LOST VOICES

**THE IMPORTANCE OF PEOPLE TO BEING
THE NARRATORS OF THEIR OWN STORY**

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

In a world in which technology is increasing exponentially, it is requiring more and more energy in the form of culture to anticipate the problems we will face as a result. However, society appears to have stagnated, hypernormalisation resulting from a world so complicated no one can comprehend it. The resulting options are to reverse advancement, as seen in the backsliding of Western politics, or an acceleration in the creation of culture.

Stories fundamentally shape the way we perceive reality. A basal part of human nature, they are how we make sense of facts, form identities and create society through shared belief in the same stories. These stories are incredibly powerful, and revolutions of any size need new stories to rally behind and strive for.

Through telling more and different stories, we will be able to regain our sense of the future. Exploring Utopias and Dystopias are important in telling us what to strive for and what to avoid. Telling as many stories as possible gives us the best chance of finding the ones relevant to us. Everyone in society should contribute to the telling of the next story, to ensure that as many people's values as possible are embedded; it is also through the telling of stories that these values become evident in themselves. Finally, the testing and optimising of stories through exchange improves them further, exposing flaws and the subconscious.
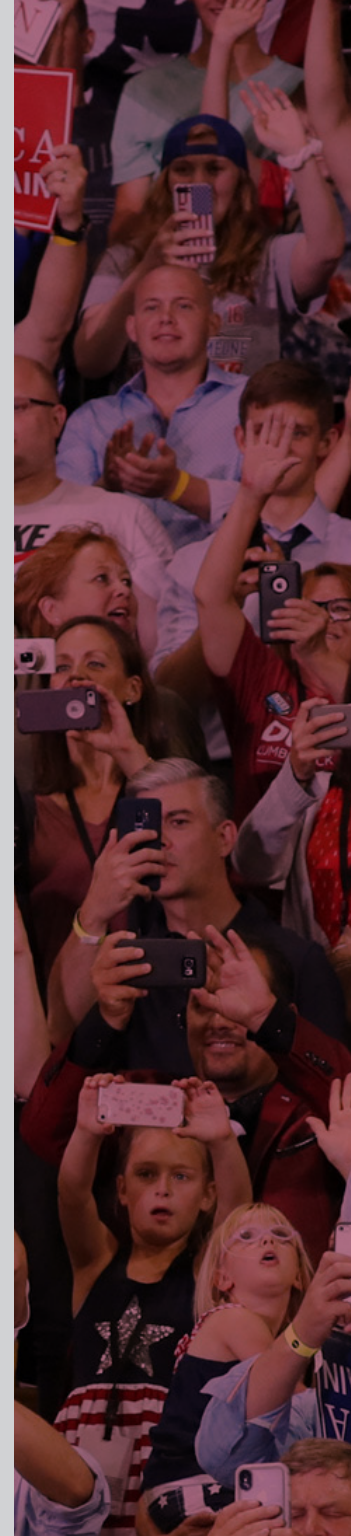
If all these criteria are achieved the result is potential, the needed element to inspire action towards the future.
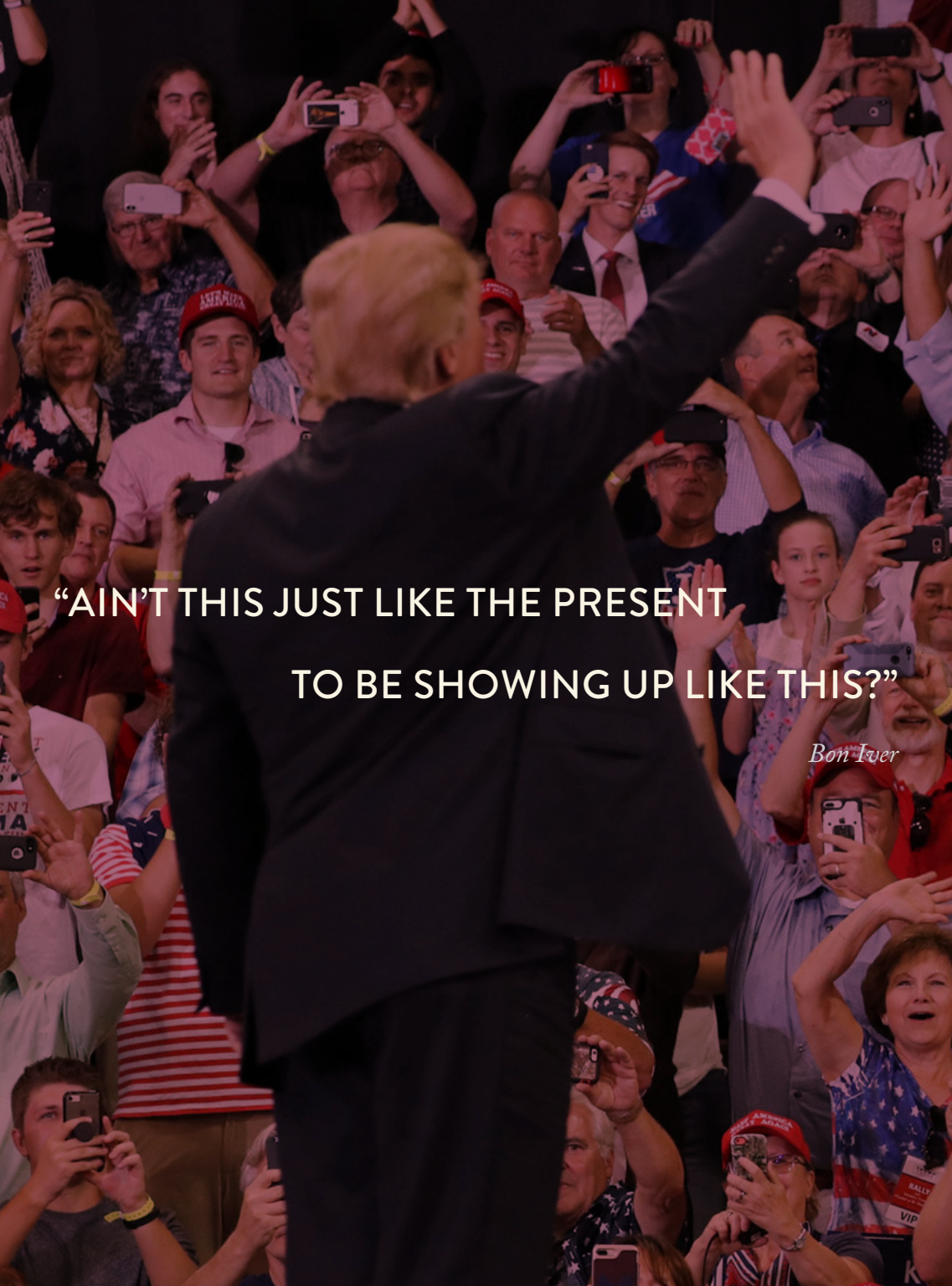
"AIN'T THIS JUST LIKE THE PRESENT

TO BE SHOWING UP LIKE THIS?"

Bon Iver

THE PROBLEM OF THE PRESENT

DARE TO UNDERSTAND

"Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity" was Kant's first sentence in his attempt to explain the Enlightenment. Rather than accept the things we are told, when we are truly *free* we can question the world around us, in an attempt to gain more understanding of it.[1]

David Deutsch interpreted the idea of progress in an enlightened modern context in the following way:

"Optimism (in the sense that I have advocated) is the theory that all failures – all evils – are due to insufficient knowledge… Problems are inevitable, because our knowledge will always be infinitely far from complete. Some problems are hard, but it is a mistake to confuse hard problems with problems unlikely to be solved. Problems are soluble, and each particular evil is a problem that can be solved. An optimistic civilization is open and not afraid to innovate, and is based on traditions of criticism. Its institutions keep improving, and the most important knowledge that they embody is knowledge of how to detect and eliminate errors."[2]

1.	Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now* (London: Allen Lane, 2018).

2.	David Deutsch, *The Beginning of Infinity: Explanations That Transform the World* (London: Penguin Books, 2012).

ENERGY AND DISORDER

The second law of thermodynamics states that the entropy of a closed system will always increase over time. In other words, unless there is energy applied to the system, randomness and disorder always increase.

Pinker uses this physical concept to talk about the progression of society; human effort applied to the system has increased order, and our control over the world. By applying energy to the world, we have managed to keep entropy at bay, even increasing order. As Kelly puts it, *"Ever since the Enlightenment and the invention of science, we've managed to create a tiny bit more that we've destroyed each year. But that few percent positive difference is compounded over decades into what we might call civilization."*[3]

It could be said that this is what makes life unique. Intelligent life being the *"process of local, provisional reversal of entropy."*[4]

This entropy-reducing energy can take two forms. The first is physical power, or *"altering the position of matter at or near the earth's surface"*[5] as Bertrand Russell called it. The second is harder to define but increasingly important: information.[6] Gaining an increased understanding of the world both fights chaos in itself, but also makes our applications of *moving matter* more efficient and effective.

ACCELERATION

Ever since the Enlightenment and the beginning of the scientific method, we have seen a rapid acceleration in the advancement in technology. Technology is difficult to define; coming from the Greek *techne,* meaning 'art' or 'craft', *tekhnologia* is translated as 'systematic treatment.'[7] It is perhaps best summarised as the application of scientific knowledge. An important aspect of technology is that it is self-reinforcing.

As we build on the knowledge of previous generations, every additional person becomes a potential resource. An exploding population has meant an explosion in creativity and brain-power; more time and energy to be applied to more advanced and wider fields of technology.

Together with the compounding factor that with every piece of time-freeing technology allowing following generations to worry less about large proportions of their lives, the result being increased focus on one aspect of technology. The nuclear physicist does not also have to know how to build his house and harvest his food. It is this specialisation that is both caused by technology and simultaneously advances technology ever faster.

Coupled to this, in the computer age we are currently in, technology is becoming unconstrained by the physical world. Computing power is following Moore's Law, an exponential curve where the available computing power doubles roughly every year and a half. This means that since the 1970's the processing power available for a given cost has increased by a factor of 100,000,000. So not only has the amount of technology being developed increased, but the time taken to iterate has also fallen dramatically.

And thus, technology increases exponentially.

STAGNATION

It has been said of the twentieth century that it started with utopian dreaming and ended with nostalgia.[8] We seem to no longer have the enlightened optimism that Deutsch was talking about. We are afraid of the future, while nonetheless not looking for alternatives.

By almost any measure, we are living in the best moment in human history. We are living through a period of unparalleled peace throughout the world, in which for the first time more people are suffering from obesity than malnutrition. It is estimated that the advances made by just 100 scientists have saved *5 billion* lives, and counting.[9]

Applying John Rawl's *Veil of Ignorance* theory,[10] we can try and get an objective measure of the state of our world. Undeniably more people are living better lives now than at any point in history; the world is by no means perfect, but if you could choose a time to be born, it be now.

However, this does not appear to be reflected in the average person. As Nisbet says in his book *History of the Idea of Progress,* "The scepticism regarding Western progress that was once

3. Kevin Kelly, *The Inevitable: Understanding the 12 Technological Forces That Will Shape Our Future*, Reprint Ed (London: Penguin Books, 2017).

4. F Berardi, *Futurability: The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility* (Verso, 2017).

5. Bertrand Russell, 'In Praise of Idleness', in *In Praise of Idleness and Other Essays*, 1915.

6. Pinker.

7. Oxford Dictionaries, 'Technology' <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/technology> [accessed 6 December 2018].

8. Lynne Segal, *Radical Happiness* (London: Verso, 2017).

9. Pinker.

10. The American philosopher John Rawls codified a moral society in his "Veil of Ignorance" theory, building on the social contract theory that originated in the Age of Enlightenment. As summarised by Maxcy; *"Rawls suggests that you imagine yourself in an original position behind a veil of ignorance. Behind this veil, you know nothing of yourself and your natural abilities, or your position in society. You know nothing of your sex, race, nationality, or individual tastes. Behind such a veil of ignorance all individuals are simply specified as rational, free, and morally equal beings." Spencer J. Maxcy, Ethical School Leadership (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Education, 2002).*

confined to a very small number of intellectuals in the nineteenth century has grown and spread to not merely the large majority of intellectuals in this final quarter of the century, but to many millions of other people in the West"[11] In one poll, the majority of people polled in the eleven Western countries said they think that the world is getting worse.[12]

Trust in institutions is also incredibly low. In the Edelman *Trust Barometer,* two-thirds of the countries it studies reported fewer than 50 per cent of respondents now trust mainstream business, government, media and non-governmental organisations to 'do what is right'. 15 per cent believe that 'the present system is working' while 53 per cent do not.

ENTROPY

These two forces currently driving society seem at odds with one another. How is it possible that technology is constantly improving at a breath-taking and ever accelerating pace, but we live in a world that feels stuck? When further examined, there is no contradiction between these as they are addressing different things; the acceleration is technological, whereas the stagnation is societal.

Berardi summarises this poignantly: *"Then came the time of impotence. The overall rhythm of information has accelerated. Those flows are perceived as neural stimuli by the conscious organism, while the sensory organism lives in a permanent state of nervous electrostimulation and bodily contraction."*[13]

It is not very long ago that humans would have known everything they needed to know to survive; they would have mastery over all the technology available to them. The weapons to hunt their food with, the fire to cook it with, the shelter to eat it in. But as our society has become more complex, this is clearly no longer the case. No one person can be expected to know all the technology that goes into the farming of the salmon they eat, the weaving of their duvet that keeps them warm and the firing of their house's bricks that gives them shelter. Our economy has pushed us into smaller and smaller niches, *specialisations*, to the point that it is no longer possible to have a total overview. When forced to only understand a small piece of the entire system because it is far too complex, no one feels like they are in control.

Bridle points out that we have even started developing more technology to help us understand the existing technology; *"As the world around us increases in technological complexity, our understanding of it diminishes. Underlying this trend is a single idea: the belief that our existence is understandable through computation, and more data is enough to help us build a better world."*[14]

With every added piece of complexity, we also increase the potential for entropy. It is requiring more and more energy from society to determine what the technology means to us, how it should be utilised, how it affects individuals, the community and the world at large. We have reached the point of the trajectory curve where humans are no longer adapting to the technology fast enough - as a whole, or as individuals. Society is no longer able to proactively foresee technological issues on the horizon, and instead has become purely reactive. Individuals are seeing life around them radically change, unable to keep up, and are feeling left behind.

Marx and Engels wrote that *"in communist society…it is possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic"*[15], the aim being to reduce alienation where a worker feels that they have no control over their actions. This does not, however, address the alienation coming purely from the amount of technology itself; from there being an ever-increasing world that we feel the need to understand. This produces symptoms described by Monbiot; *"Loneliness is just one symptom of a wider crisis of alienation: a loss of connection with people and place, and with a sense of meaning and purpose. Society, the world's living systems, our happiness, our self-control, our sense of belonging: all are falling apart. Why has this happened?"*[16]

The documentary maker Adam Curtis describes this as *Hypernormalisation*, explaining that governments and technologists are merely attempting to keep the world stable by creating a 'fake' world, as the real world is far too complex to understand.[17] Calling back to the Soviet Union, he explains that the government invented an alternative reality in which the communist system was not failing, and while the citizens knew this was not the case as they could see around them the failures of the state, it became more convenient for everyone to accept this shared delusion.

If we want to break out of the cycle of hypernormalisation, we are left with two choices: slow down the acceleration of technology or break out of the stagnation of current times.

11.   R A Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress*, Harper Colophon Books (Basic Books, 1980).

12.   Will Dahlgreen, 'Chinese People Are Most Likely to Feel the World Is Getting Better', *YouGov*, 2016 <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/lifestyle/articles-reports/2016/01/05/chinese-people-are-most-optimistic-world> [accessed 13 March 2019].

13.   Berardi.

14.   James Bridle, *The New Dark Age* (London: Verso, 2018).

15.   Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *A Critique of the German Ideology*, 1932.

16.   Monbiot.

17.   Adam Curtis, *HyperNormalisation* (United Kingdom: BBC, 2016).

"At a certain point, Obama changed his philosophy from the hopeful 'Yes We Can' of 2008 to a cynical 'Don't Do Anything Stupid'. Okay, I told myself, 'Don't Do Anything Stupid' is a pragmatic compromise considering the complexity of the contemporary world."[18]

REVERSING ADVANCEMENT

The elections over the last few years have generally been trying to pull the brake on technology, and even attempt to make the train reverse. This has resulted in votes against the establishment, that are really a thinly veiled attempt to return to an old establishment. Rather than striving towards radical new systems, the current 'rebellion' is to go backwards, back to a time where the pace of things was slower, and one could still feel in control (at least if you were a straight white male). There is no longer the perception within society that there are options that have not yet been tried, future alternatives not yet discovered that may answer the problems of today.

This rearward view that has led to populist backsliding around the world is best exemplified in the examples of the UK Brexit vote and the election for Donald Trump as president, but there are also examples in Hungary, Poland, Italy, and France. What unites these movements is an idea that the best days are in the past, and there must be a regression back to the 'good old days.' These movements *"look backward to an age in which the nation was ethnically homogenous, orthodox cultural and religious values prevailed, and economies were powered by farming and manufacturing."*[19]

The most literal example of this is Trump's campaign slogan *"Make America Great Again"*, making the point that currently America is not great and will not even return to this through forward progress and more problem solving, but that the ideal society came and went; that recent developments must be undone. It is also interesting to note that one of the best predictors of Trump support was pessimism, with sixty-nine per cent of Trump supporters feeling that the US was *"seriously off track."*[20]

Similar backward-looking campaign phrasing was used in the EU referendum in the UK, such as *"Let's Take Back Control"* and *"We Want Our Country Back,"*[21] hearkening back to a

time of British Imperialism. As in the US example, there is a strong link between voting for Brexit and believing Britain's best days lie in the past.[22]

Whilst this appeal to nostalgia clearly worked on voters, it is of course not based in truth. As already discussed, in almost every factor the US and UK are better off now than ever before, and it is clearly now a more moral society than ever in its history, for example with regards to the LGBT community, let alone equality of racial minorities. These populist movements are threatening human progress and the values of the Enlightenment, constituting *"a pushback of elements of human nature – tribalism, authoritarianism, demonization, zero-sum thinking – against the Enlightenment institutions that were designed to circumvent them."*[23]

There is also little point of attempting to slow down the pace of technology for a variety of reasons. As discussed, technology is applied knowledge, so to slow down technology we would have to collectively forget. While this has happened at various points in history, not only did it decrease the quality of life, but society eventually sprung back - for every dark age there has been a renaissance. Technology should therefore be seen as something that almost is a physical force in itself, that can be harnessed but only ineffectively controlled.

In addition to this the problems facing the world of tomorrow are becoming too big to be tackled by ignorance and avoidance. While Europe could come out against gene modification in foetuses, China might still attempt it, and the effects would still be felt everywhere. We are living in the Nuclear Age, where no country, society or individual can live in total isolation from the effects of others.[24] Burying our heads in the sand is a short-sighted strategy, in that it is no strategy at all.

It is clear then, that if slowing the technology is not the solution, we must speed up society.

EXPONENTIAL CULTURE

People are no longer dying in the same technological world as they were born in. 10,000 years ago, you could have made an educated guess as to what life would be like 1,000 years in the future. Progress was happening, but it was at such a slow pace that a generation over a lifetime could easily adjust to these

18. Berardi.

19. Pinker.

20. Jon Huang and others, 'Election 2016: Exit Polls', *The New York Times*, 2016 <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/11/08/us/politics/election-exit-polls.html> [accessed 5 June 2018].

21. Michael Deacon, 'EU Referendum: Boris Johnson Fires up the Brexit Juggernaut', *The Telegraph*, 2016 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/boris-johnson/12190736/EU-referendum-Boris-Johnson-fires-up-the-Brexit-juggernaut.html> [accessed 5 June 2018]; Leda Reynolds, "We Want Our Country Back" Farage Rallies Troops Ahead of "Independence Day" Brexit Vote', *Express*, 2016 <https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/664333/We-want-our-country-back-Farage-rallies-troops-ahead-of-Independence-Day-Brexit> [accessed 5 June 2018].

22. BBC News, 'The English Question: Young Are Less Proud to Be English', *BBC News*, 2018 <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-44142843> [accessed 5 June 2018].

23. Pinker.

24. Yuval Noah Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, 1st Editio (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2018).

new advancements; perhaps it was a new method of harvesting slightly more efficiently, or a way of keeping livestock alive a few years longer.

Fast forward to 1000 years ago, and it was no longer possible to see a millennium into the future; the Vikings and Anglo-Saxons could not have predicted today's internet. In their lifetime they may have seen technology advance more rapidly, but not in a way that it greatly changed the lives of most people. Perhaps it is a new navigational tool or a new, more deadly form of weapon.

Starting with the Age of the Enlightenment we saw technology really start to take off. Within a person's lifetime, steam power could have become widespread, making it suddenly possible to travel distances in hours that as a child would have taken days. They may have witnessed society's transformation by electricity or long-distance communication. It was difficult to see what the world would look like at the end of your life, and while adjustment may have been sometimes difficult, it was possible.

In this day and age, it is difficult to even know which sector the next big disruption will take place in. Will Artificial Intelligence enable self-driving cars, or will it make everyone redundant? Will better understanding of the brain allow for curing of mental illnesses, or will it just create more effective advertising? Will gene editing be able to cure all disease, or will it create a separate class of superhumans?

Technology has been advancing exponentially, and while society has still come out on top in this race until now, that is not a law of nature. With each passing moment, technology may outpace what society is equipped to deal with; indeed, we are seeing signs that the climate crisis may have broken the limits of what humans are capable of dealing with. The societal rate of progress must increase to stay ever above that of the technology; the only way to effectively harness the future is if we know how we want to approach the problems.

There is a riddle given to children in France. Lilies in a pond must be kept in check, as their growth means they double every day, and if they were to cover the pond they would kill everything inside it. The children are told it takes 30 days to cover the pond. When does it cover half? The answer is of course 29 days. There is only one day to save the pond.[25]

25. Donella H. Meadows and others, *The Limits to Growth* (New York: Universe Books, 1972).

"AFTER NOURISHMENT,
SHELTER AND COMPANIONSHIP,

STORIES ARE THE THING WE
NEED MOST IN THE WORLD."

Phillip Pullman

THE STORIES OF THE PAST

WHAT MAKES US HUMAN?

The biggest advantage we humans have evolutionarily is our compassion. There is no other animal that feels the same amount of compassion we feel for one another,[26] and not only do we empathise and try to help one another, but we encode these ideas in moral norms. Our brains are adapted to be able to understand other human's emotions and viewpoints, and it already shows at fourteen months, when children begin to help each other reach objects another cannot.[27] At age two, children start sharing treasured items, and by three they start reacting against others violating social norms.[28]

Fundamentally social creatures, we need each other more than material goods, perhaps even food and water.[29] Evolutionarily, leaving the group meant much lower survival chances, so emotional pain developed to drive us back. In language, we use the same words for physical and emotional pain.[30] Social contact is known to reduce physical pain, such as when we hug children after they hurt themselves.[31] Conversely, a reduction in social contact is intended to cause emotional pain as a stand-in for physical pain, such as with solitary confinement.[32]

It is as a result of this compassion that we are also the best mammal (with the possible exception of the naked mole

26. Keith Jensen, Amrisha Vaish, and Marco F. H. Schmidt, 'The Emergence of Human Prosociality: Aligning with Others through Feelings, Concerns, and Norms', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 5.July (2014), 1–16 <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00822>.

27. Felix Warneken and Michael Tomasello, 'Helping and Cooperation at 14 Months of Age', *Infancy*, 11.3 (2007), 271–94.

28. Federico Rossano, Hannes Rakoczy, and Michael Tomasello, 'Young Children's Understanding of Violations of Property Rights', *Cognition*, 121.2 (2011), 219–27 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2011.06.007>.*and (2*

29. Matthew D Eisenberger, Naomi I., Lieberman, 'Why It Hurts to Be Left Out', *English*, 2005, 109–28.

30. Franklin D. McMillan, 'The Psychobiology of Social Pain: Evidence for a Neurocognitive Overlap with Physical Pain and Welfare Implications for Social Animals with Special Attention to the Domestic Dog (Canis Familiaris)', *Physiology and Behavior*, 167 (2016), 154–71 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.physbeh.2016.09.013>.

31. Eisenberger, Naomi I., Lieberman.

32. Shaun Gallagher, 'The Cruel and Unusual Phenomenology of Solitary Confinement', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 5.2 (2014), 237–45 <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00585>.

rat)[33] at cooperating. We evolved and have undoubtedly come to dominate the planet, although there are many bigger and stronger animals. As Harari explains, *"One versus one, or even ten versus ten, chimpanzees might be better than us. But, if you pit a thousand humans against a thousand chimpanzees, the humans will win easily, for the simple reason that a thousand chimpanzees cannot cooperate at all."*[34]

This cooperation is possible, because humans have the imagination to create fictional stories. *"We can cooperate flexibly with countless numbers of strangers, because we alone, of all the animals on the planet, can create and believe fictions, fictional stories. And as long as everybody believes in the same fiction, everybody obeys [sic] and follows the same rules, the same norms, the same values."*[35]

"Just imagine Wembley Stadium with 100,000 chimpanzees. Complete madness."[36]

EVERYTHING AS A STORY

These stories are unique to humans, and central to everything we do.

Our brains have evolved to think in stories, and this is how we perceive the world around us. As Marshall states, *"stories perform a fundamental cognitive function: they are the means by which the Emotional Brain makes sense of the information collected by the Rational Brain. People may hold information in the form of data and figures, but their beliefs about it are held entirely in the form of stories."*[37] And as Kant already said, our minds help us structure our experience of reality; thus the rules of reality (as we know it) are intrinsic to the mind; the reality as we know it is shaped by stories.

Clifford Geertz describes humans as the *"unfinished animals"*[38], with which he meant that our human nature is not totally intrinsic to us, rather being shaped by external forces around us; it is *"more created than it is discovered."*[39] The stories we tell and collectively believe have a much bigger impact on creating society than the other animalistic instincts within ourselves.

As the science fiction writer Ursula K Le Guin puts it, *"The story—from Rumpelstiltskin to War and Peace—is one of the basic tools invented by the human mind for the purpose of understand-*

ing. *There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories."*[40]

The money we use to pay for real physical objects has no inherent value, but the story that all of society believes inscribes it with such. There is no such thing as a 'nation' in the natural world, borders do not alter the course of a tornado or cause birds to question their migration patterns.

Language constantly confronts us with words borrowed from the world of stories. We read newspaper stories, when people recount an interesting event we comment on how that is a 'great story', in other places we hear about the 'narrative' being insufficient to convince stakeholders: in journalism, in politics, in architecture competitions. In this sense, language exposes how reliant we are on stories, when in actuality we go through most of life unaware of how much our society is shaped by them.

THE POWER OF STORIES

These stories are powerful then, given how inherent they are to our understanding of the world. As soon as we are confronted by a problem, we immediately search for the consistent and comprehensible story,[41] paying little attention to how reliable the facts are. Because these stories play to our most fundamentally basal human instincts, they can take on incredible power.

Stories have the ability to change the values we hold. The values we share are no laws of nature (the enlightenment idea of 'human rights' is just another story[42]), and we are not born with them. They are created by *"our social environment, by the cues and responses we receive from other people, and by the stories we tell ourselves and each other."*[43] They are also shaped by the political environment we live in.[44]

"Nations and peoples are largely the stories they feed themselves. If they tell themselves stories that are lies, they will suffer the future consequences of those lies. If they tell themselves stories that face their own truths, they will free their histories for future flowerings."[45]

There is a strongly self-reinforcing aspect to this, where the values of the society we live in become normalised. This means the next generation can then build from this new base-

33. Hynek Burda and others, 'Are Naked and Common Mole-Rats Eusocial and If so, Why?', *Behavioral Ecology and Sociobiology*, 47.5 (2000), 293–303 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s002650050669>.

34. Yuval Noah Harari, 'What Explains the Rise of Humans?', in *TEDGlobalLondon*, 2015.

35. Harari, 'What Explains the Rise of Humans?'

36. Harari, 'What Explains the Rise of Humans?'

37. George Marshall, *Don't Even Think About It*, 1st Editio (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2014).

38. Barry Schwartz, *Why We Work* (London: Simon & Schuster UK, 2015).

39. Barry Schwartz, 'The Way We Think About Work Is Broken' (TED, 2014).

40. Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*, 1st U.S. E (New York: Harpercollins, 1992).

41. Monbiot.

42. Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens* (London: Harvill Secker, 2014).

43. Monbiot.

44. Stefan Svallfors, 'Policy Feedback, Generational Replacement, and Attitudes to State Intervention: Eastern and Western Germany, 1990–2006', *European Political Science Review*, 2.1 (2010), 119–35 <https://doi.org/DOI: 10.1017/S1755773909990257>.

45. B Okri, *A Way of Being Free*, EBL-Schweitzer (Head of Zeus, 2014).

line and go further in this direction. This is the process of policy feedback, also known as the Values Ratchet.[46]

This can cause societal backsliding: *"If people live under a cruel and grasping political system, they tend to normalise and internalise it, absorbing its dominant trends and translating them into extrinsic values. This, in turn, permits an even crueller and more grasping political system to emerge."*[47]

However, the same process can also work in the positive direction, and if *"people live in a country in which no one is allowed to fall out of the boat, in which social norms are characterised by kindness, empathy, community and freedom from want and fear, their values are likely to shift towards the intrinsic end."*[48]

Politics always attempts to shape these stories in a way that they will in turn shape us (making no judgement on motives, or even awareness of this happening). Thatcher for example said, *"Economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul."*[49]

Our love for stories can even make us support protagonists that stand against the values we have. Lord of the Rings and the Narnia series for example put us on the side of autocracy, destruction of industry and even *"divine right over secular power."*[50] Instead, we choose to ignore the clash with our own values, as the desire for a good story is more important.

Viewed from the perspective it is easy to understand how people often make decisions that go against their own interest. We are never the cold, fact-based machines that modern economics tries to convince us we are. Rather we look for our social identities on the election ballot, and the stories that go with them. *"Perhaps we could see these tendencies as complementing our fondness for narratives: we interpret the world through our attachments, rather than through reasoned observation. We attach ourselves to stories and to social groups, and take the positions that seem to align with these attachments."*[51]

Monbiot describes the narrative we see again and again in politics: *"Disorder afflicts the land, caused by powerful and nefarious forces working against the interests of humanity. The hero – who might be one person or a group of people – revolts against this disorder, fights the nefarious forces, overcomes them despite great odds and restores order."*[52]

"The most grotesque doctrines can look like common sense when embedded in a compelling narrative, as Lenin, Hitler, Georges Sorel, Gabriele D'Annunzio and Ayn Rand discovered."[53] In more recent times, the Remain campaign in the EU Referendum and Hillary Clinton, it could be argued, lost their respective elec-

tions due to not having a compelling narrative. Many voted against their own interests, because the story of one side was more coherent.

Conspiracy theories are similarly a result of this desire to have everything explained by a simple story. In this sense conspiracy theories are similar to populist politics; a simple overarching theory to explain something that in reality is beyond comprehension.

It would seem logical that the solution to this could be facts, that more information is able to change our minds and convince us of new directions. Monbiot disputes this, saying *"A string of facts, however well attested, has no power to correct or dislodge a powerful story. The only response it is likely to provoke is indignation: people often angrily deny facts that clash with the narrative 'truth' established in their minds."*[54]

"Drawing on experimental work, Marshall shows that, even when people have been told something is fictitious, they will cling to it if it makes a good story and they have heard it often enough. Attempts to refute such stories tend only to reinforce them, as the disproof constitutes another iteration of the narrative. When we argue, 'It's not true that a shadowy clique of American politicians orchestrated the attack on the World Trade Centre', those who believe the false account hear that 'a shadowy clique of American politicians orchestrated the attack on the World Trade Centre'. The phrase 'It's not true that' carries less weight than the familiar narrative to which it is attached."[55]

However, when a story becomes too dominant and unquestionable, the result is a narrative that placates through not allowing other stories to be imagined. One of the strongest fictions in the stagnant era we are living within is the political-economic system the world is currently governed by. We are living in an era where we forget that neoliberalism is just a story, a story of which we appear to *"accept the proposition that this utopian faith describes a neutral force – a kind of biological law, like Darwin's theory of evolution."*[56] 'The Economy', that drives daily life and determines people's path through life before they are even born is a story that did not even exist 300 years ago.

Monbiot explains that one of the reasons for *"neoliberalism's remarkable longevity is the absence of countervailing stories. When laissez-faire economics led to catastrophe in 1929, John Maynard Keynes devised a comprehensive economic theory to replace it, supported by a powerful narrative of restoration and redemption. When Keynesian demand management hit the buffers in the 1970s, there was an alternative ready: neoliberalism. But when neoliberalism fell apart in 2008, the political parties appeared to vindicate

46. Monbiot.
47. Monbiot.
48. Monbiot.
49. Ronald Butt, 'Margaret Thatcher', *The Sunday Times*, 1 May 1981.
50. Monbiot.
51. Monbiot.
52. Monbiot.
53. Monbiot.
54. Monbiot.
55. Monbiot.
56. Monbiot.

Margaret Thatcher's maxim: there was, indeed, no alternative."[57]

We seem to have come to a point of stasis, hypernormalisation leading to an 'inevitable' world of neoliberalism; *"The white middle class is unable to understand and control the hyper-complexity of financial automatisms, and this fuels sentiments of social impotence."*[58]

"It does often seem that, whenever there is a choice between one option that makes capitalism seem the only possible economic system, and another that would actually make capitalism a more viable economic system, neoliberalism means always choosing the former. The combined result is a relentless campaign against the human imagination. Or, to be more precise: imagination, desire, individual creativity, all those things that were to be liberated in the last great world revolution, were to be contained strictly in the domain of consumerism, or perhaps in the virtual realities of the Internet. In all other realms they were to be strictly banished. We are talking about the murdering of dreams, the imposition of an apparatus of hopelessness, designed to squelch any sense of an alternative future. Yet as a result of putting virtually all their efforts in one political basket, we are left in the bizarre situation of watching the capitalist system crumbling before our very eyes, at just the moment everyone had finally concluded no other system would be possible."[59]

It would seem that Huxley was right in *Brave New World Revisited*, and consumerism has replaced utopian dreaming,[60] or as Frederik Jameson poignantly declared: *"It is easier to imagine the end of humanity than the end of capitalism."*[61]

The lack of alternative political stories in the current world may be another factor contributing to the current complacency. No matter what one thought of the alternatives, just the fact they were visible provided a challenge to the established norms; they were a reminder of alternate stories. It was often declared in post-cold-war euphoria that liberal democracy will be the last ever political system.[62] What is certainly true is that when the Berlin Wall crumbled in 1989, the last major political ideology threatening the West crumbled with it. Now we are left without visible reminders that our current political story is not a law of nature.

"We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable – but then, so did the divine right of kings."[63]

– Ursula K Le Guin

REVOLUTIONS

Revolution, no matter how big or small, is the moment of converting the accepted story from one to another. Perhaps the most famous revolution, the French revolution in the late eighteenth century, is a good example of this.

"In the wake of a revolution, ideas that had been considered veritably lunatic fringe quickly become the accepted currency of debate. Before the French Revolution, the ideas that change is good, that government policy is the proper way to manage it, and that governments derive their authority from an entity called 'the people' were considered the sorts of things one might hear from crackpots and demagogues, or at best a handful of freethinking intellectuals who spend their time debating in cafés."[64]

For the revolution to take place though, it is not enough to be unhappy with the current story. As Harari says, *"In order to change an existing imagined order, we must first believe in an alternative imagined order."*

The next story must be ready. It is impossible to go from an established story to none; rather the next story must be evocative enough to inspire people towards action. *"Without a new story, a story that is positive and propositional rather than reactive and oppositional, nothing changes. With such a story, everything changes."*[65]

So, a constant telling of stories, is necessary for revolutions. There must be always be an exploration of new stories, to test whether the next revolution should happen.

"If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work, and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea." – anon

Stories are fundamentally human and shape our very existence, but we are in a stagnant period where not enough are being explored. Luckily, the power they have over us means they are also our means of escaping this very situation; we just need to invent new ones. This all then leads to the inevitable question: how should we evaluate these stories?

57. Monbiot.

58. Berardi.

59. David Graeber, 'A Practical Utopian's Guide to the Coming Collapse', *The Baffler*, 2013 <https://thebaffler.com/salvos/a-practical-utopians-guide-to-the-coming-collapse> [accessed 5 December 2018].

60. Aldous Huxley, 'Brave New World Revisited', 1958 <https://www.huxley.net/bnw-revisited/index.html> [accessed 5 June 2018].

61. Peter Frase, *Four Futures: Life After Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2016).

62. Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History?', *The National Interest*, 1989, 3–18.

63. Ursula K. Le Guin, 'Ursula K Le Guin's Speech at National Book Awards: "Books Aren't Just Commodities"', *The Guardian*, 20 November 2014.

64. Graeber.

65. Monbiot.

"IF OTHERS CAN SEE IT AS I HAVE SEEN IT,

THEN IT MAY BE CALLED A VISION
RATHER THAN A DREAM"

William Guest

THE
POTENTIAL OF
THE FUTURE

~~DYSTOPIA~~ UTOPIA

Segal explains that *"almost by definition, few impulses or activities have been more mocked and dismissed in contemporary times than those labelled 'utopian'."*[66] This however does a disservice to the intention of utopian fiction. Few would claim that utopian fiction is written from a genuine belief of attainment, but rather as a direction to strive towards.

The British political theorist David Leopold has grappled with this, analysing all Marxist arguments against future planning, before dismissing them; even though utopian visions cannot be wholly accurate, and their realisation might prove problematic, such aspirations still serve many functions.[67]

Graeber points out that historically social change has never happened according to a blueprint[68], but he also states that does not mean plans are worthless. Using the example of Michael Albert who has conceived a moneyless modern economy, he stresses the importance, *"not because I think that exact model could ever be instituted, in exactly the form in which he describes it, but because it makes it impossible to say that such a thing is inconceivable."*[69] In this sense utopian dreaming also becomes self-perpetuating, and if done enough potentially can overcome the stigma Segal mentions.

66. Segal.
67. David Leopold, 'On Marxian Utopophobia', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 54.1 (2016) <https://doi.org/10.1353/hph.2016.0004>.
68. Graeber.
69. Graeber.

It is a process of nudging ourselves, and each other, towards an ever greater, and yet more grounded, *"influence optimism"*[70] The preferred future becomes a prophecy, self-fulfilling through constantly being in our periphery, the potential drawing us towards it. These ideas inspire us by making change more tangible and evocative to us, driving us towards action which results in fighting for these worlds.[71]

It is for these facts that Gordon attempts 'to encourage those of us who see ourselves as politically engaged radical intellectuals or social-change activists to be a little less frightened of and more enthusiastic about our most scandalous utopian desires and actions.'[72]

All these points also count for dystopias – just this time in reverse. Through fully conceiving what a dystopia may look like, we try our hardest to avoid any path that may lead towards it. Perhaps the dystopia of 1984 never became a reality because the fiction of 1984 was written.

INFINITE STORIES

Kahn and Weiner describe the process of future projecting; "*what is central... to the present future studies is not an effort to 'predict' the future, as if this were some far-flung rug of time unrolling to some distant point, but the effort to sketch 'alternative futures' –– in other words, the likely results of different choices, so that the polity can understand costs and consequences of different desires."*[73]

If this is to be taken at face value, then the ideal scenario would be infinite stories about the future. While telling infinite stories is by its very definition impossible, does this even represent the ideal?

The logic here is the same as stating that if infinite monkeys type on infinite typewriters, one is guaranteed to write the complete works of Shakespeare. It does not even matter if this happens by pure chance, as there is no framework that can necessarily be applied to all situations to arrive at the most helpful story. In this way the more stories are told, the more likely society is to trend towards telling the important ones, which can then be acted upon.

Most of what would result would almost by definition by unhelpful. In ontology this is often described as 'Meinongs Jungle', the jungle where all the possible objects exist, all the

things that can be talked about (even ones such as unicorns and square circles). "*The only trouble with that notorious thicket, Meinong's jungle, is that it has not been zoned, plotted and divided into manageable lots, better known as possible worlds."*[74]

This zoning, plotting and dividing of lots then, would be an attempt to explore logically, and proceed according to the framework that can not apply to all situations, so it would rather have to be seen as a form of curation; choosing the important ones out of the infinite iterations.

As already mentioned, when there are a lot of stories, infinite stories, society naturally favours some and attempts to steer towards the more utopian visions. In that sense, there are a lot of stories that can immediately be discounted; the ones needed most are towards the utopian end of the spectrum (to know what to strive for), and the dystopian end (to know what to avoid). There may be lessons to be drawn from stories towards the middle of the spectrum, and they give a good reference point, but they are much less likely to inspire action.

Kahn and Wiener were also talking about trying to predict the future, rather than help shape it. The distinction is subtle. While Candy states that future studies can help a society know what they want to work towards, it is slightly different from inspiring them to do so, from creating *action*. Also, stories do not necessarily need to take every possible aspect into account; we have no problem believing in different, or even contradicting, stories in different scenarios when needed (and even their associated identities).

THE HIVEMIND

Perhaps the most important aspect of this is that everyone should be telling stories; all professions, genders, ages and classes. Arendt believed that the individual's participation was vital. It keeps representative politics accountable, and stops it from distancing itself from the people, especially segments with competing interests.[75] "*The rediscovery of action and the reemergence of a secular, public realm of life may well be the most precious inheritance the modern age has bequeathed upon us who are about to enter an entirely new world."*[76]

Hegel relatedly argued that humans are *socio–politico–cultural beings*[77], and that societies gain a rationality through their

70. Fred L Polak, 'The Image of the Future'.

71. Segal.

72. Avery F. Gordon, *Keeping Good Time: Reflections on Knowledge, Power and People*, 1st Editio (London: Routledge, 2004).

73. Herman Kahn and Anthony J. Wiener, *The Year 2000: A Framework for Speculation on the Next Thirty-Three Years* (Macmillan, 1967).

74. J Hintikka and M B P Hintikka, *The Logic of Epistemology and the Epistemology of Logic: Selected Essays*, Synthese Library (Springer Netherlands, 2012).

75. Segal.

76. H Arendt and J Kohn, *Thinking Without a Banister: Essays in Understanding, 1953-1975* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2018).

77. Arran Gare, 'Nihilism Inc.: Environmental Destruction and the Metaphysics of Sustainability', *Ecological Press*, 1996.

development in history. Individuals only become *fully human, only become rational, free individuals*, through participating in the ethical life of society.[78] Monbiot, speaking about this participatory culture, advocates *"that the process of creating change is open to anyone, not just those who are employed in particular industries. That was a weakness of guild socialism and other labour-based political movements: they excluded people who did not belong to selected workforces, often shutting women, retired people, the self-employed and many others out of active politics. They sometimes created the impression that some people have a legitimate political role, while others are automatically disqualified."[79]*

This is avoided through storytelling; the only thing required is imagination and creativity. Anyone with a voice can talk about and facilitate change, the pinnacle of Arendt's *action*[80].

One of the things this does is take the power of stories out of the control of the few. For revolutions of any size to happen anywhere in society, what is needed is a new story. If you are being told this story, rather than being part of the shaping of it, by definition most of the agency has been taken away from you.

This is a topic that was discussed by the Frankfurt School. Horkheimer and Adorno claimed that the culture created by industry takes over the thinking of the individual, by not allowing space for the individual's imagination.
"All films have become similar in their basic form. They are shaped to reflect facts of reality as closely as possible. Even fantasy films, which claim to not reflect such reality, don't really live up to what they claim to be. No matter how unusual they strive to be, the endings are usually easy to predict because of the existence of prior films which followed the same schemas."[81]

This hijacking of the societal conversation can be overcome by everyone engaging in storytelling. A democratised platform would then result, in which naturally stories that inspire many would travel far. This would also reduce the alienation resulting from passivity:
"Entertainment can also alienate us from each other. Where once we sat around the fire and talked and sang as we watched the flickering lights, today the lights and voices have been enclosed in a series of boxes. Television, while it tended to shut down conversation, at least was something that we watched, in the early days, together. Now we often watch it alone. We spend hours every day watching other people doing what we might otherwise be doing: dancing, singing, playing sport, even cooking."[82]

If this exploration of the potential future, this exploration

of stories, can become more common and strategically deployed across communities, the individual may feel more empowered and the future may be steered again by the inhabitants of a given community or society, rather than the resignation to complacency. As Candy describes it, *"this may be the ultimate 'political' moment in 'doing futures': one's self-reconstruction as a person with imagination, with options, with agency."[83]*

CRITERIA

The individual criteria to assess the validity and relevance of the stories told can by definition not be surmised here. Every society, age, situation will be different, and have different requirements. There are perhaps some criteria that will nonetheless set a good baseline from which to judge any stories and returning to the values of the enlightenment is a good starting point. Progress, liberty and tolerance are all values that are almost certain to be needed in the future. In this way we can turn the values ratchet in the right direction for future generations. It has been argued that this is what religion achieves and may be the reason it has been able to last thousands of years.[84]
"If our purpose is to create a kinder world, we should embed within the political story we tell the intrinsic values that promote this aim: empathy, understanding, connectedness with other people, self-acceptance, independent thought and action."[85]

Once again, we can turn to Rawls' *Veil of Ignorance* theory to help assess the results of these stories. If you were born now, not knowing into which circumstances, would you endorse the story that is being told? The thought experiment (when applied perfectly) removes any bias due to current circumstance. This hopefully leads to a more objective assessment, and a gravitation towards stories which bring the greatest good to the greatest people.

However, paradoxically, the incredible thing about stories are that they expose what is important. Through ongoing storytelling in the way advocated so far, the stories themselves can help discover the very criteria that society should measure these stories against.

78. Gare.

79. Monbiot.

80. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1990).

81. T W Adorno and M Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Verso Classics (Verso, 1997).

82. Monbiot.

83. Stuart Candy, 'The Futures of Everyday Life: Politics and the Design of Experiential Scenarios', 2010.

84. Monbiot.

85. Monbiot.

SHARING

The most effective way to test these criteria, is the evaluation of them by exchange. The stories get tested against the values of others, rather than just the author. This exposes any flaws or inconsistencies that go against the values held by society at the time. It is almost like making all the brains in the community work together to solve the problems of the future in an engaging, collective way.

In this way, new stories develop from exchange as well. Picking up the story of one person, which may be lacking clarity in some areas, only to add your own bias and imagination to these before passing it on again, like a game of Chinese Whispers that self-optimises to include the desires (or fears) of everyone it has passed through.

But also, beyond testing the stories to certain criteria, and consciously adapting stories through iteration, the exchange of stories has one more effect, which is impossible to synthesise: revealing the subconscious. Turkle states that, *"Most important, we all really need to listen to each other, including to the boring bits. Because it's when we stumble or hesitate or lose our words that we reveal ourselves to each other."*[86]

Turkle makes another observation about conversation, which is that *"we use conversations with each other to learn how to have conversations with ourselves. So, a flight from conversation can really matter because it can compromise our capacity for self-reflection."*[87] In this way, exchanging stories not only helps to develop the society we live in as a whole, but even on an individual level.

POTENCY

It is when a story successfully fulfils all these elements that it becomes truly important. If the story is able to inspire us, guide us in a direction, be tested against a society's values, reach a critical mass through appealing to a broad section of the audience, and finally gets iterated through exchange until enough people can claim ownership and the story no longer has an author, then it becomes something different: potential.

"Everyone is racing to close a gap: the space between what can

be imagined and what can be done. As that margin narrows, when thought and action come close enough to brush against one another, you get a static charge."*[88] This is what Berardi calls potency: *"the energy that transforms the possibilities into actualities."*[89]

It is this inflection point we must reach, again and again, to reclaim our future. To change the world we must tell stories, that give us identities, and tell of hope and transformation. If we can achieve this on a large scale, we will come up with all the answers to the questions that technology will throw into the world and be able to act to solve them. We can reduce alienation, break out of a cycle of stagnation and hypernormalisation. All we need are stories that learn from the past, tell us about our present, but, most importantly, guide us towards a future.

86. Sherry Turkle, 'Connected, but Alone?', *TED*, 2012 <https://www.ted.com/talks/sherry_turkle_alone_together/transcript#t-1162524> [accessed 14 January 2019].

87. Turkle.

88. Jessica Bruder, *Burning Book: A Visual History of Burning Man* (New York: Simon Spotlight Entertainment, 2007).

89. Berardi.

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