**The Widening World of Hand-Picked Truths**

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Nearly half a century ago, in what passed as outrage in pre-Internet times, people across the country became incensed by the latest edition of Time magazine. In place of the familiar portrait of a world leader — Indira Gandhi, Lyndon B. Johnson, Ho Chi Minh — the [cover of the April 8, 1966, issue](http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19660408,00.html) was emblazoned with three red words against a stark black background: “Is God Dead?”

Thousands of people sent letters of protest to Time and to their local newspapers. Ministers denounced the magazine in their sermons.

The subject of the fury — a sprawling, 6,000-word essay of the kind Time was known for — was not, as many assumed, a denunciation of religion. Drawing on a panoply of philosophers and theologians, Time’s religion editor calmly considered how society was adapting to the diminishing role of religion in an age of secularization, urbanism and, especially, stunning advances in science.

With astronauts walking in space, and [polio](http://health.nytimes.com/health/guides/disease/poliomyelitis/overview.html?inline=nyt-classifier) and other [infectious diseases](http://health.nytimes.com/health/guides/specialtopic/travelers-guide-to-avoiding-infectious-diseases/overview.html?inline=nyt-classifier) seemingly on the way to oblivion, it was natural to assume that people would increasingly stop believing things just because they had always believed them. Faith would steadily give way to the scientific method as humanity converged on an ever better understanding of what was real.

Almost 50 years later, that dream seems to be coming apart. Some of the opposition is on familiar grounds: The creationist battle against evolution remains fierce, and more sophisticated than ever. But it’s not just organized religions that are insisting on their own alternate truths. On one front after another, the hard-won consensus of science is also expected to accommodate personal beliefs, religious or otherwise, about the safety of vaccines, G.M.O. crops, fluoridation or cellphone radio waves, along with the validity of global [climate change](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/science/topics/globalwarming/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier).

Like creationists with their “[intelligent design](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/c/creationism_and_intelligent_design/index.html?8qa),” the followers of these causes come armed with their own personal science, assembled through Internet searches that inevitably turn up the contortions of special interest groups. In an attempt to dilute the wisdom of the crowd, Google recently tweaked its algorithm so that searching for “vaccination” or “fluoridation,” for example, brings vetted medical information to the top of the results.

But presenting people with the best available science doesn’t seem to change many minds. In a kind of psychological [immune response](http://health.nytimes.com/health/guides/specialtopic/immune-response/overview.html?inline=nyt-classifier), they reject ideas they consider harmful. A study published this month in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences suggested that it is [more effective to appeal to anti-vaxxers through their emotions](http://www.pnas.org/content/112/33/10321.abstract), with stories and pictures of children sick with [measles](http://health.nytimes.com/health/guides/disease/measles/overview.html?inline=nyt-classifier), the [mumps](http://health.nytimes.com/health/guides/disease/mumps/overview.html?inline=nyt-classifier) or [rubella](http://health.nytimes.com/health/guides/disease/rubella/overview.html?inline=nyt-classifier) — a reminder that subjective feelings are still trusted over scientific expertise.

On a deeper level, characteristics that once seemed biologically determined are increasingly challenged as malleable social constructs. As she resigned from her post this summer, an N.A.A.C.P. local leader [continued to insist](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/21/us/white-former-naacp-leader-who-said-she-was-black-still-does.html) she was black although she was born white. Facebook now offers users [a list of 56 genders](http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2014/02/14/us/ap-us-facebook-new-gender-options-glance.html?_r=0) to choose from. Transgender sits on the list, along with its opposite, cisgender — meaning that, like most people, you identify yourself as male or female according to the way the cells of your embryo unfolded in the womb.

Even conditions once certified as pathologies are redefined. While some parents cling to discredited research blaming vaccines for giving children [autism](http://health.nytimes.com/health/guides/disease/autism/overview.html?inline=nyt-classifier), others embrace the condition as one more way of being and speak of a new civil rights movement promoting “neurodiversity,” the subject of [a book by Steve Silberman](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/23/books/review/neurotribes-by-steve-silberman.html), published this month.

While this has been a welcome and humane development for those diagnosed as “higher functioning” on the autism scale, parents of severely impaired children have expressed dismay.

Viewed from afar, the world seems almost on the brink of conceding that there are no truths, only competing ideologies — narratives fighting narratives. In this epistemological warfare, those with the most power are accused of imposing their version of reality — the “dominant paradigm” — on the rest, leaving the weaker to fight back with formulations of their own. Everything becomes a version.

Ideas like these have been playing out in the background as [native Hawaiian protesters](http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2015/07/11/us/ap-us-giant-telescope.html) continue to delay the construction of a new telescope on Mauna Kea that they say would desecrate a mountaintop where the Sky Father and Earth Mother gave birth to humankind. Last month, they staged a demonstration at the annual meeting of the [International Astronomical Union](http://www.iau.org/) in Honolulu.

There are already 13 telescopes on the mountain, all part of the Mauna Kea Science Reserve, which was established by the state in 1968 on what is widely considered the premier astronomical vantage point in the Northern Hemisphere. After I [wrote about the controversy last fall](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/21/science/seeking-stars-finding-creationism.html), I heard from young anthropologists, speaking the language of postmodernism, who consider science to be just another tool with which Western colonialism further extends its “cultural hegemony” by marginalizing the dispossessed and privileging its own worldview.

Science, through this lens, doesn’t discover knowledge, it “manufactures” it, along with other marketable goods.

Altruism and compassion toward the feelings of others represent the best of human impulses. And it is good to continually challenge rigid categories and entrenched beliefs. But that comes at a sacrifice when the subjective is elevated over the assumption that lurking out there is some kind of real world.

The widening gyre of beliefs is accelerated by the otherwise liberating Internet. At the same time it expands the reach of every mind, it channels debate into clashing memes, often no longer than 140 characters, that force people to extremes and trap them in self-reinforcing bubbles of thought.

In the end, you’re left to wonder whether you are trapped in a bubble, too, a pawn and a promoter of a “hegemonic paradigm” called science, seduced by your own delusions.

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