

CONTRIBUTIONS FROM THE PARTICIPANTS FOR THE WORKSHOP “SCIENCE FICTION DAYS” SEPTEMBER 28-29, 2023

What could a “Post-Truth Society” look like in the near, mid-term and long-term future?? Please feel free to elaborate as much as you like, don’t be shy! The most “wacky” scenarios will be invited to be shared on Day 1 in the session “Discussion Papers”. Selection Jury: Una & Markus 😊

1. Post-truth society: some scenarios

Narrative 1: Matthew de Abaitua

Some thoughts on a train journey, off the top of my head:

It is our present condition that has been described as “post-truth”. This implies that prior to this moment we lived in a “truth society”. And prior to that, a “pre-truth” society. So what in this context is signified by *truth*? It is a gesture toward consensus. Once upon a time if you were lying then those lies were exposed and you suffered the consequences of those lies. It is typically euphemistic of our times to use the construction of post-truth when surely the only thing that is beyond truth is lies. A *lying society* has truth to it, It is a commonplace observation that where the middle class once offered a kind of scrutiny and critical thinking, they now provide the cheerleading and their professions have devolved into what David Graeber described as bullshit industries. Bullshit being a particular species of lying. The success of Chat GPT reveals how much of our writing and communication has become bullshitting, and the “hallucinations” of generative AI language models are really the instances in which their bullshitting is exposed.

The post-truth society is not confined to pop culture, politics and bureaucracy. The crisis of reproducibility in the sciences suggests something is awry in scientific publishing. Perverse incentives and overloaded academics lead to insufficient scrutiny of datasets. Scientific consensus is challenged by its own internal hierarchies of publication and professional advancement, and it is assailed from without - by malign forces incentivised - initially - to disrupt any consensus around the climate emergency.

A post-truth society is one in which credulity can be measured and exploited. The Flat Earth Society was an experiment to harvest the identities of the most credulous people and use this as a training dataset to determine if it was possible to use manufactured media to undermine faith in the fundamental scientific discovery that the world is round. In a post-truth society, ignorance is monetisable if you can detect and measure it. Facebook sell their audiences to political advertisers in tranches defined by their ignorance.

So much for the present day. The question should be: what would a post-post truth society look like? Would it be possible to restore a centre or consensus? Or is that mere nostalgia,

what we can call *centrementality*. Our democracy and our science was designed to be dynamic and contested. To advance by argument. In politics, those arguments have rarely been rational. Where science collides with politics - the pandemic, the vaccines, climate emergency - it becomes embroiled in this highly emotional and wilfully irrational discourse. Like Galileo coming up against the disapproval of the Church, hierarchies of power and control admit rationality only as an alibi for decisions already taken.

For me, the post-post truth society (and how might this be different from a "truth society") can be generated on two pathways: one is the automated verification and interrogation of assertions. An AI fact-checker growing out of existing social media moderation practices to incorporate further contested domains, such as court rooms and civil disputes. The entry-level philosophical labour of society. The second path way is to continue on our dynamic model of contestation and challenge but build tools to incorporate further viewpoints. Here I am thinking of the many non-human minds on Earth and finding ways to incorporate their needs and requirements into our planning and decision making processes. Speculative ideas such as the interspecies internet and my own Dolittle Machine consider the possibility of an expansion of translation of non-human communication. To me, post-post-truth might be found in an enlightenment that extends beyond human culture into the other cultures that connect and inter-penetrate our own.

Anyway my train journey is at an end now, and I must head off into the post-truth of academia. Where we use metrics, league tables and other performative rationalisms to pretend that all is well, all will be fine, we are all doing great.

Matthew De Abaitua

Additional thoughts: Instead of governments acting upon scientific advice, a post-truth government ensures that it only commissions the science that supports its politically determined actions. This leads to a scenario in which groups of scientists seeking agency to act upon the pressing problems of the world outside of nation states. This kind of scenario is played out (optimistically) in Kim Stanley Robinson's Ministry of the Future. So my narrative would be about counter-culture or underground scientific networks seeking to bring about change without the support of nation states: entrepreneur-supported geo-engineering projects; privately-sponsored genetic experimentation; bespoke private enterprise science for specific classes and clientele, following existing trends in healthcare and space exploration. Against this trend, the scientific communities who believe in knowledge as an inherent good - much like the open source publishing networks - will be in opposition to autocratically-funded, self-serving technologies and politically-motivated discoveries. Give the amount of noise and disruption aimed at scientists producing politically-inconvenient truths, there is a role for a post-truth assistant or manager to protect scientists from antagonists.

Narrative 2: Mark Robinson

Scenario 1 - 2050: Live and Let Live

By 2050, the world has four remaining regional nation states: Greater Americana, greater China, Greater India, and Greater Europe. The populations in each state however are divided into two distinct camps. The first camp is for those who reject the 'post-truth' culture and want to live lives governed by facts, experts, and order. The second camp is for those who embrace the 'post-truth' culture and much prefer the trustworthiness of believing whatever they wish to believe.

The two groups live in separate areas and rarely have contact with each other; but both are quite happy about that. Everyone has a vote under proportional representation, and this means that each region is governed by coalitions across wide political beliefs. Climate change has created mayhem across the planet but the rise in global temperatures has seemingly been stabilized.

Scenario 2 - 2100: A New Dawn

By 2100, 'post-truth' culture has been illegalised, all statements by leaders (of whatever party or grouping) are fact checked by roaming AI robots who give 'yellow' warning notices for any falsehoods followed, after three occurrences in a year, by a 'red' card exile. There is no appeal and sentences are long to an area formally known as Australia. Inmates must recant 'fake news', show remorse that can be verified by the warden AI Robots, subscribe to science weekly, and pass a truth sincerity audit before being released on 2 years' probation.

Iconic monuments have been erected to leading experts in many fields of scientific and literature endeavour, including one to the descendants of Una & Markus. CERN has been granted an open-ended funding commitment by the sole remaining political entity: the global Green Party that is headquartered in Stockholm. The Future Circular Collider is in now known as the CC and is in its 4th upgrade configuration. Human habitation throughout the inner planets is well established and thriving.

Climate change has been reversed through fierce enforcement of a zero emissions global policy by roaming armed AI Robots. The only legitimate generation of electricity is either solar, wind or nuclear fusion. The International emissions control authority (IECA) has successfully prosecuted several 'post truth' fundamentalist world leaders and rogue industrialists at the Hague for 'crimes against the planet'. Isolated pockets of 'post truthers' hide in remote, largely underground outposts. The authorities leave these groups alone, although occasional drone footage shows members spraying 'just stop telling the truth' confetti at sports events.

The History channel runs countless documentaries about how chaotic it was when 'post-truth' was allowed as a belief system even in segregated areas. Love Island has been replaced by Love Planet where contestants demonstrate what they have done for 'truth' to emerge as the dominant cultural norm. Global weekly voting is announced through the host AI Robot. The annual winner receives a long and sincere hug from one of Greta Thunberg's descendants.

Scenario 3 - 2200: Post-Truth Strikes Back

By 2200, following the violent and brutal 2180 to 2185 'global fiction' uprising, post-truth culture dominates. Nations states have re-emerged with 'post-truth' parties in power. Human experts have been replaced by machines who make the best of unclear instructions from populist leaders who are enthusiastically elected on wild promises. Manipulation of the masses by unscrupulous leaders is accepted in a astonishingly willing return to serfdom.

Monuments of the leading experts have long ago been torn down, burned, and replaced by massive index fingers. The CERN campus has been sacked and trophies taken by gangs of horn wearing insurrectionists. The CC has been abandoned and the entrance bizarrely blocked by a 1960's London red bus. Climate change has returned with a vengeance and the world population has halved through natural disasters. Mass migration from the equatorial regions to the poles has resulted in house prices in the Falkland Islands and Tromsø skyrocketing. The assemblies of human habitation throughout the inner planets have all banned transportation to and from earth.

The History channel runs documentaries of how, in the late 2180s, the programmers of the AI Robots who previously handed out yellow and red cards were hunted down, prosecuted, and imprisoned in the very area that they incarcerated people to. The History Channel red button allows subscribers to run their own versions of history. Love Planet has been replaced by Love Yourself where contestants demonstrate what they have done for 'post truth' to emerge as the dominant cultural norm. Global weekly voting is announced through the robot host and the annual winner receives a long and sincere hug from one of Donald Trump's [alleged] descendants.

Narrative 3: S.J. Groenewegen

Near-term future – five years in the future, 2028

Assumptions:

1. No human being is the same as any other in terms of sensory perception, memory, imagination, processing emotions, etc.
2. No human society presently enjoys full equality or equity for all its people.

My novel, *The Disinformation War* (GoldSF, 2023, ISBN 9781913380809), is set in a near-future Britain with an authoritarian government. Although it should be noted that I don't specify the date in my novel. I extrapolated themes from a few different strands of socio-economic and political thought from the last few centuries to form the world in which the novel is set. One of those strands is the 'post-truthism' used by Vladimir Putin, Victor Orbán, Donald Trump, Boris Johnson and their ilk to obtain and keep power.

The heroes in my novel work through what their strategy should be, which is articulated by two of the main characters and summarised in these two quotes:

Libby took a puff from her inhaler. 'Look, the key to this is information, who controls it and how people digest it. We can take down wrong information and put up the right information. We bolster influencers who challenge the destructive vision, but who have constructive ideas about social structures and the economy. We encourage

people who know others taken in by conspiracies to seek out safe ways for them to get deprogrammed. We make it harder for people to get into positions of power in the media and politics through information sabotage. They know each other through long-lasting networks from school, university and families, but while it all looks impregnable, I don't think it is. Those people behave like they're paranoid. Their psychological projection is, I think, a weakness to exploit.'

Libby paused for a quick breath. 'Most importantly, we help our allies who have been fighting all of this for such a long time.'

Libby's words flicked a switch in Kayla's mind. She stood up straighter. 'There are ways to automate what Libby described and make it look like there's more of us than there are. It's sort of what the other side do, only we shouldn't lie like they do.'

Kayla keeps a journal and writes a little more about that point of not using the tactics used by their enemies:

Disinformation, lies and propaganda erode trust. Trust underpins liberal representative democracies, and any worthwhile human relationship. Disinformation, lies and propaganda are used in war/conflict to destabilise and dehumanise the enemy. Lies linger, long after the fight.

Our heroes discover a big problem with their use of digital tools to combat the disinformation when their enemies return to analogue methods of spreading lies and propaganda...

I spoke about disinformation – what it is and how to spot and try to stop it -- at this year's British Science Fiction Convention (Eastercon: Conversation 2023). My speaking notes are here: <https://www.sjgroenewegen.co.uk/the-power-of-words>. My talk only brushes the surface of a huge topic and is from a particular point of view, but it covers how I define and view it.

Mid-term future - 500 years in the future, 2523

Assumptions:

1. There hasn't been an extinction event before 2523 that's wiped out most humans and mammals on Earth.
2. Humans haven't left Earth in numbers so great as to have depopulated the planet.
3. No advancements are ever made in an even way, and there are usually unintended consequences (good, bad, something in between) affecting different populations in different ways.

Climate crisis has resulted in population movement on a grand scale from badly affected zones to areas less affected. That's despite brutal attempts to stop that movement (beginning in the early 21st century), and despite the persistent revivals of eugenics and various 'junk sciences'. Certain groups that feel threatened by the changes exaggerate ethnic differences to encourage conflict to varying degrees of success. While many countries

familiar to people in 2023 still exist, many do not. Borders have changed in various places. History is rewritten in several places, both for benign and malign purposes. Human biological realities persist in the face of denialism grounded in 'social Darwinism', biological essentialism, and the like.

Conflict still occurs over causes of the environmental changes, despite the overwhelming scientific consensus. Conspiracy theories about social engineering responses abound and are similar to claims in 2023 England about '15-minute cities' curtailing freedom of movement. Several of these 'theories' result in violence on a scale similar to that which occurred in Rwanda during 1994.

New pathogens emerge from the changing climate and solutions. Most are harmless to humans, but there are those that are not. Conspiracy theories similar to those that emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020-24 emerge. Efficacy of education campaigns depend on how cynical populations are, and how much their leaders are using "post-truth" tactics to maintain power.

Superconductor technology rolls out globally, reducing costs in electrical power. Those savings are not uniformly passed on to consumers (private or industrial). Mag-lev trains are developed, revolutionising land-based transport of goods and passengers. Conspiracy theorists claim they are responsible for a perceived rise in the number of certain cancer cases.

Digital data losses, archiving attempts, and capability of data mining and analysis all have localised problems and bursts of remedial activity. Autocratic governments/corporations tend to destroy historical records and commentary. Adrienne Bernhard noted in 2023 that, 'Many digital archives already struggle to exclude or annotate content, not to mention living websites like Wikipedia, Twitter or Facebook, which must be continuously monitored for harmful or fraudulent content.' (in 'Shining a Light on the Digital Dark Age', published 19 July 2023 on <https://longnow.org/ideas/shining-a-light-on-the-digital-dark-age/>).

The first generations of sophisticated algorithms dubbed 'AI' (edited to add: actually large language models, or LLMs) ate themselves and burned out within a few years of their development. Leading up to this, they were adopted by the advertising industry, that pushed for reduced regulations on claims made about products and services, which were granted in some jurisdictions with a myriad of consequences. Various digital advances like crypto-currencies and non-fungible tokens emerge, flourish, and die off. Collectively, they result in a wider acceptance that global finance is a shared, manufactured illusion. Nearing 2523, there is a global revolution that completely changes the financial world. A popular political group uses the slogan, 'If there's no money, then money is no obstacle to progress', to great effect.

A global corporation involved in developing numerous tech solutions from sustainable communications and transport, to medical solutions, wins the race to 'fix' cognitive impairment in humans. They hide an alarming side-effect: the tech makes users hyper-vulnerable to suggestions, effectively zombifying them. The scandal is revealed during an expose of working practices; the corporation spins it as an urban myth. It's only successful in the short-term but the story persists.

Long-term future – 1,000 years in the future, 3023

Assumptions:

1. There hasn't been an extinction event before 3023 that's wiped out most humans and mammals on Earth.
2. Humans haven't left Earth in numbers so great as to have depopulated the planet. Attempts to colonise planets relatively nearby are producing mixed results.
3. No advancements are ever made in an even way, and there are usually unintended consequences (good, bad, something in between) affecting different populations in different ways.

The focus of dealing with continuing climate-caused issues has turned to terra-forming and geo-engineering to 'reclaim' land lost to rising oceans. Further advances in superconductor technology make the doing relative easy. The difficulties are in identifying consequences and mitigating the negative effects. Messages about 'natural' changes, like lunar deceleration, versus manufactured changes are too often 'hi-jacked' by those pushing political agendas. Pockets of 'natural Earth' groups rise in power in some places, pushing back on developments regardless of how successful or useful they are. Some of these groups are effective in using 'post-truth' tactics.

The massive changes in the economic and financial systems pave the way to a 'post-scarcity' economy for large groups of the population. In part, this is achieved through an unintended breakthrough in tackling the 'collective amnesia' where human narrative systems fail (see as examples Paul Constance, 'The River Twice', 28 June 2023 <https://longnow.org/ideas/the-river-twice/> and Paul Constance, 'Peering Into The Invisible Present', 8 November 2022 <https://longnow.org/ideas/peering-into-the-invisible-present/>). The developments enabled humans to fully break from established narratives about ownership and worth. (Note: despite the hegemony of 'western' ideas of ownership and worth, even in 2023 there are groups of people such as First Nations Australians who generally do not view objects intrinsically as possessions.)

Narrative 4: Pablo Garcia Tello

My "narrative" would be just what I think is an apparently innocent question:

Is it possible to live in a future (society) where it would be completely impossible for all practical purposes to distinguish what is true vs. what is real? What do I mean with "for all practical purposes"? Well, you may think it in this way...you see a video in the WWW of this future society which takes an enormous reverse engineering computational time to figure out whether it is a fake one or a real one.

Some links for thought:

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-to-tell-if-a-photo-is-an-ai-generated-fake/>

<https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2120481119>

How will this fact affect our trust in politicians?

Is there any form of government resilient enough to overcome this?

How will science be distinguished from AI simulated science?

Etc

Narrative 5: Kathleen Jennings

My thoughts on a post-truth future are filtered through what I see (occasionally) happening in the more joyously chaotic corners of the internet (cough~Tumblr~cough). There is a delight in invention, of yes-and-ing someone's initial fabrication of something from wholecloth. It's related to terrible things of course, and to conspiracies, and to urban legends and gossip, but at its most open there's an incredible collaborative humanity to it. A tangle of paths-of-desire in a very pure way, evading many more identifiable larger interests, and tending to slither out from their grasp. Leading to:

- Ungovernable mass-improvisation (à la Goncharov)
- The purely invented work of entertainment as awards scam and/or corporate write-off (why make it at all if no-one will ever see it? I picture this playing out as a high-tech screwball comedy)
- A fragmentation of community units to a personally verifiable scale, sometimes hedged-in by stories that happened to a friend of a cousin, sometimes gathered around a closely-held local anecdote. Aesthetic as arbiter of value. Related, a rise of federalism, and the return of the plucky local reporter (meets folk horror, obviously).
- Long-term: Apparently verifiable facts imprinted in the built environment — events impressed upon the environment and therefore believed to be verifiable, but changing and shifting how they are understood as with archaeology. And elements that particularly appeal to other communities are sometimes traded or taken wholesale, confusing the record.

To the extent this is a narrative, I imagine it told in a mode less dystopian than wildly, wistfully comedic — perhaps *Be Kind, Rewind* with a touch of *Mr Burns, A Post-Electric Play*.

Narrative 6: Magda Osman

What actually is Post Truth? Instead, what would a Truth society look like?

Given that the focus is on what a Post-truth society looks like, the assumption is that there was a “truth” society. When were we ever in a state of the world where society enjoyed exchanges that were always accurate, always true, and that any news media, advertising, and political discourse was assumed to always be true? Logically it follows that if we talk about a “post” truth world, we had a time where there was “truth”, was this pre-internet?

To get some grip on the ideas that will be discussed, it might be worth considering what conceptions of truth are, and departures from truth, and how modern (or ancient) the

concept of truth is. Misinformation and disinformation are terms that have only circulated in recent vernacular in the last 6 years:

<https://theconversation.com/misinformation-why-it-may-not-necessarily-lead-to-bad-behaviour-199123>

We have always had rumour, gossip, and other such entertaining ways of communicating with each other since humanities beginnings, and evidence of distorting details has even been discovered in communication on clay and papyrus. Moreover, there has always been some concern about propaganda, challenges to orthodoxy, and regressive responses to it. One we start to deconstruct what we mean by truth, and deviations from it, we confront other accepted ideas of distortions of truth (e.g. satire, parody etc...) - so when do these distortions move from what are acceptable to examples that suggest we are in an infodemic of bad information.

Adams, Z., Osman, M., Bechlivanidis, C., & Meder, B. (2023). (Why) Is misinformation a problem?. Perspectives on Psychological Science.

Another thing to consider is, what the intelligentsia think of as a post truth world awash with misinformation and disinformation, is not what people outside of this circle think. It matters to get an understanding of what people generally believe to be misinformation and in turn whether it is as problematic as current thinking (and alarm for the future) is.

[Osman, M., Adams, Z., Meder, B., Bechlivanidis, C., Verduga, O., & Strong, C. \(2022\). People's understanding of the concept of misinformation. Journal of Risk Research.](#)

Finally, on a related topic - our worry that we are awash with conspiracy theories also seems to be something that reflects excessive alarm which doesn't bear out when we look at the empirical findings.

<https://theconversation.com/conspiracy-theories-arent-on-the-rise-we-need-to-stop-panicking-208033>

The point I would be making in discussions is why is it that we have reached a point in our history that we need to think about, and forecast what a society would look like in a post truth era? Why now? Is this not part of a cycle where we reach a point in information technology where we worry about the implications, along with accompanying moral panic (e.g. printing press, the telegraph, radio, television, internet)? Are we not just repeating history? If not, how can we be sure that this is unprecedented? My challenge would be, what would a Truth Society look like? This to me would be something that would be entirely unique to human history and human communication.

Narrative 7: Raghu Movva

AI in its current form is poised to create more divisions within society. The way Silicon Valley is repeating the social media business and algorithms models without oversight and "non-democratic" governments will be using it for public order surveillance and cyber warfare is but an eventual reality unfortunately. Europe is doing some interesting work fortunately on this regard and [this Economist debate](#) between Yuval Noal Harari & Mustafa Suleyman (Deepmind & Inflection.ai) shares some very solid points that I have been pondering upon, especially the views of Mr. Harari that I very much echo.

AI is also anti knowledge and wisdom in its current forms towards society and is being modelled and controlled centrally while designed to be interacted globally which opens a strong risk towards malicious and non-humanist use of technology on a massive scale. During this information age, as we strive towards bettering human society, enabling knowledge to the masses and not information overload which creates knowledge complexity that we see today in society, even at leadership levels across institutions and industry. On this part of AI, information and influence on society, [here is an interesting discussion](#) that shares many of the points I spoke of above from Maria Ressa (Nobel Peace Prize Winner), Mark Cuban among others.

2. Shared resources

Post-truth

[Are we living in a post-truth era? Yes, but that's because we're a post-truth species. | \(ted.com\)](#)

[Lying in Politics: Hannah Arendt on Deception, Self-Deception, and the Psychology of Defactualization – The Marginalian](#)

[The Anxiety of Influencers. by Barrett Swanson](#): “Epistemologically, this is where we are as a country: when content gets expurgated because of blatant misinformation, it is taken as a sure sign of that source’s truthfulness.”

[Laura Kuenssberg’s Time as BBC Political Editor has been a Catastrophic, Systemic Failure – Byline Times](#):

<https://www.wired.com/story/generative-ai-deepfakes-disinformation-psychology/>: AI and post truth worlds

<https://www.friendsofeurope.org/insights/from-post-truth-to-post-reality-the-future-of-disinformation/>: From post truth to post reality

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343099318_Post-Truth_Society_The_AI-driven_Society_Where_No_One_Is_Responsible: What happens when no-one is responsible

Artificial intelligence

General

[150 African Workers for AI Companies Vote to Unionize | Time](#)

[AI Narratives: A History of Imaginative Thinking about Intelligent Machines | Oxford Academic \(oup.com\)](#)

<https://futurism.com/ai-trained-ai-generated-data-interview> - When AI Is Trained on AI-Generated Data, Strange Things Start to Happen

<https://substack.com/notes/post/p-124603164> Language Is a Poor Heuristic For Intelligence: With the emergence of LLM “AI”, everyone will have to learn something many disabled people have always understood, by Karawynn Long. Posted on 26 June 2023.

<https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/women-warnings-ai-danger-risk-before-chatgpt-1234804367/> “These Women Tried to Warn Us About AI: Today the risks of artificial intelligence are clear — but the warning signs have been there all along”, Rolling Stone Magazine, by Lorena O’Neil. 12 August 2023.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7605294/>: Societal implications of AI

<https://arxiv.org/pdf/1709.04511.pdf>: A Study of AI Population Dynamics with Million-agent Reinforcement Learning

Society of Authors response to AI

[Long-awaited but vague – the SoA view on the government’s artificial intelligence white paper - The Society of Authors](#)

[Artificial Intelligence - The Society of Authors](#)

Article in The Bookseller about the UK’s Copyright Licensing Agency principles on AI

https://www.thebookseller.com/news/copyright-licensing-agency-rolls-out-list-of-ai-principles?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Morning%20Briefing (8 September 2023)

Glasgow 2024, A Worldcon for Our Futures statement on AI-generated art

<https://glasgow2024.org/about/ai-art-statement/>

Ted Chiang on AI

[Will A.I. Become the New McKinsey? | The New Yorker](#)

[Silicon Valley Is Turning Into Its Own Worst Fear \(buzzfeednews.com\)](https://www.buzzfeednews.com)

[Sci-fi writer Ted Chiang: 'The machines we have now are not conscious' | Financial Times \(ft.com\)](https://www.ft.com)

Deepfake Pope Francis

[Why Pope Francis Is the Star of AI-Generated Photos - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com)

[Pope in a coat: Viral AI image fakery spooks its creator \(rappler.com\)](https://www.rappler.com)

Longtermism

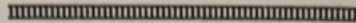
Thread on TESCREAL acronym: [Émile P. Torres \(they/them\) on Twitter: "I see some folks starting to use the "TESCREAL" acronym. So, here's a short thread on what it stands for and why it's important. 🗳️" / Twitter](#)

Against Longtermism: [Why longtermism is the world's most dangerous secular credo | Aeon Essays](#)

A Note and a Chart Concerning Narrative Modes (from *Always Coming Home*, Ursula K. Le Guin)

A Note and a Chart Concerning Narrative Modes

PUNCTUATION



In inscriptions and mural writing this punctuation was used except for a standing stroke to divide sentences. In ordinary and literary writing punctuation was careful and complex, including indications of paragraphs and tempo which we use only for music. The principal signs were:

— Equivalent to our period

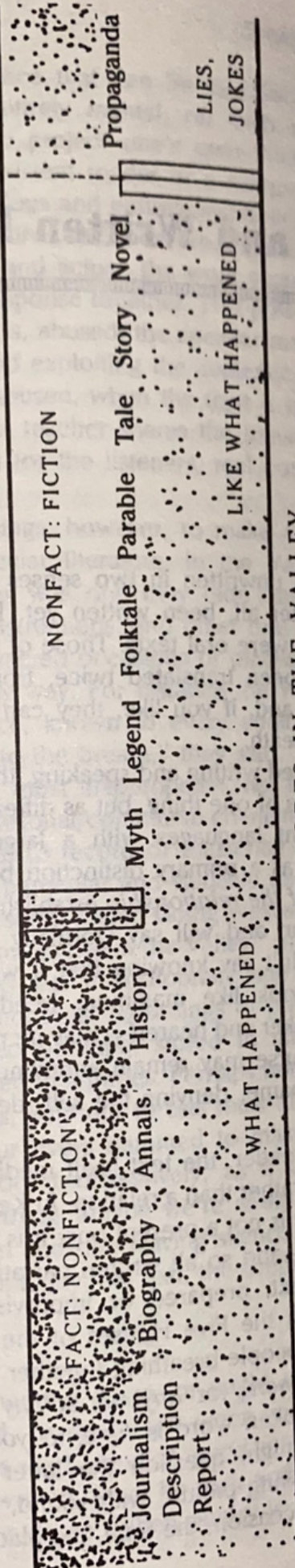
The principal mode of our thinking is binary: on/off, hard/soft, true/false, etc. Our categories of narrative follow the pattern. Narrative is either factual (nonfiction) or nonfactual (fiction). The distinction is clear, and the feeble forms such as the "novelised biography" or the "nonfiction novel" that attempt to ignore it only demonstrate its firmness.

In the Valley the distinction is gradual and messy. The kind of narrative that tells "what happened" is never clearly defined by genre, style, or valuation from the kind that tells a story "like what happened." Some of the Romantic Tales certainly recount real events; some of the sober Historical Accounts concern events which we do not admit into the category of the real, or the possible. Here of course is the difference: where you stop, on what grounds you stop, and say, "Reality goes no further."

If fact and fiction are not clearly separated in Kesh literature, truth and falsehood, however, are. A deliberate lie (slander, boast, tall tale) is identified as such and is not considered in the light of literature at all. In this case I find our categories perhaps less clear than theirs. The distinction is one of intent, and we often do not make it at all, since we allow propaganda to be qualified both as journalism and as fiction; while the Kesh dismiss it as a lie.

The accompanying chart attempts to show these continuities and discontinuities.

NARRATIVE MODES IN WESTERN CIVILISATION



NARRATIVE MODES IN THE VALLEY

3. Further reading and other suggestions

- Graham Farmelo, *The Strangest Man: The Hidden Life of Paul Dirac, Quantum Genius*
- Catherine Gallagher, *Rise of Fictionality*
- David Held and Thomas Hale, *Beyond Gridlock*
- Rob Iliffe, *Priest of Nature: The religious world of Isaac Newton*
- Ursula K. Le Guin, *Always Coming Home*
- Meghan O’Gieblyn, *God, Human, Animal, Machine: Technology, Metaphor, and the Search for Meaning*
- Nick Robins, *The Corporation that Changed the World*
- Simon Schama, *Foreign Bodies*
- Nick Spencer, *Magisteria: The Entangled Histories of Science and Religion*
- Mustafa Suleman, *The Coming War*
- [The Quiet Year - Wikipedia](#) (board game)