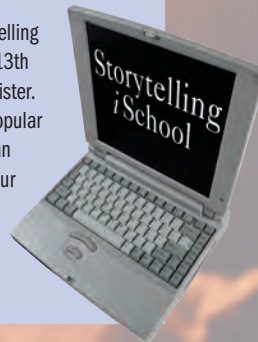


# The Doomsday Clock— By the Numbers

- 7 Number of minutes to midnight when the clock was first set in 1947
- 18 Number of times the clock has been reset since then
- 5 Number of minutes to midnight in clock's current setting
- 2 Number of minutes to midnight in 1953, the closest setting to doomsday in the clock's history (due to H-bomb tests that year)
- 17 Number of minutes to midnight in 1991, the farthest the clock has been pushed back (thanks to the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty talks that year)
- 7 Number of years in the longest span between resets (1953-60)
- 1 Number of years in the shortest span between resets (1990-91 and three other occasions)
- 4 Number of false alarms when warning systems in the US or Russia sent preliminary launch instructions to nuclear missile sites (1947-present)

## And assuming Doomsday doesn't come soon...

The next semester of Storytelling iSchool will begin on April 13th and there's still time to register. To learn more about this popular online course, which you can take from the comfort of your own office, home, or bomb shelter, visit [www.agoodmanonline.com](http://www.agoodmanonline.com).



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*Free-range thinking™ is written by Andy Goodman and edited by Lori Matsumoto.*



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# free-range thinking

## The Minute Hand That Rocks the World

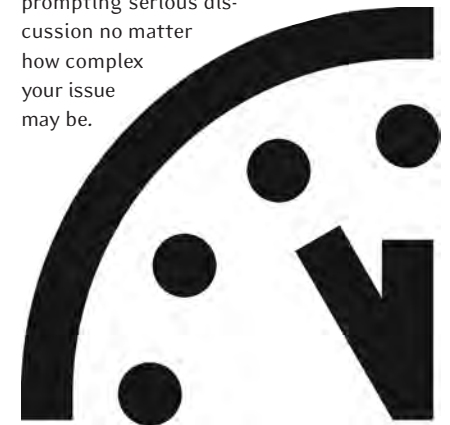
**When it comes to making complex issues  
accessible to the public and attractive to the media,  
the Doomsday Clock is so good it's scary.**

When its minute hand moves, every major wire service reports the change. It has been the subject of impassioned essays in *The New York Times* as well as satiric riffs on *The Daily Show*. The Who, Sting, and Ozzy Osborne have sung about it; the NBC series *Heroes* incorporated it into a recent episode; and when it was adjusted most recently in January, the announcement triggered over one thousand news reports around the globe.

The Doomsday Clock was created in 1947 by the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists (BAS), an organization founded by University of Chicago scientists who worked on the Manhattan Project. Cognizant of the nuclear genie they had unleashed, BAS' members decided to take responsibility for warning the public about this new and potentially catastrophic danger. With a clock as their chosen indicator, they set the hands at seven minutes to midnight and have reset them whenever they've

believed humankind's prospects for self-destruction had substantially changed.

And the world has taken notice, especially this year when new factors such as climate change helped move the clock two minutes closer to midnight. Nonprofits should take notice, too, because underlying the success of the Doomsday Clock are specific principles for attracting attention and prompting serious discussion no matter how complex your issue may be.



► To learn more about the Doomsday Clock, I spoke with Kennette Benedict, Executive Director of The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, along with several others who played key roles in the January announcement. What emerged from those conversations were five principles that have contributed to the clock's impact and can serve as a checklist for public interest groups developing (or evaluating) indicator programs of their own.

### People (especially reporters) will consider the source first.

Changes in the Doomsday Clock are determined by the Bulletin's Board of Directors in consultation with its Board of Sponsors. No less a personage than Albert Einstein helped found the Board of Sponsors (which currently includes eighteen Nobel laureates), and Robert Oppenheimer was its first chairman.

Credentials alone, though, do not completely account for the respect and trust BAS has earned over the years. Rather than hide from their role as midwives to the nuclear age, the scientists who founded BAS openly took responsibility for their deeds. They created the clock in the spirit of humility and, to some extent, atonement. That spirit has infused every announced change since 1947, clearly conveying a very different tone from most scientific pronouncements.

### Data is important, but it's not everything.

According to Benedict, there is no specific formula for resetting the clock. BAS' Board of Directors discusses the state of world affairs at each meeting to determine whether current trends warrant a change. In 2006, outside experts were invited to present the latest information about the security of nuclear stockpiles, aging fail-safe systems,

and similar threats to the planet's safety. BAS also solicited testimony on climate change and nanotechnology – the first time these issues have risen to such a high priority.

Subsequent discussions about changing the clock are informed by this evidence, but ultimately the decision comes down to a judgment call, or what Benedict refers to as “the wisdom of an extraordinarily smart crowd.” While a handful of op-ed writers have complained about the arbitrary nature of this process, the public hasn't seemed to mind, and this doesn't surprise Benedict. “People are looking for someone who can sort through the data and give them their best judgment,” she says, likening her colleagues to doctors who consider a set of symptoms before making a prognosis – except in this case, the patient is the planet.

### When seeking a symbol, keep it simple.

As an indicator, a clock was a logical choice for the scientists who gave us the second-by-second countdown of A-bomb tests. But it has turned out to be an inspired choice as well, striking a chord with people all over the world. Media strategists responsible for publicizing the clock's latest change credit this simplicity for its broad impact. “The genius of the Doomsday Clock is that it is simple, direct, and communicates exactly what you need to know about a grave situation,” says Scott Stapf, senior partner for The Hastings Group.

Pam Solo, President of the Civil Society Institute, provided strategic guidance and funding for the January announcement and is also a believer in the “less is more” approach. “The clock is a two-by-four to the side of the head,” she says. “It wakes people up.” When Benedict retained the design firm Pentagram to update the clock's look for the January press conference (see cover), the designers

took its simplicity to a new level, showing only a quarter of a clock face comprised of two lines, four circles and an arc – all in basic black.

### Star power helps.

The January clock change was announced in a press conference that featured live satellite feeds from Washington, DC and London. Stephen Hawking, a BAS Sponsor and arguably the world's most recognizable and respected scientist, read a statement from the Royal Society in London. While the sixty-year legacy of the clock, a bi-national event, and the live satellite transmission all added sizzle to the announcement, Hawking's participation was clearly a major draw. According to Stapf, the demand for press credentials in the run-up to the event exceeded anything he had experienced before.

### Timing is critical, but it's also nice to be lucky.

Nuclear saber rattling in North Korea and

Iran, the war in Iraq, and the drumbeat of reports about accelerating climate change lent urgency to BAS' Board of Directors deliberations in June 2006. When they were finally prepared to make their announcement six months later, these stories were still current and long-term trends were headed in the same dismal direction, but popular culture provided an unexpected boost.

Just days before the press conference, an episode of *24* showed terrorists detonating an atomic device on American soil – a fictional event that still caused millions of American to ponder the unthinkable. The impact of that episode was clearly felt at the press conference, too. “You wouldn't believe how many reporters asked me about that episode,” says Stapf.

*(To read more about The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists and the Doomsday Clock, visit [www.thebulletin.org](http://www.thebulletin.org). Special thanks to Rodney Ferguson of Lipman Hearne for his contributions to this article.)* ■



“We have a duty to alert the public to the unnecessary risks that we live with every day,” Stephen Hawking stated as the latest change in the Doomsday Clock was unveiled.