

Do you find that these times, world politics are so complicated and bizarre? Well, first of all, you're not the only one, and second of all, these are not new emotions. "Confusion" and "bizarre" were the same terms used in 1961 by a distraught Philip Roth as he penned an even more highly important article about how reality is full of surprises.

This is only a snapshot of the kind of observations gathered by former New York Times book reviewer Michiko Kakutani to explain how we managed to end up in the "post-truth age" of "false news." As Kakutani puts it, authors such as Roth, George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, Victor Klemperer, Robert Heinlein, and Neil Postman have left very prophetic messages about the risks that await when reality and known truths are confirmed.

## Chapter 1 - The opposition of rationality and change has always been in place, but in 2017 it went viral.

Some of the driving ideals of the founding of the United States of America, with its focus on rationality, democracy, development, and religious freedom, are taken from the Enlightenment of Europe of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But there have been persons who defied these values in the history of the country.

Abraham Lincoln delivered a speech in 1839 recognized as the Lyceum Address, which highlighted the value of justification to hold dictatorship at bay and uphold the rule of law in the United States. But back then those seeking to undo rationality and change had a different continuing story kept alive. In 1855, possibly the right-wing Know-Nothing Party, ardently anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic, and counting 43 Congress members at the moment, best reflected this counter-narrative in the political sphere.

Many who endorsed the candidates for Know-Nothing were not so distinct from those who today fight back against change and purpose: they are members of a middle class that feels oppressed and dispossessed of all institutions, a fact that they prefer to blame globalization and automation for progress.

Over the centuries, authors have given numerous names to this opposition trend. Philip Roth named it "the indigenous American berserk," and it was called "the paranoid type" by Richard Hofstadter. Not unlike a latent disease ready to reactivate, this counter-narrative has always been active and lives only underneath the nation's soil. It was not until later that it went viral, in 2017.

Breitbart blogs began writing about conspiracy theories and extremist beliefs about religious and ethnic intolerance, which had been previously held out of the public spotlight, and President Trump helped them with retweets that year.

We can see the behavior Trump has done by his preference of representatives for government agencies against purpose and development. Rick Perry once declared an end to the Energy Department, and he is now managing it for whatever reason. Similarly, Scott Pruitt is currently the director of the Department for the Safety of the Atmosphere, which he has sued many times in the past. These critical organizations have been rolling back their clean energy and conservation efforts and initiatives.

## Chapter 2 - The web has developed harmful filters, silos, and clans, while there has been an increase in knowledge choices.

Over the last couple of decades, the way we get details has improved significantly. As the writer, David Foster Wallace once described it this "kaleidoscope of intelligence choices" has culminated in networks like Fox News that support a certain viewpoint instead of being unbiased, and a political ecosystem where the reality is entirely a matter of interpretation and agenda.

The comments by Wallace are from 2005. That was before social media became as prevalent as it is today and made it much more probable that before it hits a person, content would be manipulated and distorted. In comparison, since 2005, the right-wing news media has expanded to include Breitbart and the Sinclair Broadcast Network, which controls local news programs that cover about 38 percent of the United States, beyond Republican spokesperson Rush Limbaugh and Fox News.

In a knee-jerk manner, these sources react to the coverage that appears to disregard reality, statistics, and proof, particularly on topics such as gun violence, global warming, and healthcare. Supporters of these sources respond in kind, either denying facts or rejecting it as knowledge produced from a liberal agenda or coming from a poorly described "establishment" sinisterly referred to by Trump supporters as "the deep state."

In other terms, persons only leave a development recognized as confirmation bias in the evidence with which they are inclined to comply. This causes what the writer terms partisan silos of content silos, constructs that individuals create around themselves to include only the evidence that suits their desired narrative.

People often sort themselves into like-minded groups like never before and only confirmation bias has been made stronger by the resulting community dynamic. Currently, not unlike extremist networks, the cultural communities with which we put ourselves run. To establish a highly polarized ideology, recruits are cut off from all outside influence.

How fragmented has the media world become? 45 percent of Republicans concluded in a 2016 Pew poll that Democratic policies were a threat to the well-being of the country, while 41 percent of Democrats thought the same about Republicans. In the meantime, 70 percent of Democrats

labeled Republicans 'close-minded', and 47 percent of Republicans named Democrats 'immoral'. Not a landscape that promotes transparent, fair discussion.

## Chapter 3 - To reinforce discord and a self-serving agenda, postmodern philosophy and subjectivism are being used.

The postmodern trend-led writers such as David Foster Wallace and Thomas Pynchon, along with directors such as Paul Thomas Anderson, Quentin Tarantino, and the Coen Brothers, to some game-changing work. Postmodern ideology, however, has now penetrated the political world and has created certain less-than-ideal outcomes.

One of the core ideas of postmodernism is that owing to some variety of variations, including gender or class, the fact or perception may not be the same as the other person's. In the United States, in the aftermath of the Vietnam war and the Watergate affair, postmodernism gained momentum as the public was looking for a story other than the one that the government had been attempting to push them.

Postmodern thinking, however, helped promote the notion that truth can be arbitrary under certain situations. Alternative explanations were seen as enlightening after the government was found misleading the public about the invasion and the Watergate break-in. But to the point that everything is arbitrary, and absolute realities, truth and logic immediately become questionable, this idea will, and has been taken too far.

And the provable reality about how many people turned up at the presidential inauguration in 2016 was viewed by the Trump administration as arbitrary. But as Kakutani describes, it is not only irrational to undercut reality, it's also outright dangerous.

Take Trump's deliberate disdain for well-studied evidence about the value of renewable sources of energy and the risks of climate change. This appears to be specifically intended to appeal to his supporters and thereby deepen the nation's partisan gap, as well as to appeal to his fossil fuel business contributors.

The way he utilized misinformation to whip up resentment and distrust among white working-class voters and provide them with scapegoats in the form of refugees, women, black people, and Muslims is maybe even more troubling. He reported that crime levels were increasing when they were hitting record lows. While they are less likely to commit offenses than US-born people, Trump has called immigrants unsafe and a drain on the economy. What is even more, 60% of the nation's tech firms have been founded by immigrants and the children of immigrants.

The totalitarian template is right out of strategies like these. Hannah Arendt argued in her 1951 novel, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, that persons who could no more discern the difference between reality and fantasy were the perfect basis for totalitarian rule. Are you able to?

## Chapter 4 - Fake news is being used as a manipulation weapon, particularly by Russian agents to undermine.

More than simply utilizing subjectivity to create questions about simple evidence, the political deception toolkit includes propaganda as another way to hack away at freedom, which is what a lot of modern "false news" really is.

Back in 1989, when World-Wide-Web creator Tim Berners-Lee was contemplating what the internet might be used for, he was enthusiastic about its collaborative ability and the development of a massive global archive of information. What he didn't think was how effective the internet can be at lightning-fast rates for transmitting rumors.

The boundaries between journalism and entertainment had already blurred ahead of the 2020 US election due to too many publications placing a value on attention-grabbing stories and viral content. What was always known was that there were some properties of the best viral content: it played into emotions such as awe, fear, and indignation.

Many citizens see sites such as Facebook and Twitter as their key news source by 2016, so the foundation for the huge misinformation effort that started mainly in Russia was set.

Russian agents shared about 80,000 updates on Facebook alone between June 2015 and August 2017, impacting an estimated 126 million Americans. Most came from a St Petersburg company called the Internet Research Agency from December 2015 onwards. People would publish false blog entries on one floor of the department, mostly pro-Trump or anti-Clinton, while others on some other floor would create fake American profiles to vote on the articles and retweet them.

How good have they been? The most famous fake news posts had more viewers in the three months previous to the election than the top headlines from reputable publications including the New York Times, the Washington Post, and NBC News.

Fake online groups were also formed to cause unrest and divisions in the United States, in addition to the pro-Trump posts. The Confederate flags were used in one called "South United" and encouraged a new Southern revolt, while another was named "Blacktivist" and praised the Black Panthers.

There is a long global tradition of using anti-democracy propaganda, particularly in Russia, and these modern Russian propagandists are not confining themselves to the US. As part of their

attempts to disrupt both the EU and NATO, they have intervened in at least 19 European elections in current history.

## Chapter 5 - As well as his misinformation and twisting of words, Trump's nihilistic, troll-like conduct has serious consequences.

One problem is unidentified Russian internet trolls, but Kakutani considers it much more surprising that the president uses his Twitter handle daily to cheat, bully, insult, and indulge in trollish actions in general. In reality, one Twitter user in 2013 nicknamed Trump "the greatest troll," to which he responded, "A huge compliment!"

One fact we noticed from Trump's writings is that he has a zero-sum mentality where there must be a loser to succeed, and nihilism, which in metaphysical words, is the rejection of empirical reality and an acceptance of disruptive cynicism, is the main motivating power.

A great instance is these lines from his novel, *Think Big*: "A universe is a terrible place." In crises such as fires and flooding, the same raging greed that makes people rob, kill, and steal, operates regularly in common ordinary people. Only for the love of it just to display off to their mates can people annihilate you.

Trump has been motivated by cynicism in his proposals that have implications that will impact millions. In specific, from healthcare services to the atmosphere, he has criticized any element of Obama's leadership, and he appears bent on scaling back civil rights to the pre-1960s period.

But the blatant and repetitive lies Trump has told, and the avoidance of penalties for his actions, has had other harmful ramifications. Other lawmakers in the United States, for instance, and officials around the world are following in his footsteps.

Some Republicans, evidently motivated by Trump's brazen lies, in their attempts to get a tax bill approved in late 2017, said the bill would improve the budget shortfall and favor the middle class when it was clearly about giving the wealthy a tax break.

In the meantime, those in Congress seemed to be motivated by the skepticism of Trump as they became strangely honest about their actual reasons for the passage of the bill. Representative Chris Collins acknowledged that he wished the bill to be approved by his big-money supporters and that he was prepared to make them satisfied.

Trump's comments on the media, such as the manner he trolled CNN, which he calls "fake news," by tweeting a picture of something called "CNN" squashed under his heel, tend to influence politicians elsewhere in the world. The governments of Syria and Myanmar, as if pulling a leaf from Trump's playbook, all brushed off allegations of mass killing and human rights abuses by labeling them 'false news.'

## Chapter 6 - Around the United States, a different type of nihilism is bursting out.

There was a notable increase in the sales of two books after the election of Donald Trump: George Orwell's 1984 and Hannah Arendt's The Origins of Totalitarianism. But Brave New World, by Aldous Huxley, is similarly important, depicting a society so riddled with substances and "undisguised trivialities" that they are no more rational people.

Back in 1985, the writer of the book, Amusing Ourselves to Death, Neil Postman, already found the perception of Huxley mirrored in an America so drugged with escapist entertainment and deeply disillusioned by politics in general that people were all too eager to withdraw themselves from politics. Thirty years after, is there a comparable position in our modern era of disturbances and dissatisfaction in allowing the president to stomp over the Constitution?

All the indications of a new brand of nihilism in the United States running wild are also alarming.

In the manner in which the remaining victims of the Sandy Hook and Parkland shootings are constantly being trolled online, you will see this nihilism. You can see that in a California-based company named Disinfomedia, which runs a variety of fake news websites, one of which ran a fake article titled "FBI Agent Suspected of Found Dead in Apparent Murder-Suicide in Hillary Email Links." Owner Jestin Coler claims the company's attempts to trick leftists into spreading fake news articles have not gone as far as the stories they have aimed at Trump supporters.

It is also likely to see a different form of nihilism in Richard Spencer, a white nationalist who rallied alt-right crowds yelling "Hail Trump!" Hail the people of ours! Spencer brushed off the allegations when asked about offering Nazi salutes to these cheers, saying that he was sarcastic.

But even though we admit that in their racial or fascist comments, Spencer, as well as many posters on Reddit or 4chan message boards, are being ironic, this can also escalate to very real hatred. Researchers Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis published a report on internet news abuse in which they found that an online troll "might be more open to serious white nationalist arguments" after two or three months of using racist remarks "ironically."

Even Trump's advisors have told people that not everything the President says should be taken seriously by them.

What has our planet become? People were encouraged by the fathers of the United States, such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, to be vigilant in upholding the values of truth, equality, and reason unless they put democracy at risk. It's time that we all begin to follow these messages.

## The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump by Michiko Kakutani Book Review

Although it may appear like we have reached an unparalleled period of turbulent conflicts and political turmoil, history reveals that earlier developments are deeply entrenched in our present plight. In reality, as Kakutani puts it the outcome of the US election in 2016 may not be all that shocking considering that many authors have anticipated what happens when politicians lie endlessly, twist words to their ends, and misinterpret evidence and factual truths. The acts of Donald Trump put the core values of democracy under pressure, as many journalists, academics, and historians have highlighted over the years.

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