

## TECHNOLOGY

# Expect 2018 to Be More Sane? Sorry, It's Not Going to Happen

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Happy new year to you and yours, of course, but I'm going to have to put a halt to the festivities and play Frowning Farhad for a minute: You're fooling yourself if you think 2018 is going to be any different, sanity- or anxiety-wise, from the roller coaster of the year just concluded.

Sure, as in any year, a lot of good things could happen in 2018, and perhaps lots of bad things will happen, too. (How's that for a prediction?) But there is a deeper and more unsettling certainty about the ride upon which we've all just embarked: A lot of probably very crazy things will happen in 2018.

Get ready for even more events that don't follow the rational course, and narratives that appear unmoored from the laws of politics, business and science. The

4

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isn't going to abate. Just the opposite — my columnist's Spidey sense tells me it's only going to get worse. Strap in.

Just a few years ago, there was a dawning sense that technology would give us a peek around the corner. Thanks to reams of information — sensors and surveillance everywhere, and computing capacity to make sense of it all — it looked as if we were entering a “Minority Report”-type world, where much of the future could be foretold in our numbers. Google could predict flu trends, election-stats nerds could predict political outcomes, and predictive policing algorithms were going to give us a handle on crime.

Yet what has happened is rather quite different. Instead of revealing unseen order and predictability in the world, technology has unleashed a cascade of forces that have made the world more volatile — and thus made the future hazier and more open to out-of-the-blue results.

Some of this isn't news. In 2016 and 2017, the world began to appreciate how smartphones and social networks can upend what we once considered the natural order. Tech has helped undercut the power of incumbent institutions — governments, political parties, the media, the patriarchy — and it has created a new class of geopolitical actors whose presence and ricocheting power we're all still getting used to: trolls, terrorists, conspiracy theorists, social-media activists, hackers and cryptocurrency bugs, among others.

These dynamics aided many of the biggest and most surprising stories in the last couple of years — Brexit, the election of Donald Trump, the emergent resistance movement against him, the #MeToo avalanche, the decline of Uber, the rise of Bitcoin.

Yet even as a barrage of surprising stories plays out, many of us have yet to come to grips with the permanence of this chaos. People seem to have a latent, hopeful sense that things are going to calm down, that we're on the cusp of a more normal news cycle. I suspect that's wrong. Chaos is the new normal; the apprehension you feel every time you get a notification on your phone — the fear that you don't know what fresh horror it could bring — isn't an overreaction but an

adaptation. Thanks to phones and Facebook, anything really could happen tomorrow.

“I will tell you that as someone who does this professionally, my job has become a lot harder in the last few years,” said Amy Webb, a futurist who runs the Future Today Institute, a firm that helps big companies think about the possibilities of tomorrow.

“There are just a lot more variables in play,” Ms. Webb said. “Think about how a single tweet from Donald Trump can have all these strange reverberations across the world. You can almost apply chaos theory to Donald Trump’s Twitter account.”

One of the touchstone ideas of chaos theory, which is the study of dynamic systems, is the “butterfly effect” — the idea that small changes in initial conditions can lead to huge differences in outcomes, like how a butterfly flapping its wings in Peru can cause a hurricane in Houston.

Nowadays, because we’re hyperconnected, we see butterfly effects everywhere. A single confessional blog post by Susan Fowler, a former employee of the ride-hailing company Uber, led to a swirling online campaign that eventually brought down Travis Kalanick, Uber’s once indomitable chief executive — an outcome that, as far as I can tell, not a single observer of Uber predicted would happen long before it did.

But it’s not just that one-off stories cause huge cascades; it’s that in a connected world, there are now so many one-off stories capable of setting off cascades, and no one knows which ones will hit.

Note how Mr. Trump was not brought down by the series of sexual harassment claims against him during the presidential campaign — and yet just a few months later, claims against a host of other powerful men spiraled into a culture-shaping movement that has upended many parts of the economy.

To continue the butterfly-effect analogy: “It used to be that there were a trillion butterflies each in their own weather system, but we have now connected all those butterflies into one planetary weather system — and you never know which one is going to have some kind of autocatalytic effect, and which one isn’t,” said Alexander

Rose, executive director of the Long Now Foundation, an organization that aims to promote a long-term outlook on the world.

As if all that weren't enough, there's another complication to fold into the chaos: Technology isn't stopping. The pace of technological change is in many cases too fast for anyone of us to comprehend or get used to; as a result, just as the world seems to get its head around one new force unleashed by tech, another comes along to discombobulate our efforts to respond to it.

For example, in the last year and a half, social networks have tried several ways to tamp down the misinformation flowing online. Their efforts have been fitful at best, but already they risk being outdated. Soon artificial intelligence and augmented reality software will make it trivially easy to create not just text-based misinformation but entirely fake audio and video, too.

Last year, researchers at the University of Washington used A.I. to scan through footage of Barack Obama speaking, giving them a way to put just about any words into the former president's mouth. Someone else thought up a more vulgar way to show off similar tech — a fake pornographic video of the actress Gal Gadot.

In the run-up to the 2018 election, Facebook, Twitter and other social networks have vowed to take on the kinds of misinformation and trolling that ran amok in 2016. But what if social media is hit with a wave of explosive, realistic-looking viral videos whose authenticity can't be confirmed? It's highly unlikely that the social networks, the news media or the political class will know how to respond to such a situation.

Mr. Rose pointed out that in the long span of human history, periods of turbulence aren't unusual; technological change often prompts social and political instability and unpredictability. What is unusual now is that many of us aren't used to this sort of chaos.

"I'm 39, about to turn 40, and people like me who came of age in America in the '80s and '90s, we got used to a fairly predictable world," said Nate Silver, the founder of the data-news site **FiveThirtyEight**, whose uncannily accurate forecast of the 2012

presidential election while at The New York Times set off wide interest in data-based journalistic predictions.

“So I do think people are now realizing the world is less predictable than we thought it was,” Mr. Silver said. “But in some ways that’s a return to normal.”

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