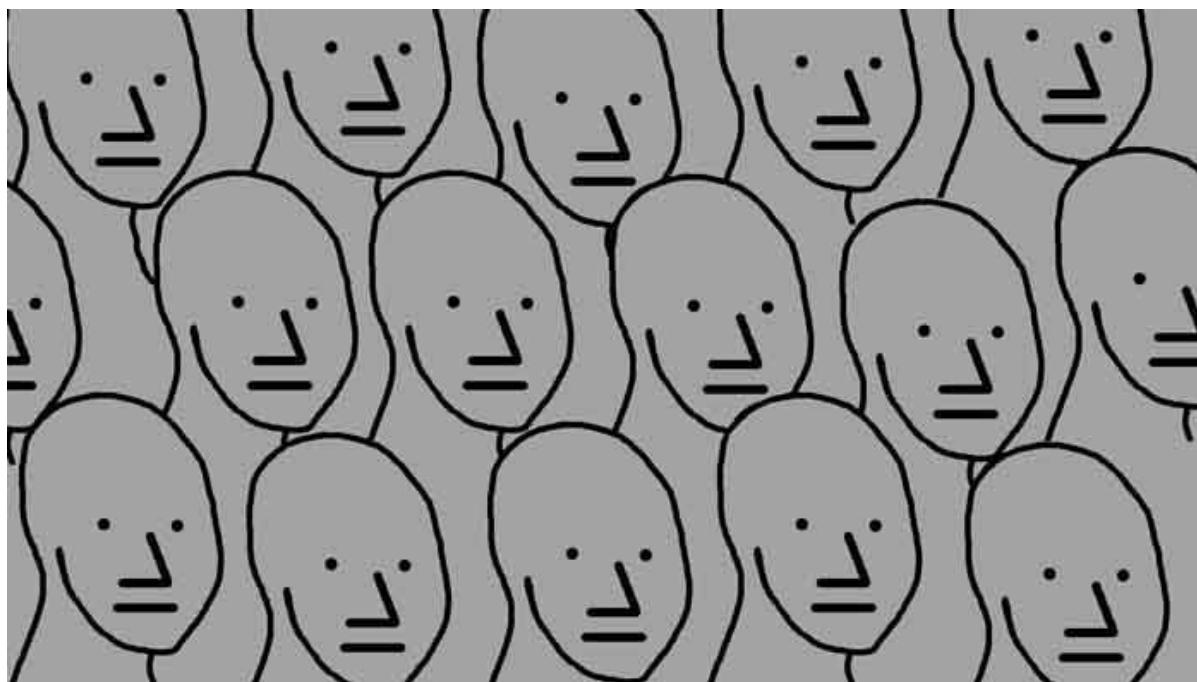


Available Illusions

by [Robert Gear](#) (January 2019)



A Mob of NPCs

A category of psychological error in which an individual understands some information or sensory experience falsely, due to its emotionality, immediacy, frequency or availability, rather than soberly assessing the statistical likelihood of the event, is generated by the “availability heuristic,” which gives rise to the “availability error.” The formal academic discussion of this bias is usually traced to Kahneman and Tverski’s 1970s [work](#) on judgment and decision making. According to Stuart Sutherland in *Irrationality: the Enemy Within*, this error permeates much of our reasoning. All people, at one time or another, make availability errors since it is a shorthand method of decision making and opinion forming. Few of us have time or inclination to look deeply into the statistical likelihood of events or situations since

statistics (themselves often suspect) are “abstract and pallid” as Sutherland says. So, basing our decisions on what is available to our senses allows for fuller and more efficient functioning.

Examples of the prevalence of the availability heuristic in everyday life are legion. For example, when news consumers are exposed to stories about airline accidents or shark attacks, they will tend to decide not to travel by air or swim in the ocean. In fact, of course, the likelihood of being a victim of such an event is remarkably small. According to the US National Safety Council, an individual’s chance of dying as a result of an airline accident are only half that of dying by lightning strike. Well-known sources of such media-hyped hysteria surround events as varied as child abductions or abuse, stock market investing and even fairground accidents. But more mundane, and therefore less “available,” accidents account for a pretty hefty toll of harm; annually, in the United States alone, apparently about 450 people die or are seriously injured falling out of bed. The grim reaper now has a fine crop of “selfie” casualties of the “this-is-me-posing-on-the-edge-of-the Grand . . . (oops)” variety. The widespread belief in the annual “harvest” of 150 deaths caused by falling coconuts is, however, almost certainly an urban legend. But it was taken so seriously by some, that a beach authority in Queensland, Australia had its coconut trees removed. This latter case is a trivial but clear example of how the availability error may serve to buttress government meddling.

Biases so formed often lead to what is now known as NPC (non-playing character) behavior. (NPCs are flat and often annoying non-playable video-game characters exhibiting a set of predetermined responses controlled by the computer, well-known to devotees of the pastime). Such computer-generated creatures

usually have one or two scripted lines that become tiresome but provide ambiance to the active “playing” characters. Recently, the NPC appellation has been cleverly assigned to individuals and institutions that have a seemingly predetermined automatic response to ideological and cultural questions. Such responses are taught and honed, and are now prevalent throughout the Education Systems of much of the West (need I add, “of course”?). The perpetrators of this mass mental cull, however, are not necessarily themselves victims of the availability error. Hard-core Marxists and such-like “warriors” are by their very existence wrapped up in sociopathic bias which often has deeper and more worrying mental peculiarities than a mere error of judgment.

Almost 100 years ago, E. M. Forster’s description of “flat characters” in *Aspects of the Novel*, helped popularize in literary circles a kind of early NPC. Flat characters are fictional and confined to the pages of novels, and in Forster’s sense, they are not *ideologically* ludicrous. He describes them as “little luminous disks of a pre-arranged size, pushed hither and thither like counters across the void or between the stars.” He famously argued that, for example, Mrs. Micawber in *David Copperfield* was flat, since her character can be expressed in one sentence: “I never will desert Mr. Micawber.” For Forster, such characters are best when they are comic.

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Much of the MSM is itself a kind of ubiquitous flat-character.

We know what they are about to say as soon as they appear on stage venting their often-quasi-fictional imaginings. Like Mr. Pickwick, again according to Forster, when you turn them edgeways they are no thicker than a gramophone record.

And perhaps it is best to consider the widespread foolishness of the left as just that: comic and flat (but *not*, perhaps, its current best buddy, the religion of peace, since the devotees of this mindset make use of a variety of utterances depending on the audience targeted). We know what the modern flat-characters will say on any given topic *before they mouth their platitudes*. To verify the truth of this, it is only necessary to ask such replicates about one area of human contention to understand their views on most other areas. Few, of the leftward leaning classes have or can have independent views on most issues. We know beforehand that the words like “racist,” “denialist,” “Islamophobe,” or “Trump is literally Hitler” will be a prominent part of their “argument.” No reasoning is forthcoming because such individuals have been pre-programmed, just as NPCs in video games. They stick to their ideological landscapes as Greyfriar’s Bobby stuck to the grave of its dead master. That is loyalty; but then Bobby was a dog.

Perhaps the bias generated by the availability heuristic is more pronounced among our “liberal” confreres. This was brought home to me recently when I attended a talk about something I have already forgotten, but the general tenor of which is that we live in terrible times. The rejoinder to that is the opening line of *A Tale of Two Cities*: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness.” Or as Paul Harvey, a popular 20th century radio broadcaster put it, “In times like these it helps to remember that there have always been times like

these.”

The subtext of the talk, although only hinted at, was the self-induced terror symptomatic of Trump Derangement Syndrome (TDS), and although that was not the announced topic, TDS just had to fly in, rather like the invisible worm in Blake’s *The Sick Rose*.

I did raise my hand at one point in the after-talk discussion and ask rhetorically what we should make of say, the 14th Century; or indeed much of the 20th Century until the defeat of most communist tyrannies. Of course, no clear answer was given; the present is terrible, and almost nothing will change a mind steeped in quasi-religious beliefs. The speaker even included among the slides flaunted for our edification, the mawkish stock-photo of a distraught-looking polar bear “trapped” on an ice floe.

The speaker had digested without much historical understanding the 24/7 news-cycle memes. This kind of uncritical display even leads some educated people to give up on reproduction of the species to which they and we belong. Of course, you’d have to be “educated” to believe such nonsense. Apparently, this is a common thread of stupidity stemming from left-leaning cultural imposition.

I also recently observed a discussion between a Climate Jihadist and a skeptical (yes, they exist) Climate Scientist. Clearly outmaneuvered, the believer thought she had saved her argument by introducing the clincher “But, what about the hurricanes?” The fact that we have been experiencing the

longest hurricane “drought” since the 1850s was not known by her. Nor could it have, since a very damaging hurricane had just occurred in Florida. That was salient, and therefore *available*, and hence the only fact one needs to know. To update geographically but less mellifluously, G. B. Shaw’s script for the 1938 film version of *Pygmalion*, “In Hertford, New Haven, and New Hampshire, hurricanes hardly ever happen.” And this is true for now, at least.

Researchers themselves, among whom, as in most fields, are frauds and grant seekers, seem as susceptible to the availability error as the “non-scientific” general public. This has been known for a long time. I recently came across the following opinion expressed by Fabrizio, the Romantic and somewhat unheroic hero of Stendhal’s novel, *The Charterhouse of Parma* (translation by Scott-Moncrieff),

. . . three quarters of the sciences that are not mathematical, [are] a collection of enthusiastic simpletons and adroit hypocrites paid by the masters they serve . . .

That sounds about right. And that novel was published in 1839.

Below are some quotes and glosses from influential scientists and journalists (some probably enthusiastic simpletons and adroit hypocrites) that lay bare their failure, whether innocent or intentional, to understand any historical or statistical data about climate patterns, proving that they too can themselves be victims of the availability error. It seems true *at the moment* (*sub species durationis*, as Spinoza might have put it), so that is the trend, and woe betide

civilization, etc.

The vagaries of climate alarmism, date at least as far back as January 10, 1871 when a correspondent of *The Brisbane Courier* dared to express independent thought in describing

. . . a plentiful crop of speculation from weather prophets, and projectors, and half instructed meteorologists, and all the philosophic tribe of Laputa in general, to whom the periodical press now affords such fatal facilities.

An article in *The New York Times* tells us that the US consul to Norway claimed the Arctic seems to be warming up. Hitherto unheard of high temperatures are being experienced. This is followed by description of ice-free regions where only moraines are now visible. Also the report makes clear that glaciers are rapidly disappearing. Such a disturbing picture was given wide exposure around the world. The article included reports from fishermen, seal hunters and explorers all pointing to a warming arctic region.

Did you spot the clue that this is not a contemporary report? The original article is in fact from November, 1922. The innocuous word "fishermen" gives the game away. This word is an example of badspeak, and is probably listed on the Index Verborum Prohibitorum. As we know, it is important to excise suffixes indicating "male," in this case since people who fish in the Arctic region are just as likely to be women. You know, just like coal miners, front line soldiers, sewer maintenance engineers, and so on.

In December, 1939 a report from Stockholm claimed that all the glaciers in eastern Greenland are rapidly melting. According to the leading authority on the Arctic at the time, the glaciers faced a catastrophic collapse.

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And yes, the 1930s are still measured as the hottest decade of the last 100 years (at least in North America). Such summers were hot and dry enough to spur John Steinbeck to write *Grapes of Wrath*, in which the Joad family load their few possessions onto a converted Hudson sedan, and along with multitudes of other “Okies” journey west on Route 66 in search of cooler and better-behaved climes.

In February, 1952, the leading expert on the Arctic, William Carlson, opined that the glaciers of Norway and Alaska had halved in size in only 50 years. This would raise ocean levels, he argued.

This line of newspaper puffery continued in the media until about January 1961 when *The New York Times*, as if on cue, divulged that “an assembly of specialists from several continents seems to have reached unanimous agreement on only one point: it is getting colder.” Note the word “unanimous.” And then we were informed by experts reported in *The Canberra Times* of July 18, 1963 that “Norway’s glaciers are growing

thicker after 200 years of gradual melting.”

By July, 1970 *The New York Times* was “informing” us that both US and Soviets are worried because Arctic Sea Ice has recently become “ominously thicker.”

On Dec 3, 1972, 42 top scientists wrote to President Nixon, warning of an impending ice age. The letter pushes the point that we are on the cusp of . . . “global deterioration of climate . . . by order of magnitude larger than any experienced by civilized mankind.”

The Science Correspondent of *The Guardian* was not to be outdone, and condescended to tell us on January 29, 1974, that “Space Satellites show new Ice Age Coming Fast.”

The cover illustration of *Science News*, on March 1, 1975, shows a scary picture of an ice sheet crushing New York City. Headline: “The Ice Age Cometh?”

And so it continued. *The Chicago Tribune*, March 2, 1975: “B-r-r-r : New Ice Age on Way Soon?”

And *The New York Times* of March 11, 1979 was clear that “One thing is indisputable: the world has been cooling off since World War ll.”

As we know, by the late 1980s, the Fat Controllers of the media-driven world were dusting off their reports from the earlier “warm” part of the century, being careful to correct for badthink terminology.

What these and many similar accounts tell us is that the climate changes and has always changed. What is less obvious is that the purveyors of the alarmism may just be victims of the availability heuristic and as innocent as driven snow or a sunny afternoon. But no doubt some among them, for political, financial and status gain are not averse to tampering with the data in order to feed the narrative and buttress their (and others’) ideological beliefs. As the sculptor in *Ozymandias* knew, such passions yet survive. And as President Eisenhower famously warned, “. . . we should be alert to the possibility that public policy can become captive to a scientific and technological elite.”

Robert Gear now lives in the American Southwest. He is a retired English teacher and has co-authored with his wife several texts in the field of ESL.

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[Back to Home Page](#)