing contemporary responses to the challenges of synthetic media. In doing so, it highlights the continued relevance of African knowledge systems within global debates on technology and communication.

Future research should examine how forensic orality might inform digital literacy programmes, media verification practices, platform governance frameworks, and public responses to AI-generated content. As synthetic communication technologies continue to evolve, understanding how societies establish credibility and negotiate authenticity will remain a critical challenge. The enduring significance of the spoken word suggests that the future of authenticity may depend not only on more advanced detection technologies but also on renewed attention to the human, cultural, and dialogic foundations of trust.

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