

Society is Choosing Fantasy Over Reality

The death of critical thinking and the collapse of civilization.

[Angus Peterson](#)



(Image Credit: [Emily MacDonald](#))

In an era where logic and critical thinking are more crucial than ever, society is moving in the opposite direction — toward misinformation, mysticism, and authoritarian rule. The world is locked in a permanent state of polycrisis — economic instability, ecological collapse, geopolitical tensions, and societal fragmentation. Instead of confronting these crises with logic and evidence-based solutions, vast swaths of the population are retreating into superstition and authoritarianism.

This is not just a failure of individual reasoning but a systemic collapse of critical thinking. Public discourse has been hijacked by propagandists, digital echo chambers, and the commodification of outrage. Misinformation spreads at unmatched speeds, weaponized

by the very tools that were once hailed as instruments of enlightenment. Civilization is not just unprepared for the crises it faces — it is actively undermining any attempt to mitigate them.

The consequences are dire. As the climate deteriorates, democratic norms erode, and economic inequality widens, people are increasingly desperate for explanations. But rather than demanding accountability from the powerful, they turn to [mysticism, conspiracy theories, and strongmen](#) who promise salvation without sacrifice. This is not an accident — it is the predictable result of a world where education has been hollowed out, the social fabric is unraveling, and the wealth gap has grown so extreme that social mobility is an illusion.

We are not moving toward a more enlightened society; we are regressing. Carl Sagan warned of this decades ago, foreseeing a world where people, incapable of distinguishing truth from fiction, would turn to demagogues and charlatans. That prophecy is no longer a warning — it is our reality. The consequences will not just be felt in the abstract; they will shape the quality of life for generations to come.

Mysticism Fuels the Rise of Authoritarian Leaders

As uncertainty grips the world, people seek leaders who offer certainty — no matter how false or dangerous their claims may be. In times of prolonged crisis, people turn to faith, whether religious, conspiratorial, or political. The polycrisis has intensified this instinct, driving populations toward mysticism, irrationality, and, inevitably, authoritarian leaders who promise to restore order.

The human brain is not wired for perpetual stress. Economic instability, climate catastrophes, and political turmoil create a psychological need for certainty. But the real world offers no such assurances. Scientific consensus warns of worsening ecological collapse, economic data points to widening inequality, and global institutions struggle to maintain order in mounting chaos. For those unwilling or unable to grapple with complexity, faith in a strongman leader provides an easy alternative.

Historically, crises breed autocrats. When people feel powerless, they look for someone who projects strength — someone who claims to have all the answers, even if those answers are lies wrapped in bravado. The rise of populist demagogues worldwide is no coincidence; it results directly from populations losing faith in their ability to create change. In the absence of solutions, they turn to narratives that absolve them of responsibility.

This shift is not occurring in isolation. It reflects a broader rejection of rationality. Across the globe, anti-intellectualism is on the rise. Expertise is dismissed as elitism, education is underfunded, and the scientific method is treated as ideological rather than a pathway to truth. Conspiracy theories flourish in this environment, thriving on the same uncertainty that rational thought is meant to combat.

Freedom House reports a [global expansion of authoritarian rule](#), fueled by disillusionment and economic precarity. Leaders who once might have been scrutinized for abuses of power now operate with impunity, shielded by their own cults of personality. Their followers do not demand accountability; they demand relief from the chaos of reality.

The connection between mysticism and autocracy is neither new nor unique to our era. But in the age of the polycrisis, it is accelerating. The worse things get, the more people seek comfort in narratives that shield them from harsh truths. And as history has shown, when truth becomes inconvenient, those who offer lies — no matter how absurd — thrive.

Social Media Algorithms Are Killing Critical Thinking

If mysticism and authoritarianism are the symptoms, then technology is the accelerant. The internet, once heralded as a tool for enlightenment and knowledge-sharing, has instead become a labyrinth of algorithmic manipulation, designed not to inform but to reinforce biases.

Social media, once a forum for open discourse, has been hijacked by engagement-maximizing algorithms that prioritize outrage over accuracy. The goal is not to educate but to entrench — feeding

users a never-ending loop of content that amplifies their existing beliefs while shielding them from conflicting perspectives. The result is a population that is not merely uninformed but actively resistant to reality.

This trend has worsened with deliberate policy changes by major platforms. Meta's recent decision to [eliminate third-party fact-checkers](#) from Facebook, Instagram, and Threads under the guise of reducing bias is a glaring example. Instead of independent verification, the platform now relies on a "community notes" system — an approach borrowed from X ([formerly Twitter](#)), which has devolved into a breeding ground for misinformation.

Mark Zuckerberg himself [acknowledged the risk](#):

"The reality is this is a tradeoff. It means that we're going to catch less bad stuff, but we'll also reduce the number of innocent people's posts and accounts that we accidentally take down."

This is a grotesque distortion of priorities. It is far more dangerous to allow misinformation — especially racist, misogynistic, and xenophobic content — to fester than it is to occasionally misflag an innocent post. Yet, this is the new standard of content moderation: a system that values "neutrality" over truth, even when that neutrality means permitting blatant falsehoods.

X serves as a case study in what happens when guardrails are removed. Since Elon Musk's takeover, the platform has [descended into chaos](#), where extremists are emboldened, conspiracies flourish, and legitimate journalism is drowned out by manufactured narratives. News organizations that once relied on Twitter for real-time reporting have largely abandoned it, while propaganda and pseudoscience thrive under the guise of "free speech."

This degradation of information integrity is happening at a particularly dangerous moment. The 2024 U.S. presidential election saw a sharp increase in how misinformation was weaponized, and as Trump's second term looms, the stakes have only grown. The systematic weakening of fact-checking is not corporate negligence

— it is a calculated move that benefits autocrats who rely on a disoriented, misinformed public.

What we are witnessing is the mass dismantling of critical thought. The [erosion of public education](#) laid the groundwork, but social media finished the job. In a world where truth is optional and lies are more profitable, objective reality itself is in peril.

Why Governments Are Cracking Down on Climate Activism

As the climate crisis worsens, governments and corporate interests are not responding with urgent action but with repression. Instead of addressing the existential threats posed by climate change, those in power are working to silence those who refuse to look away.

Governments worldwide are tightening restrictions on protests. In the UK, new laws grant police sweeping authority to arrest climate activists before they even begin demonstrations. In the U.S., Republican-led states have introduced “critical infrastructure” laws that make it a felony to protest near oil and gas sites. In Germany, climate protesters now face prison sentences. The harsher the climate crisis becomes, the more governments work to suppress those calling for change.

This backlash is not just about policy — it is a psychological defense mechanism on a societal scale. The reality of ecological collapse is unbearable for many. Acknowledging the full scale of the crisis would require recognizing not just governmental failures but the personal complicity of entire populations. It is far easier to dismiss climate activism as disruptive or criminal than it is to accept that the future they were promised is gone.

This crackdown is a direct consequence of society’s abandonment of critical thinking and its turn toward mysticism and denialism. No one wants to hear that their way of life is unsustainable. Instead, they seek comfort in spiritualized rhetoric — phrases like “being one with nature” or “cleansing the soul” have become convenient substitutes for actual engagement with the crisis. The rise of “climate doom spirituality” allows people to cope without taking meaningful action.

And yes, people need comfort. No one can fight a battle if they are too burned out to function. But this is not rejuvenation for resistance — it is escapism disguised as wisdom. It is a deliberate surrender, a mass psychosis in which denial is reframed as enlightenment.

As the world spirals deeper into climate catastrophe, the suppression of climate protests will only intensify. The message is clear: stop fighting, stop warning, stop reminding us of what we do not want to know. But history shows that ignoring a crisis does not make it disappear — it makes it inevitable.

The Takeaway — The Death of Critical Thinking

We are living in the dystopia that Carl Sagan warned us about. The collapse of critical thinking, the embrace of mysticism, the rise of autocracy, and the deliberate erosion of truth — all of it was predicted, and all of it is happening.

I have a foreboding of an America in my children's or grandchildren's time — when the United States is a service and information economy; when nearly all the manufacturing industries have slipped away to other countries; when awesome technological powers are in the hands of a very few, and no one representing the public interest can even grasp the issues; when the people have lost the ability to set their own agendas or knowledgeably question those in authority; when, clutching our crystals and nervously consulting our horoscopes, our critical faculties in decline, unable to distinguish between what feels good and what's true, we slide, almost without noticing, back into superstition and darkness...

That time is now. The United States, and much of the world, has become a society incapable of distinguishing reality from fiction, unwilling to make the sacrifices necessary to mitigate impending catastrophe. Public education has been gutted, replaced with ideological indoctrination and manufactured ignorance. Digital platforms have abandoned truth for profit, ensuring that misinformation spreads unchecked. The wealth gap has reached obscene levels, leaving millions with no means to access reliable information.

The dumbing down of America is most evident in the slow decay of substantive content in the enormously influential media, the 30-second sound bites (now down to 10 seconds or less), lowest common denominator programming, credulous presentations on pseudoscience and superstition, but especially a kind of celebration of ignorance.

The celebration of ignorance is now policy. Climate protesters are being arrested. Fact-checkers are being eliminated. Algorithms decide what people see, and demagogues dictate what they believe. The polycrisis is accelerating, and instead of confronting it with reason, society is retreating into fantasy, clinging to the illusion of control.

This collapse isn't just environmental or economic — it is the collapse of truth itself. In a world drowning in misinformation, where reality is dictated by those in power, the question is no longer if collapse is coming, but how quickly it will consume everything.