

Are We Living in the Age of Epstein?

The scandal suggests that everything awful we've ever believed is true.

By [Joshua Rothman](#)

It was odd, for many reasons, to be a journalist in 2016 and 2017, just after the election of Donald Trump. Part of the oddness was that seemingly every story had to include him. If a reporter travelled somewhere to gather material on something apparently unrelated—a natural disaster, a sporting event, a scientific discovery—it felt important to explore whether the people who lived there had voted for Trump, and why. Writing about individuals, one found it crucial to note whether they liked Trump. His rise was connected to so many aspects of modern American life, from reality television and information technology to gender politics and deindustrialization, that weaving it in seemed not just natural but inevitable. We were in Trump's America, and so to understand Trumpism was to understand the country, and vice versa. That's an intellectual way of putting it. From another perspective, Trumpism was a mood that infected everything; it still is.

One of the central contentions of Trump's movement was that the world was run by a corrupt, deviant, and rootless élite, a cabal of cosmopolitan globalists who held themselves out as enlightened but were actually callous, self-interested, and predatory. (Trump positioned himself as an alternative to this group: if the rich weren't like you and me, he was the exception.) Another Trumpist tenet was that our society had become lawless, its justice system far too lenient. (He promised [rough justice](#): "Lock her up!") Yet another was that the technocratic experts were part of a deep state, and weren't telling the truth. (He knew better.) And then there was a claim about power, which was to be enjoyed and employed nakedly, in place of the nuanced manipulations of norms and bureaucracies.

This wasn't exactly an unprecedented mix of ideas, and yet, just a year or two earlier, it hadn't been anywhere close to taking over America. How had it ascended so quickly? I started seeing Trumpism's arrival through the metaphor of a kaleidoscope. In the ones my kids own, translucent plastic pieces tumble into new designs as the barrel rotates, creating patterns that, after periods of hesitation, click into place. Politics, I came to think, were a kind of dark kaleidoscope. Familiar fears and anxieties shifted until they assumed novel, captivating configurations. Trumpism was such a pattern. It was a grim vision of society that didn't make sense logically but, for some, held together for reasons of emotion or identity. If there really was a class of unaccountable, libertine global élites plundering the world, then wasn't Trump obviously a member? You weren't bothered by such questions if you liked what you saw through the kaleidoscope. For you, Trump was the one spinning the barrel—an observer of the pattern, rather than a part of it.

A kaleidoscope is always shifting, with new patterns coming into focus. The Jeffrey Epstein scandal has been fascinating and horrifying onlookers for more than a decade; in addition to being an actual set of appalling events that involved real perpetrators and real victims, it's been a political wild card and a conspiratorial lure. But [it's only recently](#)—with the release of millions of documents, which anyone can read for themselves—that its pieces have really snapped into place. Trump, for many, [is now inside its pattern](#), along with a lot of other people, organizations, and institutions. A different dark vision of

society has emerged. Suddenly, we seem to be living in the age of Epstein. We tell ourselves that by understanding his rise to power we might understand the world.

The Epstein scandal further rearranges many of the kaleidoscopic elements that Trump already rearranged. An evil global cabal, an ineffectual justice system, the exercise of unchecked power by untrustworthy experts—these are familiar themes. But the Epstein story also brings together other elements, many of which have been in the mix for decades.

We might start with the institutional sex scandals of the two-thousands and twenty-tens. It was in 2002 that the Boston *Globe*, with its Spotlight investigations, [showed that](#) widespread sexual abuse had been covered up by the Catholic Church. In 2017, reporting in [the Times](#) and [this magazine](#) helped break open the Harvey Weinstein scandal, which reflected not only one man's abuses but a larger predatory power structure within the entertainment industry. In between, we learned about coaches, including [Jerry Sandusky](#) and [Larry Nassar](#), who preyed upon their athletes; about admirable figures, such as [Bill Cosby](#) and [Jimmy Savile](#), who abused victims and were protected by de-facto conspiracies of enablers; and about sexual abuse in the military [of prisoners at Abu Ghraib](#), and also among service members. For many people, these scandals finally proved the assertions of those feminists, journalists, and researchers who had long argued that sexual abuse, including abuse of young children and teen-agers, was more widespread than was commonly acknowledged. It was especially disturbing to see how the abuses had been carried out within big, respected, and highly visible organizations. It became natural to look at any organization or institution and wonder if it was protecting an abuser—some well-loved man who had it all, and used his power for predation.

Broadly speaking, these scandals were contained within org charts. But, over the same period, there was an increasing awareness of how networks of knowledge and power could cross institutional and even national lines. In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, the Occupy movement argued that a global overclass was taking advantage of the rest of us: members of the one per cent may have worked for competing governments or financial firms, but at the end of the day they enriched one another, like pro athletes playing in the same league. It wasn't only progressives who worried that capital and control were flowing into globalized spaces, accessible mainly to the private-jet set. In 2004, the conservative political theorist Samuel Huntington [explored the idea](#) of "Davos men"—"transnationalists" who "view national boundaries as obstacles that thankfully are vanishing, and see national governments as residues from the past whose only useful function is to facilitate the elite's global operation." Huntington warned that the "growing differences between the leaders of major institutions and the public" weren't just economic but cultural—he suggested, for example, that members of the global elite tended to be indifferent or even hostile to traditional values, including religion.

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These new understandings—both of the powerful and of the diffuse hierarchies within which they operate—are two elements of the Epstein kaleidoscope. Another is a new conception of the public. In the days before social media, public opinion might have been characterized through surveys or “man on the street” reporting, or ventriloquized by leaders who claimed to know what people thought. But the same decades that saw a rethinking of the élite also saw a reinvention of the public as a networked, online entity—a sort of [hive mind](#). Huntington’s analysis, at the turn of the millennium, had contrasted the élite class with a traditional public that cared about God and country. But the new public was stranger than that. Its hive mind could think out loud, surfacing, organizing, and analyzing vast quantities of information in real time, as in the [Steubenville rape case](#) in 2012, or the crash of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, in 2014. And yet its thinking was hardly objective. Shaped by for-profit viral and ad-targeting algorithms, it was drawn to ideas that were lurid, divisive, and provocative. It was often—in a word—crazy.

The new public was hyperglossic, with its human subunits constantly typing and posting. Its thoughts explored every possibility: anything that could be said would be said, no matter how horrible or outlandish. And these tendencies collided with an unprecedented growth in accessible data. Increasingly, the hive mind could find pretty much anything it wanted to see in the Earth-size Rorschach blot available for its analysis. End-to-end encryption had been invented, but not widely adopted, and so the powerful often used Gmail and Outlook like the rest of us. Their secret societies weren’t actually that secret. There were endless documents to be WikiLeaked.

As the hive mind sifted through the data, norms began to change, and these shifts raised difficult questions. What should we think about people who had acted badly in the past, but who said they were acting within the norms of that time? What about those who had enabled bad behavior, maybe just by looking the other way? Cancellation was, among other things, a response to the new understanding of power: it recognized that powerful people, despite their differences, found common cause through shared tacit values, and that the maintenance of predatory or unjust values was therefore a malign and damaging exercise of power. And, actually, it wasn’t always so complicated: lots of people had done things that were plainly against the norms of both their time and ours. Before #MeToo, young women who wanted to work in the culture industries were frequently assaulted or harassed, and, if they talked about it, they were dehumanized. Defenders of this behavior suggested that it might have been normal to harass women back then. But maybe it wasn’t—maybe everyone knew it was wrong—in which case the norm that was actually in effect centered on bowing and scraping to powerful people. This was the central norm that needed to be overturned. Commonsense morality had to be reasserted.

All these elements evolved against a dispiriting backdrop. Wrongdoing was being discovered everywhere, and yet so little was happening—everyone could agree on this, no matter their politics. Mueller and #MeToo failed to wound Trump. Hunter Biden [got off easy](#). The January 6th hearings [didn’t stop the pardons](#). The impunity of the powerful was measured by the inefficacy of the outraged. And, also, although it was hard to accept, there seemed to be no way to evade the fact that lots of people were simply evil. Mass shootings were bad enough—and nothing was being done about them—but many awful crimes had a [sexual character](#). It turned out, for example, that the social-media networks employed [armies of workers](#) to “moderate” endless waves of depraved content, including

material involving child pornography and murder. They often worked overseas, and a lot of them were traumatized. The hive mind had nightmares that couldn't be eradicated, because they were real.

The Epstein story, of course, was part of the capsule history we've just reviewed. It was always there, contained in the pattern. Recently, though, it's become the pattern. If a movie starts out normally, with a family moving into a new house, and then the family discovers a demon in the basement, then the whole movie is changed—it was always a horror movie. That's what this feels like.

Summing up the whole picture is impossible, and attempting to do it requires treading carefully, so as to maintain important boundaries between what is definitely true and what seems likely or merely speculative. (Those boundaries, it's worth noting, have been irrevocably blurred by the long-term mishandling of Epstein's crimes.) It's beyond doubt that there were hyper-élite individuals—Epstein and Ghislaine Maxwell—orchestrating the trafficking and sexual abuse of women and children at a scale that outstrips the plausible demands of one man. Their globe-spanning efforts required help from many individuals in many countries, almost none of whom have been charged with crimes. The alleged abuse often happened in transnational spaces—a private island, a private jet—or in other locations that seemed beyond the law. Actual “Davos men,” well-respected and supposedly enlightened people, really did look the other way, acting as though it were normal for a plutocrat to be surrounded by a rotating cast of [very young girls](#). And it seems reasonable to say that, in conjuring this larger social group, Epstein weaponized the power of norms and networks to provide his enterprise with a form of protection.

Perhaps because this strategy worked, the experts in charge of investigating and stopping the abuse almost certainly failed to do so. (Though the Southern District of New York's indictment of Epstein focussed on crimes allegedly committed between 2002 and 2005, many civil suits have alleged that his activities continued long after that.) Meanwhile, ineffectual investigators left behind a trove of millions of documents, many of them outrageously disturbing. In a manner that's historically unprecedented, the hive mind can actually click through them; online, people can learn about [connections](#) between Epstein and [a former British Prince](#), a former Prime Minister of Norway, a billionaire who chaired the Museum of Modern Art, a former president of Harvard, the leading architect of Trumpism, and the world's richest man, among many others. On sites like [Jmail.world](#), they can puzzle over the names that appear only glancingly in Epstein's e-mail correspondence and decide for themselves what to make of them. The internet resounds with calls for rough justice. Meanwhile, in Congress, people identifying themselves as victims stand up and indicate that they contacted investigators but were never interviewed. The Attorney General of the United States deflects and denies. It seems that e-mails between Epstein and the President have [not yet been released](#).

Just how bad was the abuse, and how many of the “Davos men” knew about it, or even participated in it? Who was merely a social or business connection, and who engaged in conduct that was criminal, or at the very least worthy of opprobrium? One document that has been shared describes the torture of a small child by a group of men. Did that really happen on Epstein's island, or at his town house or mansion? In a prior version of America, these questions would've been passed to a select group, who would've produced a report—an Epstein version of the 9/11 Commission. Now they've simply been handed over to the public, along with enormous quantities of semi-redacted material spanning decades and provenances. Inevitably, our views of such questions will be shaped by our assumptions about

human nature; about power; about the prevalence of horrific sex crimes; and about the trustworthiness of accounts of abuse, among other things. Given the past two decades of American life, it's fair to say that even people who aren't conspiracy theorists will find some of the worst scenarios plausible. A moral duty and intellectual necessity, in cases like this, is to remain rooted in specifics—to attend to the particular victims, the real crimes, so that an exacting and appropriate form of justice can be delivered. (What other kind is there?) But, for many, what is known for sure is dwarfed by what might possibly hang together. The darkest versions of the Epstein story fit perfectly within patterns we now take for granted.

Where does all this lead? Recently, I took my son to a preseason Little League clinic. While he and the other boys practiced their swings, I stood near a group of dads, who were talking quietly about Epstein. They had all been learning about the files, and were unanimous in thinking that many of the ultra-rich men in Epstein's orbit had engaged in the abuse. They differed only in how far they allowed their imaginations to go. One man believed there had been many murders on the island, including killings of teen-age girls and young children. Another maintained that Epstein was still alive—living in Israel, he suggested, with Charlie Kirk. I couldn't tell if he was serious; maybe he himself couldn't tell. But the emotion beneath it all was a very real disgust. "I just don't know what to do with this," one father said of the scandal, while watching the kids. "My life is here, and look what's going on with the people running the world." It's hard to imagine the gulf between the public and its leaders getting any wider. ♦