Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic
and Millenarian Movements

# Theoretical Themes in Social Media

**Author:** László-Attila Hubbes
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## Social Media Developments, Characteristics, and Context

The World Wide Web—made possible by computer technology—created the ideal global media platform for apocalyptic views (as it did for many other popular and unpopular views and opinions). By closely following the technological processes of web development and the parallel evolutions of mass communication, it is evident that apocalyptic and millenarian discourses and behaviours both formed and adapted to each new stage of the computerised global village. As Robert Glenn Howard has repeatedly pointed out in his various investigations (1997, 1998, 2006, 2009), apocalypse- and millennium-related topics often occur in online discourses and dialogues, supporting the formation of topical groups, belief communities, and "virtual ekklesiae." The actual era of social media began in the early years of the new millennium with the emergence of Web 2.0. From this period on, we can speak of social media apocalypticism proper, with genuine recombinant apocalypse (Cardone 2007) and improvisational millennialism (Barkun 2003) in cyberspace.

If Marshall McLuhan (1962, 1964) saw in electronic new media, and more specifically in television and cinema, the advent of the "global village," several authors (e.g., Georgiadou 2002; Marshall 2017) have pointed out that the Internet is the media form that actually realises the worldwide closeness, immediacy, simultaneity, interpersonality, and interconnectedness foreseen by McLuhan. In contrast, Vacker (2000, 2012) repeatedly asserts—using as his starting point Alvin Toffler's concept of new media and contemporary society as a "Cairo bazaar" in *Future Shock* (1970)—that what the Internet is creating, rather than a global village, is a '*global bazaar*' of cultures, in which ideas are circulating, mixing, cooperating, and clashing at the same time. But why are these conceptualisations of the Internet as a global village or global bazaar relevant to apocalypticism and millennialism? The keyword here is *global*: through the World Wide Web, the apocalyptic (and millennial) mentality has gone global. At the same time, thanks to social media platforms and applications (websites, portals, wikis, podcasts, video channels, forums, social networking sites, etc.)., popular culture apocalypticism has become 'social' in the sense that it has become an omnipresent issue debated widely in all segments and dimensions of digital society.

In order to clarify the importance of social media in the spread and generalisation of contemporary apocalypticism and millennialism, it is necessary to briefly explain the distinct nature of social media compared to older forms of mass media. As most contemporary authors agree, the essence of social media


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lies in its very social nature, which is dialogical, interactive, and participatory in contrast to the monological, unidirectional, and mostly (centrally) controlled character of earlier forms of media. While the dialogical, interactive, and participatory nature of digital media—together with the generally open accessibility of information, as well as the dissolution of boundaries between content creators (communicators) and users (consumer audience)—has induced long-lasting enthusiasm about the democratising effects of social media (see Loader and Mercea 2011), the same aspects have also led to worries and pessimism (see Crilley and Gillespie 2019).

In this multimodal and multimedial environment, end-time ideas—whether eschatological or millennial, religious or secular—depend not only on their propagators but also on their audience, which in the case of social media are one and the same. Apocalyptic-minded Internet users are mainly concerned with information-seeking activities (Howard 2010) but also with peer-seeking activities, which results in "topical community formation" (Howard 2006, 41–44). Members of such topical communities often engage in "ritual deliberation" (Howard 2009) or "enclave deliberation" (Sunstein 2007, 77, quoted in Amarasingam 2011, 98) around their shared issues, conversing almost solely with one another. Howard provides several examples from his field research: from Christian Millennialists (Howard 1997) through Technogaianists (Howard 1998; see also Environment and Ecology n.d.) to an end-times "virtual ekklesia" (Howard 2010). As he explains, online communities that form around a topic generally thrive on the continuous exchange of ideas based on the principle that divergent ideas lead to the formation of an online ethos of pluralism; however, religious and ideological (especially apocalyptic) online communities may differ from this general rule (Howard 2009). Howard argues that in loose religious congregations, including apocalyptic and millennial ideological opinion groups formed on the web, the community's shared discourse frequently works in the opposite direction—namely, to exclude outsiders or even members who dissent from the core narrative. This is often the case with the phenomenon of "virtual ekklesia" (Howard 2010).

By this latter term, Howard means a religious—particularly Christian—community or fellowship that is formed and thrives on the Internet, with its members hardly knowing each other in person, identifying themselves only by their shared ideas concerning the end times (Howard 2009, 2010; see also Hubbes 2010b). The same is true for non-religious apocalyptic discourse communities. Online apocalyptic convictions are not limited to Howard's religious communities of 'virtual ekklesia'; they similarly produce divisive discourses all over the web, steering and capturing users (both as individuals and as groups) into exclusionary conviction enclosures termed by recent literature as "echo chambers" or "filter bubbles" of social media (see Flaxman, Goel, and Rao 2016). Nevertheless, as Dennis Beesley (2011) points out in his investigation of apocalyptic discourses on video-sharing channels (specifically YouTube), the emergence of such exclusionary opinion communities signals that the Internet also fosters egalitarian and democratic attitudes, which means that a plethora of apocalyptic and millenarian discourses circulate, confront, and interact intermittently, with equal chances of achieving prominence in the networks of the World Wide Web.

This 'democratisation' of narratives, together with easily accessible and easily manageable information for all users, opens the way for the *liberation* of discourses on social media, which is true for apocalyptic discourses as much as for any other ideas. Not only is the emergence of digital/convergent media a revolution in terms of communication technologies, but it also has a culturally and socially liberating effect on self-expression and the uncontrolled circulation of ideas. Dino Enrico Cardone (2007) sees this uncontrolled nature of the Internet, which he attributes to the relative lack of gatekeeping, as one of the

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main stimuli for the proliferation of apocalyptic discourses on the web. He draws several parallels between web media and discourses in general (on the one hand) and traditional apocalyptic discourses (on the other), seeing them both as highly subversive forms of rhetoric:

> *Both apocalypse and the Internet … present the critic with a subversive aspect. The Internet represents a challenge to older electronic media and the status quo discourses they uphold, because it gives voice to a far greater number of individuals. This greater voice occurs in a context devoid of the conventional mass media gatekeeping functions that assure an 'Establishment', or orthodox, viewpoint in mainstream media venues. Apocalyptic is a discourse of subversion which seeks the overthrow of the established order. The apocalyptic, the conspiratorial, and the alternative find in the Net a welcoming medium which shares their subversive quality. (Cardone 2007, 103)*

The subversive nature of the web and apocalyptic (and especially web-based apocalypticism) is further augmented with a line of subversive attitudes characteristic of them: an agonistic stance directed against power and the general state of affairs (perceived as evil or corrupted). They are, then, anti-institutional, anti-authoritarian, anti-establishment, anti-status quo, and anti-mainstream (Cardone 2007), and this attitude is helped by the "erosion of existing authority structures" themselves (Barkun 2003, 20). This agonistic stance is not limited to religious web-based apocalypticism: William Stahl (2011) identifies similar attitudes of contest for authority in science and media, especially in scientific discourses concerning issues related to global climate change. Stahl describes two levels of credibility contest (the level of science and policy makers on the one hand, and the wider public forum on the other) as well as three approaches towards the "climatic apocalypse": one of denial, the other adaptationist, and the third a genuinely apocalyptic stance.

In Cardone's (2007) view, the subversiveness—both of the Internet as medium and of the apocalyptic as rhetoric—also derives from several other shared features: plasticity of data; repetitiveness; residuality of forms, language, and content; a high level of syncretism; preference for alternative facts, views, and modes of expression; and an interpretive urge towards meaning-giving and searching for connections. All of these features involve aspects of non-linearity and neural-like linking between ideas, events, and participants of the end-times discussions in cyberspace (see also Howard 2011; DiTommaso 2020).

As compared to the passive spectators of earlier mass media, in the participatory culture of social media, participants in online debates around the end(s) of the world are at the same time witnesses, audiences, and rhetors of the apocalypse. Apocalyptic arguments are systematically used in digital debates generated by those groups. Given the highly interactive nature of the Internet, it is important to keep in mind that in contrast to earlier practice, online apocalyptic rhetoric is not a monologue but is, rather, dialogic: convergent inward and contentious outward (Hubbes 2010b). As Michael Barkun (2003, 21) explains, the Internet binds together (even if not into 'real communities') isolated individuals who hold fringe views, through the validation that comes from seeing one's beliefs echoed by others.

Barkun points out another essential effect of the Internet: it obscures the distinction between mainstream and fringe sources, and it levels the value of information, making possible complex bricolage editing—the utmost condition for what he calls "improvisational millennialism" (2003, xi). In contrast with traditional



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religious millennialism and more modern (ideological) secular millennialism, Barkun says, contemporary Internet-based improvisational millennialism draws together disparate elements in new combinations, building "simultaneously on Eastern and Western religion, New Age ideas and esotericism, and radical politics, without any sense that the resulting mélange contains incompatible elements" (2003, 11). Obviously, this bricolage, consisting of ideas and facts that are recombined with the help of multiple media, does not take place in a void—it is at the same time the consequence and the forger of the contemporary media milieu. Apocalypticism has become part of "counterknowledge" (Thompson 2008), and, as discussed above, modern mass media (and within it social media) apocalypticism both reflects and forms a particular global spiritual and social environment that is tagged with various labels by scholars investigating these phenomena.

Chip Berlet, who investigates right-wing conspiracism, terms the fundamentalist religious rhetoric adopted by radical conservatives as "apocalyptic demonizing" and "apocalyptic scapegoating" (1999, 5–6), and he refers to the role of mass and social media. Barkun, highlighting strong interconnections between improvisational millennialism (apocalypticism) and conspiracy theories (as well as UFO beliefs), uses the term "stigmatized knowledge" (2003, 23, 26–29). Relying on Richard Hofstadter's "paranoid style" in political discourses, Cardone (2007) also shows parallelisms and intertwinings between conspiracism and the recombinant apocalyptic, and similar ideas have led to the coining of the term "apocalypticizing rhetoric" for the discourses that dominate conspiracist websites (Hubbes 2010a).

Another recent term, "conspirituality," was proposed by Charlotte Ward and David Voas in 2011 and quickly adopted by scholars (for example, Robertson 2013, 2015; Asprem and Dyrendal 2015, 2019). Although it primarily denotes the convergence of conspiracy thinking and New Age spirituality, the literature unanimously agrees on its social media nature and its apocalyptic and millennial aspects (for a discussion on this topic, see Farnsworth 2020). Niels de Jong (2013) describes conspirituality as constructed from the concepts of the cultic milieu (Campbell [1972] 2002), stigmatised (or suppressed) knowledge, and improvisational millennialism (Barkun 2003). Apocalyptic conspiracy mentality often forms an intimate alliance with millennial UFO creeds (see Wojcik 2003) and alien demonologies (Partridge 2004; Wilson 2013). Andrew Fergus Wilson (2013)—starting primarily from Colin Campbell's ([1972] 2002) idea of the "cultic milieu"—relies on these same concepts when he delineates his notion of the "apocalyptic milieu." Though Wilson does not offer a concise definition of the term, he links it—beyond the above-mentioned concepts—on the one hand to the "apocalyptic consciousness" (Ostwalt 1998) and on the other hand to the "New Age milieu," and characterises it as "the readiness for significant sections of the Western population to hope for profound, indeed cataclysmic, change" (Wilson 2013, 268).

Whatever the approach and terminology of the above authors deliberating on the nature of contemporary apocalypticism (and millennialism), they all emphasise one common factor: the essential role of the Internet, and implicitly social media, in the present apocalyptic paradigm. Lorenzo DiTommaso (2014, 2020) presents this phenomenon as a "superflat" apocalypse. On the one hand, this is seen in "the 'superflat' nature of daily life in the Digital Age [and] existence on a data plane with an infinite horizon but no real depth or modulation," where contexts substitute for content. On the other hand, it is seen in an "essentially adolescent way of perceiving the world" in binary categories of good or evil, us or them, complemented by a "puerile desire to see things smashed and to stomp what one does not like" (DiTommaso 2020, 326). DiTommaso summarises the entangled nature of social media and contemporary apocalyptic mentalities:

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> *'Superflat' apocalypticism … proceeds from an essentially heterarchical and nonlinear system of information-creation. Open access to an electronic universe featuring instantaneous data retrieval, unlimited archival capability, and hypertext referencing connects any generative prophet to the full spectrum of apocalyptic predictions past and present. At the same time, user-generated content, multimedia interactivity, and virtual communities permit a real-time public dialogue of new apocalyptic prophecies. In theory, anyone can be a prophet and anyone can influence that shape of a prophecy. The back-and-forth dialogue between the creation and re-creation of apocalyptic prophecies occurs in a social-media forum that is dynamic, instantaneous, democratic, and outside the pale of old theological firewalls. Apocalypticists now bring an omnivorous intellectual appetite to a table where the menu has changed from prix fixe to à la carte, and the number of items available has increased a thousandfold. Syncretism is virtually inevitable. The production of apocalyptic predictions in the digital era has become public, pervasive, and participatory. … Where once apocalyptic revelation was transmitted from prophet or seer to prophetic community along restricted channels, now it can be broadcast across the entire social bandwidth. The prophet today has six billion faces, and that prophet is us. (DiTommaso 2020, 336, emphasis in the original)*

## Topics, Forms, and Forums

In order to get a panoramic view of contemporary social media apocalypticism and millennialism, it is necessary to take into account the main topics, currents, and rhetorical modes, their forms of manifestation, and their sources and forums.

In his 2012 book *The End of the World—Again*, Barry Vacker offers an excellent brief overview of the many apocalypses that have actually occurred or are likely to occur, which can be linked to just as many types of apocalyptic prophecy (or variants of the "apocalypse meme"—Vacker 2012,10). He classifies them into three main categories: apocalypses originating in nature, in culture, and in the cosmos. The first category includes catastrophes such as earthquakes, volcanoes, tsunamis, hurricanes, and typhoons, while the last category is exemplified by comets, meteors, and asteroids crashing upon our planet. These are precisely the natural and cosmic cataclysms often described (foretold) in ancient apocalyptic narratives. The second category refers to human-caused apocalypses, such as wars, conquests, genocides, holocausts, and ecological destruction (Vacker 2012, 29). Based on this trichotomic categorisation, Vacker (2012, 30–31) elaborates a detailed table listing the overviewed types of apocalypse (from which, however, he mentions only very briefly the classical transcendental 'divine' apocalypses involving supernatural beings and events, which nevertheless still constitute the largest body of apocalyptic scenarios). Vacker's list should be completed with the apocalyptic ideas awakened by computer technology: digital eschatology and utopianism (Geraci 2010; Stepanov 2018), and fears regarding an "AI takeover" (Geraci 2010) or even "Robopocalypse" (Wilson 2011). Worries raised by apocalyptic scenarios in which computer breakdowns would cause the fall of present civilisation (e.g., Y2K, also known as the Millennium Bug) or where artificial intelligence (represented by robots, cyber-humans, or computer networks) would enslave or extinguish humanity are compensated, nevertheless, by far-reaching hopes regarding the same AI bringing about a utopian future for humanity—that is, various forms of techno-millennialism (Crockford 2017).

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These discourses share one common feature: they use a language characteristic of apocalyptic prophecy or very similar to it (this might be called “apocalypticizing rhetoric,” see Hubbes 2010a). They all involve a tone of both urgency and authority intended to awaken their audience and to reveal or uncover the ultimate truth they purport to contain. This possession of ultimate truth assures the rhetor an unquestionable legitimation and authorises the use of the “apocalyptic tone” (Derrida 1984).

In terms of rhetorical ethos, however, this apocalyptic tone seems the only common feature of contemporary social media apocalyptic and millennialistic discourses. For classical and more recent apocalyptic texts, Stephen O’Leary (1994) distinguishes two modes of apocalyptic rhetoric: a comic frame and a tragic frame. This applies, obviously, to online apocalyptic narratives as well. As O’Leary explains, based on Kenneth Burke’s (1937) terminology denoting attitudes towards history (named after poetic categories), the tragic frame of apocalyptic rhetoric means an acceptance of eschatological prophecies, a deterministic view of history, and the inevitability of evil, while the comic frame of apocalyptic discourses denotes the human potential of overcoming evil, and postponing or allegorising the apocalypse.

Another similar approach, useful for the reception and interpretation of social media apocalypticism and millennialism, is offered by a sensual set of bird metaphors—roosters, owls, and jays—that capture variations in apocalyptic tone. Richard Landes (1996, 2011, [1998] 2016) discerns two registers. The first, termed ‘roosters’, prophesises doom, its propagators adopting an alarmist attitude. The second stance, called ‘owls,’ is based on ‘worldly’ realism and involves convincing with soothing arguments. A third stance may be proposed (‘jays’) when approaching the topic of apocalypse (whether secular or religious): a mocking or deriding attitude (Hubbes 2020). These attitudes are worth comparing with Stahl’s (2011) three (denying, adaptationist, apocalyptic) public opinion threads towards the ‘climatic apocalypse.’

We can observe examples of each of the above frames and stances in the apocalyptic/millennialistic discourses of social media. They are characteristic not only of the more traditional religious discourses but also of the secular trends (the most notorious being those surrounding Y2K, climate change, mass migration, and the coronavirus pandemic beginning in 2019)—and, indeed, for syncretistic, recombinant apocalypticism as well (e.g., the ‘Mayan apocalypse’ and the ‘Nibiru or Planet X cataclysm’ prophesied for 2012—see Defesche 2007; Gelfer 2011; Wilson 2013; Hubbes 2021). Those who seek signs of the end in secular terms (suggestions of all-ending nuclear war, a human-caused deadly pandemic, environmental catastrophe, or a cosmic cataclysm eradicating life on earth pervade every aspect of contemporary culture) are just as obsessed with finding and demonstrating evidence as the prophets of any religious apocalypse. It is this generalised interest, this “seekership” (Sutcliffe 2017) and ‘seership,’ that characterises social media apocalyptic, leading to what DiTommaso formulated as the apocalyptic “prophet with six billion faces” (2020, 336). We can regard this aspect, on the one hand, as the tragic frame of contemporary diffuse apocalypticism (or often, implicitly, millennialism) in digital media. On the other hand, in Landes’s (1996, [1998] 2016) terms, countering the paranoid enthusiasm of the countless rooster rhetors of the apocalyptic future and their large, committed audience, we can see a probably equally large group of sceptical critics of the apocalyptic mentality (owls). Yet, there are many others who mock and disregard the whole phenomenon (jays) (Hubbes 2020).

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## Social Media Apocalypticism and Millennialism

Today, in the era of the World Wide Web and globalisation, apocalypticism and millennialism are by definition 'social media apocalypticism and millennialism'—in their form, in their content, and in their working alike. Just like any other cultural elements, apocalyptic and millenarian ideas are highly dependent on media; they spread and act through mediatisation. Being mediated messages, not only the form but also the content of apocalyptic discourse and—implicitly—millennialism are shaped by the media technologies used (McLuhan 1964), just as these messages themselves contribute in turn to shaping these media. A major technological breakthrough came with the emergence of the electronic global media of the post-Gutenberg galaxy (Harnad 1991) and, with it, social media, which has created an entirely new environment for apocalyptic and millenarian ideas.

Social media apocalypticism and millenarianism, however, mean not simply the propagation of 'doomsday' ideas across the various network channels of the Internet. Beyond multimediality, the myths of the end have themselves undergone immense changes, recombining in multiple syncretistic forms and narratives, breaking out from the religious sphere, and at the same time impregnating with religious nature even the most secular and scientific discourses. Computer-based social media provide prolific ground for countless groups to propagate their apocalyptic ideas, in which they make use of notorious ancient visions or create newer iconographic and narrative elements. Electronic media generally offer the ultimate form of technical support for "recombinant apocalypse" (Cardone 2007). Moreover, the turn of the millennium and even more the year 2012 (Defesche 2007; Gelfer 2011; Wilson 2013; Geryl 2005), as well as the coronavirus pandemic beginning in 2019 (Dein 2021), have provided temporal–cultural settings for upheavals of the apocalyptic and millenarian mentality. New Age spiritualists and Christian believers, militant fundamentalists and sceptical critics, religious and secular opinion leaders, dispensationalist and environmentalist groups, concerned scientists and conspiracy theorists, and even international news agencies and documentary channels—all compete in a proliferation of apocalyptic topics and images within their pages, blogs, video channels, websites, community portals, digital documentary videos, and comments centred on end-of-the-world spirituality. Contemporary social media apocalypticists and millenarian prophets use the pictorial and rhetorical heritage of various apocalyptic and esoteric traditions, continuously adapting them to the latest current events and recombining them with state-of-the-art scientific visual devices.

The presence of apocalyptic and millenarian discourses and representations in contemporary online mass media is prominent—and social media have an essential role in the propagation of such ideas in global popular culture. The second half of the twentieth century and the turn of the millennium saw the re-emergence of apocalypticism and various fundamentalist millenarianisms. DiTommaso calls this phenomenon "the apocalyptic shift" (2020, 316), and the technical evolution of electronic media has only added to the worldwide spread of such ideas within the global village. While full apocalyptic or millenarian movements might be fringe and sporadic phenomena compared to mainstream social trends, apocalyptic ideas are very prevalent in mass media, popular culture, and contemporary spirituality, constituting a decisive element of the new millennial zeitgeist. The generalised catastrophic–millenarian social media discourses and specific behaviours of various segments of society surrounding the year 2012 have shown that the apocalyptic paradigm has now become an organic part of the twenty-first-century global mentality and imaginary—both religious and non-religious (see Gelfer 2011). As Vacker explains, beyond the fact that we are increasingly aware of the cosmic and natural, and even human-caused threats to human


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civilisation, this obsession with the ‘end of the world as we know it'—which he calls the “apocalypse meme”—results from an anthropocentric way of thinking based on the conviction that humans are at the centre of the entirety of creation or the universe (Vacker 2012, 11–14).

The effervescent apocalyptic debate is rustling all over the Internet, on its countless platforms, channels, and social media applications. By transforming means of communication and creativity, digital media offer newly evolved means of instant and highly influential self-expression through a large variety of genres, from blogs through videos, photographs, articles, posts, comments, and digital memes. In their alternative, recombinant subversiveness, they *are* the apocalyptic media representing every controversial side of the present state and future fate of humankind. These complex multimedia combinations—with viral dissemination and mutations throughout the World Wide Web—show the many faces of apocalypse.

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