

Welcome to the Era of the Great Disillusionment

By [Jonathan Cook](#)

Global Research, April 29, 2020

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#), [Science and Medicine](#)

This is a column I have been mulling over for a while but, for reasons that should be immediately obvious, I have been hesitant to write. It is about 5G, vaccines, 9/11, aliens and lizard overlords. Or rather, it isn't.

Let me preface my argument by making clear I do not intend to express any view about the truth or falsity of any of these debates – not even the one about reptile rulers. My refusal to publicly take a position should not be interpreted as my implicit endorsement of any of these viewpoints because, after all, only a crazy tinfoil hat-wearing conspiracy theorist sympathiser would refuse to make their views known on such matters.

Equally, my lumping together of all these disparate issues does not necessarily mean I see them as alike. They are presented in mainstream thinking as similarly proof of an unhinged, delusional, conspiracy-oriented mindset. I am working within a category that has been selected for me.

Truth and falsehood are not what this column is about. To consider these topics solely on the basis of whether they are true or false would distract from the critical thinking I wish to engage in here – especially since critical thinking is so widely discouraged in our societies. I want this column to deny a safe space to anyone emotionally invested in either side of these debates. (Doubtless, that will not deter those who would prefer to make mischief and misrepresent my argument. That is a hazard that comes with the territory.)

I am focusing on this set of issues now because some of them have been playing out increasingly loudly on social media as we cope with the isolation of lockdowns. People trapped at home have more time to explore the internet, and that means more opportunities to find often obscure information that may or may not be true. These kinds of debates are shaping our discursive landscape, and have profound political implications. It is these matters, not questions of truth, I want to examine in this column.

Social media and 5G

Let's take 5G – the new, fifth-generation mobile phone technology – as an example. I am not a scientist, and I have done no research on 5G. Which is a very good reason why no one should be interested in what I have to say about the science or the safety of 5G. But like many people active on social media, I have been made aware – often with little choice on my part – of online debates about 5G and science.

Eamonn Holmes talking about the 5G conspiracy theory. I just can't.
pic.twitter.com/vdwlQe0M1L

— Richard (@gamray) [April 13, 2020](#)

Like TV presenter [Eamonn Holmes](#), I have inevitably gained an *impression* of that debate. To a casual viewer, the debate *looks* (and we are discussing here appearances only) something like this:

a) State scientific advisers, as well as scientists whose jobs or research are financed by the mobile phone industry, are very certain that there are no dangers associated with 5G.

b) A few scientists (real ones, not [evangelical pastors](#) pretending to be former Vodafone executives) have [warned](#) that there has not been independent research on the health effects of 5G, that the technology has been rushed through for commercial reasons, and that the possible dangers posed long term to our health from constant exposure have not been properly assessed.

c) Other scientists in this specialist field, possibly the majority, are keeping their peace.

Business our new god

That impression might not be true. It may be that that is just the way social media has made the debate look. It is possible that on the contrary:

- the research has been vigorously carried out, even if it does not appear to have been widely reported in the mainstream media,
- mobile phone and other communication industries have not financed what research there is in an attempt to obtain results helpful to their commercial interests,
- the aggressively competitive mobile phone industry has been prepared to sit back and wait several years for all safety issues to be resolved, unconcerned about the effects on their profits of such delays,
- the industry has avoided using its money and lobbyists to buy influence in the corridors of power and advance a political agenda based on its commercial interests rather than on the science,
- and individual governments, keen not to be left behind on a global battlefield in which they compete for economic, military and intelligence advantage, have collectively waited to see whether 5G is safe rather than try to undercut each other and gain an edge over allies and enemies alike.

All of that is possible. But anyone who has been observing our societies for the past few decades – where business has become our new god, and where corporate money seems to dominate our political systems more than the politicians we elect – would have at least reasonable grounds to worry that corners may have been cut, that political pressure may have been exerted, and that some scientists (who are presumably human like the rest of us) may have been prepared to prioritise their careers and incomes over the most rigorous science.

Looney-tunes conspiracism

Again, I am not a scientist. Even if the research has not been carried out properly and the phone industry has lobbied sympathetic politicians to advance its commercial interests, it is still possible that, despite all that, 5G is entirely safe. But as I said at the start, I am not here to express a view about the science of 5G.

I am discussing instead why **it is not unreasonable or entirely irrational for a debate about the safety of 5G to have gone viral on social media while being ignored by corporate media**; why a very mainstream TV presenter like Eamonn Holmes might suggest - to huge [criticism](#) - a need to address growing public concerns about 5G; why such concerns might quickly morph into fears of a [connection](#) between 5G and the current global pandemic; and why frightened people might decide to take things into their own hands by [burning down](#) 5G masts.

Explaining this chain of events is not the same as justifying any of the links in that chain. But equally, dismissing all of it as simply looney-tunes conspiracism is not entirely reasonable or rational either.

The issue here is not really about 5G, it's about whether our major institutions still hold public trust. Those who dismiss *all* concerns about 5G have a very high level of trust in the state and its institutions. Those who worry about 5G - a growing section of western populations, it seems - have very little trust in our institutions and increasingly in our scientists too. And the people responsible for that erosion of trust are our governments - and, if we are brutally honest, the scientists as well.

Information overload

Debates like the 5G one have not emerged in a vacuum. They come at a moment of unprecedented information dissemination that derives from a decade of rapid growth in social media. We are the first societies to have access to data and information that was once the preserve of monarchs, state officials and advisers, and in more recent times a few select journalists.

Now rogue academics, rogue journalists, rogue former officials - anyone, in fact - can go online and discover a myriad of things that until recently no one outside a small establishment circle was ever supposed to understand. If you know where to look, you can even find some of this stuff on Wikipedia (see, for example, [Operation Timber Sycamore](#)).

The effect of this information overload has been to disorientate the great majority of us who lack the time, the knowledge and the analytical skills to sift through it all and make sense of the world around us. It is hard to discriminate when there is so much information - good and bad alike - to digest.

Nonetheless, we have got a sense from these online debates, reinforced by events in the non-virtual world, that our politicians do not always tell the truth, that money - rather than the public interest - sometimes wins out in decision-making processes, and that our elites may be little better equipped than us - aside from their expensive educations - to run our societies.

Two decades of lies

There has been a handful of staging posts over the past two decades to our current era of the Great Disillusionment. They include:

- the [lack of transparency](#) in the US government's [investigation](#) into the events surrounding 9/11 (obscured by a parallel online controversy about what took place that day);
- the [documented lies](#) told about the reasons for launching a disastrous and illegal

war of aggression against Iraq in 2003 that unleashed regional chaos, waves of destabilising migration into Europe and new, exceptionally brutal forms of political Islam;

- the astronomical bailouts after the 2008 crash of bankers whose criminal activities nearly [bankrupted](#) the global economy (but who were never held to account) and instituted more than a decade of austerity measures that had to be paid for by the public;
- the refusal by western governments and global institutions to take any [leadership on tackling climate change](#), as not only the science but the weather itself has made the urgency of that emergency clear, because it would mean taking on their corporate sponsors;
- and now the [criminal failures](#) of our governments to prepare for, and respond properly to, the Covid-19 pandemic, despite many years of warnings.

Anyone who still takes what our governments say at face value ... well, I have several bridges to sell you.

Experts failed us

But it is not just governments to blame. The failings of experts, administrators and the professional class have been all too visible to the public as well. Those officials who have enjoyed easy access to prominent platforms in the state-corporate media have obediently repeated what state and corporate interests wanted us to hear, often only for that information to be exposed later as incomplete, misleading or downright fabricated.

In the run-up to the 2003 attack on Iraq, too many political scientists, journalists and weapons experts kept their heads down, keen to preserve their careers and status, rather than speak up in support of those rare experts like [Scott Ritter](#) and the late [David Kelly](#) who dared to sound the alarm that we were not being told the whole truth.

In 2008, only a handful of economists was prepared to break with corporate orthodoxy and question whether throwing money at bankers exposed as financial criminals was wise, or to demand that these bankers be prosecuted. The economists did not argue the case that there must be a price for the banks to pay, such as a public stake in the banks that were bailed out, in return for forcing taxpayers to massively invest in these discredited businesses. And the economists did not propose overhauling our financial systems to make sure there was no repetition of the economic crash. Instead, they kept their heads down as well, in the hope that their large salaries continued and that they would not lose their esteemed positions in think-tanks and universities.

We know that climate scientists were quietly warning [back in the 1950s](#) of the dangers of runaway global warming, and that [in the 1980s](#) scientists working for the fossil-fuel companies predicted very precisely how and when the catastrophe would unfold – right about now. It is wonderful that today the vast majority of these scientists are publicly agreed on the dangers, even if they are still trapped in a dangerous caution by the conservatism of scientific procedure. But they forfeited public trust by leaving it so very, very late to speak up.

And recently we have learnt, for example, that a series of Conservative governments in the UK recklessly ran down the [supplies of hospital protective gear](#), even though they had more

than a decade of warnings of a coming pandemic. The question is why did no scientific advisers or health officials blow the whistle earlier. Now it is too late to save the lives of many thousands, including dozens of medical staff, who have fallen victim so far to the virus in the UK.

Lesser of two evils

Worse still, in the Anglosphere of the US and the UK, we have ended up with political systems that offer a choice between one party that supports a brutal, unrestrained version of neoliberalism and another party that supports a marginally less brutal, slightly mitigated version of neoliberalism. (And we have recently discovered in the UK that, after the grassroots membership of one of those twinned parties managed to choose a leader in Jeremy Corbyn who rejected this orthodoxy, his own party machine [conspired](#) to throw the election rather than let him near power.) As we are warned at each election, in case we decide that elections are in fact futile, we enjoy a choice - between the lesser of two evils.

Those who ignore or instinctively defend these glaring failings of the modern corporate system are really in no position to sit smugly in judgment on those who wish to question the safety of 5G, or vaccines, or the truth of 9/11, or the reality of a climate catastrophe, or even of the presence of lizard overlords.

Because through their reflexive dismissal of doubt, of all critical thinking on anything that has not been pre-approved by our governments and by the state-corporate media, they have helped to disfigure the only yardsticks we have for measuring truth or falsehood. They have forced on us a terrible choice: to blindly follow those who have repeatedly demonstrated they are not worthy of being followed, or to trust nothing at all, to doubt everything. Neither position is one a healthy, balanced individual would want to adopt. But that is where we are today.

Big Brother regimes

It is therefore hardly surprising that those who have been so discredited by the current explosion of information - the politicians, the corporations and the professional class - are wondering how to fix things in the way most likely to maintain their power and authority.

They face two, possibly complementary options.

One is to allow the information overload to continue, or even escalate. There is an argument to be made that the more possible truths we are presented with, the more [powerless](#) we feel and the more willing we are to defer to those most vocal in claiming authority. Confused and hopeless, we will look to father figures, to the strongmen of old, to those who have cultivated an aura of decisiveness and fearlessness, to those who look like down-to-earth mavericks and rebels.

This approach will throw up more Donald Trumps, Boris Johnsons and Jair Bolsonaros. **And these men, while charming us with their supposed lack of orthodoxy, will still, of course, be exceptionally accommodating to the most powerful corporate interests - the [military-industrial complex](#) - that really run the show.**

The other option, which has already been road-tested under the rubric of “fake news”, will be to treat us, the public, like irresponsible children, who need a firm, guiding hand. **The technocrats and professionals will try to re-establish their authority as though the last two decades never occurred, as though we never saw through their hypocrisy and lies.**

They will cite “conspiracy theories” – even the true ones – as proof that it is time to [impose new curbs](#) on internet freedoms, on the right to speak and to think. They will argue that the social media experiment has run its course and proved itself a menace – because we, the public, are a menace. They are already flying trial balloons for this new Big Brother world, under cover of tackling the health threats posed by the Covid-19 epidemic.

Surveillance a price worth paying to beat coronavirus, says Blair thinktank
<https://t.co/AAb1nnv4pG>

— Guardian news (@guardiannews) [April 24, 2020](#)

We should not be surprised that the “thought-leaders” for shutting down the cacophony of the internet are those whose failures have been most exposed by our new freedoms to explore the dark recesses of the recent past. They have included Tony Blair, the British prime minister who lied western publics into the disastrous and illegal war on Iraq in 2003, and Jack Goldsmith, rewarded as a Harvard law professor for his role – since whitewashed – in helping the Bush administration legalise torture and step up warrantless surveillance programmes.

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Need for a new media

The only alternative to a future in which we are ruled by Big Brother technocrats like Tony Blair, or by chummy authoritarians who brook no dissent, or a mix of the two, will require a complete overhaul of our societies’ approach to information. We will need fewer curbs on free speech, not more.

The real test of our societies – and the only hope of surviving the coming emergencies, economic and environmental – will be finding a way to hold our leaders truly to account. Not based on whether they are secretly lizards, but on what they are doing to save our planet from our all-too-human, self-destructive instinct for acquisition and our craving for guarantees of security in an uncertain world.

That, in turn, will require a transformation of our relationship to information and debate. We will need a new model of independent, pluralistic, responsive, questioning media that is accountable to the public, not to billionaires and corporations. Precisely the kind of media we do not have now. We will need media we can trust to represent the full range of credible, intelligent, informed debate, not the narrow Overton window through which we get a highly

partisan, distorted view of the world that serves the 1 per cent – an elite so richly rewarded by the current system that they are prepared to ignore the fact that they and we are hurtling towards the abyss.

With that kind of media in place – one that truly holds politicians to account and celebrates scientists for their contributions to collective knowledge, not their usefulness to corporate enrichment – we would not need to worry about the safety of our communications systems or medicines, we would not need to doubt the truth of events in the news or wonder whether we have lizards for rulers, because in that kind of world no one would rule over us. They would serve the public for the common good.

Sounds like a fantastical, improbable system of government? It has a name: democracy. Maybe it is time for us finally to give it a go.

This essay first appeared on Jonathan Cook's blog: <https://www.jonathan-cook.net/blog/>

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