

Are We Living in the Age of Info-Determinism?

By Joshua Rothman, *The New Yorker*, August 13, 2024

In the early two-thousands, Martin Gurri, a media analyst at the Central Intelligence Agency, began considering the political implications of the Internet. Vast numbers of people were writing online, and the ideas that they shared could tank stocks, sway elections, or spark revolutions. “I realized that the Internet offered a near-infinite number of new sources,” Gurri later wrote. “I was left in a state of uncertainty—a permanent condition for analysis.”

In 2014, Gurri described the consequences of this uncertainty in a self-published book called “The Revolt of the Public and the Crisis of Authority.” In the old days, he argued, it had been possible to read a newspaper or watch a newscast and feel that you’d got a good grasp of “the news.” The Internet, however, created the sense that there was always more to know—and this was “an acid, corrosive to authority.” Because everyone could read only a slice of the Internet, the traditional mass audience was splitting into communities which, Gurri thought, had a characteristic mood: they enjoyed taking apart arguments from authority and the destruction of received opinion. “Every expert is surrounded by a horde of amateurs eager to pounce on every mistake and mock every unsuccessful prediction or policy,” Gurri wrote. And yet, “the public opposes, but does not propose.” Demolishing ideas is easy in a subreddit; crafting new ones there is mostly beside the point.

The way those in power responded to these dynamics was troubling. Their general strategy, Gurri thought, was to wish that the Internet and its “unruly public” would go away. Leaders lectured Internet users about media literacy and pushed for the tweaking of algorithms. Internet users, for their part, grew increasingly uninterested in taking leaders, institutions, and experts seriously. As the powerful and the public came to regard one another with contempt, they created “a perpetual feedback loop of failure and negation,” Gurri wrote. Nihilism—“the belief that the status quo is so abhorrent that destruction will be a form of progress”—became widespread. It could be expressed substantively (say, by rioting in the Capitol) or discursively, by asserting your right to say and believe anything you want, no matter how absurd.

How can a society function when the rejection of knowledge becomes a political act? Gurri offers a few suggestions, most aimed at healing the breach between institutions and the public.

Democracy on a small scale is easy; it’s no problem for the members of a club or the residents of a small town to elect a new leader or mayor. But democracy on a mass scale depends on mass institutions—mass media, mass education, mass culture—that seem likely to fracture or mutate with the arrival of A.I. The forms of government that flourished in one info-epoch may not thrive in the next.

In 2006, Time magazine’s “Person of the Year” was “You”—the online individual, which, massed together, made for “the many wrestling power from the few.” “We are so ready for it,” the novelist Lev Grossman wrote, in that issue. Back then, info-determinism was exciting. Today, it feels like a challenge which we must surmount, or else.