


# Palo Alto Mafia Information wars endanger civilization, say Doomsday experts

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A combination of file pictures shows (clockwise from top L) the Doomsday Clock on January 25, 2018; on January 26, 2017; on January 26, 2016; on January 22, 2015; on January 10, 2012; and on January 14, 2010  
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Washington (AFP)

Information warfare is amplifying major worldwide threats like climate change and nuclear warfare, endangering the future of civilization, US experts said Thursday as the symbolic Doomsday Clock stayed at two minutes to midnight.

The manipulation of facts, fake news and information overload -- along with global warming and flirting with nuclear war -- are all factors that have brought humans as close to destroying the planet as ever, said the non-profit Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists.

"Humanity now faces two simultaneous existential threats, either of which would be cause for extreme concern and immediate attention," the group said in a statement.

"These major threats -- nuclear weapons and climate change -- were exacerbated this past year by the increased use of information warfare to undermine democracy around the world, amplifying risk from these and other threats and putting the future of civilization in extraordinary danger."

The clock did not budge from last year, but that "should not be taken as a sign of stability," said Rachel Bronson, president and CEO of the group of scholars and international experts in security, nuclear, environmental and science fields.

"It is a state as worrisome as the most dangerous times of the Cold War," said Bronson at a press conference in the US capital, describing the current climate as "The New Abnormal."

"The velocity of information has increased by orders of magnitude, allowing information warfare and fake news to flourish," she said.

"It generates rage and polarization across the globe at a time when we need calm and unity to solve the globe's greatest problems."

This "New Abnormal" is "a state that features an unpredictable and shifting landscape of simmering disputes that multiply the chances for major conflict to erupt," she added.

"We appear to be normalizing a very dangerous world in terms of the risks of nuclear warfare and climate change."

- 'Bad news, indeed' -

Robert Rosner, professor in astronomy and astrophysics at the University of Chicago, described this "New Abnormal" as "the disturbing reality in which things are not getting better."

"The fact that the Doomsday Clock's hands did not move is bad news indeed," he said.

The Doomsday Clock was created in 1947. Its time has changed on 20 occasions since then, ranging from two minutes to midnight in 1953 -- and again in 2018 -- to 17 minutes before midnight in 1991.

Last year it moved from two-and-a-half minutes before minutes to two minutes, as near as it has ever been to the hour of the apocalypse, largely based on concerns over the possibility of nuclear war with North Korea and "unpredictability" from US President Donald Trump.

Over the past year, the "rhetoric" between North Korea and the United States "has eased but remains extremely dangerous," said Bronson.

Meanwhile, relations between the United States and Russia "remain unacceptably strained."

And on the environmental front, "carbon emissions began to rise again after a period of plateauing," Bronson added.

On tensions with North Korea, former US defense secretary William Perry said the latest talks between the Washington and Pyongyang may have done "nothing" to move North Korea away from its nuclear program.

"On the other hand, and this is a big other hand, it stopped the insults and threats between our two countries, and therefore reduced the chances of blundering into a war with North Korea," Perry said.

Jerry Brown, executive chair of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists and former governor of California, said world leaders are not doing enough to scale back the threat of nuclear weapons.

"The blindness and stupidity of the politicians and their consultants is truly shocking in the face of nuclear catastrophe and danger," Brown said.

"We are almost like travelers on the Titanic, not seeing the iceberg up ahead but enjoying the elegant dining and music."

Brown also took issue with journalists who report on every word the US president utters on social media.

"Journalists, yes, you love Trump's tweets. You love the news of the day. You love the leads that get the clicks but the final click could be a nuclear accident, or mistake, and that is what we all have to be worried about."