



Wilton Park

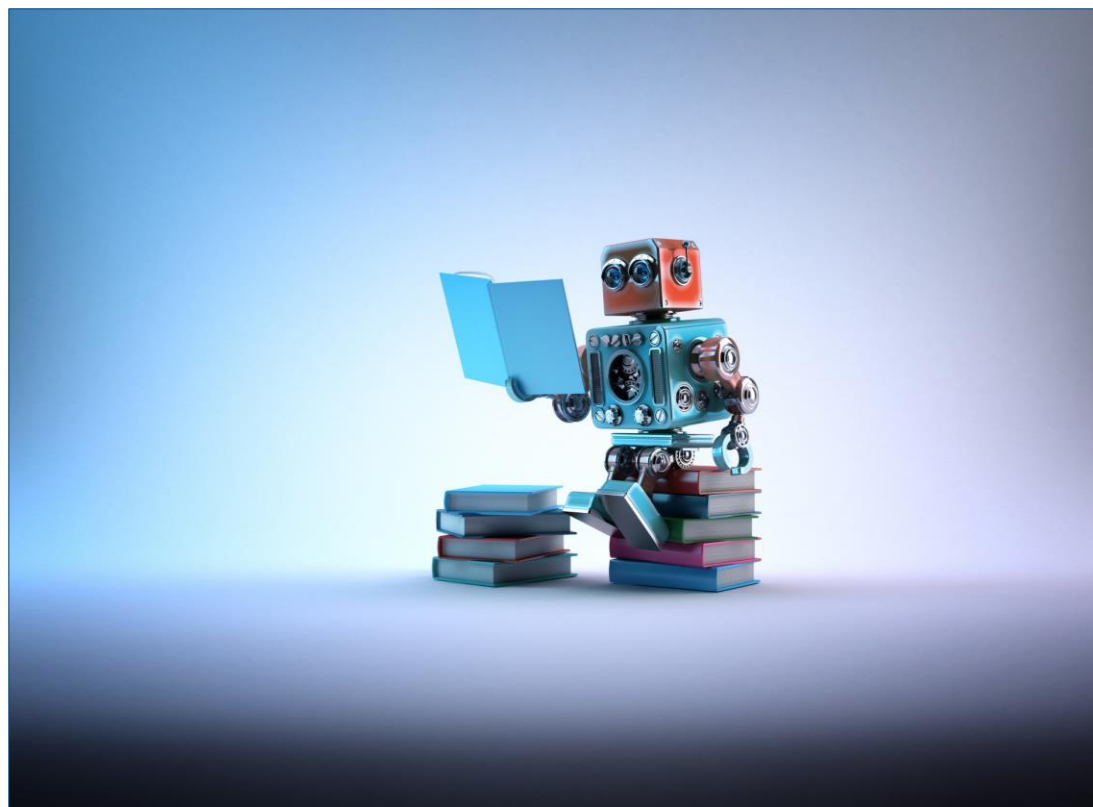


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Report

Improbable Forum

Artificial realities: politics, persuasion and storytelling

Thursday 23 – Friday 24 March 2017 | WP1535

Held in Los Angeles

In partnership with:



IMPROBABLE



BRITISH ACADEMY
OF FILM AND TELEVISION ARTS
Los Angeles



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Introduction

Wilton Park's first conference held in Los Angeles discussed the social and political ramifications of the technologies that will shape our futures. This event brought together policy makers, scientists, writers, security experts and technologists from the US and the UK to discuss the future realities we will create, both virtual and physical, the narratives that surround them and the importance of co-construction. In a political environment where tensions between governments, security organisations and narrative makers are increasingly tense, dialogue across interests at the highest level is more important than ever.

Participants recognised a need for purposeful collaboration across industry and government to shape the mediums and the messages of the near future. There was a call for new cross-sector partnerships to address complex decision-making and storytelling. Without such partnerships, suspicion between sectors could further compartmentalise critical knowledge about key narratives and technologies being constructed. Regulation of new technologies may not only help protect civil society from potential threats, but ensure that biases towards truth and equality are built into the fabric of the future.

The ambitions of participants were tempered by a climate of geopolitical fear, questionable narratives and social scepticism. Perseverance and sustained communication are necessary to develop initiatives that keep different sectors honest and accountable to one another. However, simply talking may not be enough. The way forward must include outcome-driven working groups with strong missions to develop new policy, technology and media.

This Wilton Park forum sought to promote the formation of new activities that will ensure a flow of feedback across industry and government, protecting the human rights and creativity in the digital age.

Key summary points

Co-architecting future worlds

1. Gaps in communication exist between people creating new digital worlds and people trying to fix issues in our current world. Rather than encouraging escapism and dystopia within artificial realities, there was a desire to create worlds that promote engagement and understanding. In order to achieve such a goal, partnerships across the different “worlds” of science, academia, policy and storytelling are key. New artificial worlds pose the challenge and opportunity of being non-narrative, allowing creatives to tell new kinds of stories and policy makers and scientists to explore new patterns of interactivity. New artificial worlds can be representations or augmentations of the real world, allowing policy makers and academics to ask counterfactual questions of the world around them.

Planning futures near and far

2. Involving citizen communities in shaping technologies of the near future could ensure that their values are built into new digital infrastructures. As technologies have run ahead of the policies that will shape their usage, it is increasingly difficult to create regulation that does not damage positive progress. Moreover, society’s shrinking attention span, news cycles and reaction times challenge the ability to think about the near and far future when making decisions for the present. As the UK and the US renegotiate their futures in the face of populist political movements, reviewing policy around technologies (and indeed policy at large) provides as much opportunity for positive change as it does chaos. How Western assumptions imbued in technologies, policies and narratives shape the futures of non-Western countries must be reconsidered.

Protecting truth and honesty

3. The truth should be protected by creative and technological solutions. Validation of information and assumptions is more critical than ever in a media landscape where alternative facts proliferate. This calls for a new evaluation of factual truth and emotional honesty in the narratives society creates and consumes; the evaluation must apply not only to the outputs of various sectors, but a ‘meta honesty’ regarding the sectors themselves, including their proclivities and means of operating. As the lines between truth and fiction deteriorate, so do the lines between news and entertainment, allowing for innovation and new partnerships in both sectors. One participant said, “Fiction is maybe the ultimate weapon in this post-truth world.”

Promoting connectivity

4. Society’s systems are currently designed in a highly disconnected way. The lack of policy involvement in designing digital infrastructures for civil society is particularly acute. The way that technologies are built can encourage us to connect more deeply as humans or further disconnect us into echo chambers. There was also an imperative for better connectivity across sectors to combat fragmentation and alienation. This could be achievable by imbuing a renewed warmth, humanity and laughter into cross-sector media and messages of the near future.

Continuing the discussion

5. Participants were firm in their resolve to continue cross-sectional alliances to tackle the challenges of the near future. Some suggested the formation of a council on Technology Policy, or an executive committee that would map out the principles of Human Rights in the Digital Age. Others suggested leveraging new technology to help create better formats for making decisions, promoting empathy, explaining societal infrastructure and cultural curation. Participants recognised the need to involve citizen communities, building them into feedback loops and flows of information.

Broader challenges of regulating new technologies

6. New technologies will bring enormous benefits to society but will be deeply disruptive of work, wages, equality and the greater divide between the haves and have-nots in a digital era. Anticipating these changes and choosing to care about these effects takes a degree of foresight that may slow the process of development. It will require rigorous oversight of how these technologies are domesticated.
7. The cycle of innovation is moving more quickly than governments can create policy around new technology. Such quick development creates norms gaps, where the public domesticates a technology before the government can anticipate its consequences. How do governments alter the pace of their policy making without sacrificing the quality of their decisions or stunting the growth of beneficial new tech? More fundamentally, how can governments anticipate the impact of technologies that have never existed?
8. Governments lack basic understanding of new technologies, inhibiting their ability to make knowledgeable or effective technology policy. Do we need an upskilling of the political classes? Should educating governments be a human rights issue?
9. There is a gap (and perhaps hostility) between the government and the tech industry. How do we eradicate suspicions between the two sectors? How do governments create effective partnerships with technologists while continuing to represent the interests of civil society?
10. New technologies enable citizens to mobilise more quickly than ever, for better or worse. How do you empower citizens to exercise their rights while ensuring that they don't dismantle structures that exist to protect them? Does responsibility for regulation lie with tech companies, governments, or narrative makers?

Recommendations

11. Policy makers must involve both technologists and citizen groups as equal stakeholders in the process of creating new regulations around emerging technology. There is a role for academics to play in up-skilling the political classes from a neutral, ethics-bound point of view. If evaluations of new technology come from both a comprehensive understanding of what the technology is and a commitment to the public interest and human rights, they will stand society in better stead.
12. Certain new technologies may be of benefit to help in the decision-making processes. Simulation, as one, may enable policy makers to think through potential consequences of a new piece of technology on society before it is introduced. Governments should be open to adopting new technologies where possible not only to help them keep up in terms of native understanding, but also to enhance their own ability to govern and regulate.
13. Governments should actively promote technology companies with ethical values; those that encourage participative citizenship, those that promote factual information, those that empower the public to communicate in productive ways. Financially and strategically, the government can invest in the infrastructure that it would like to see in the near future.

New responsibilities towards truth and narrative

14. Emotional honesty has seemed to trump truth in recent political events. Do storytellers have a responsibility to create political or apolitical narratives? Is their responsibility to the public, who want to hear stories that affirm their worldview, or to the truth—which may be edifying but less comfortable?
15. New movements to tell stories that include diverse characters have been adopted with mixed success. Do storytellers and media actors have new responsibilities to democratise not only the portrayals of characters, but also the means of consuming narratives? Perhaps this would mean moving from the silver screen to media where

people can more easily relate.

16. Government's relationship with media can be either a soft power or a tool of autocracy. What role should governments play in promoting narratives or truths that they uphold? Do governments have a responsibility to create standards of truthiness, or to promote key facts? Should that responsibility lie at the national or supra-national level?
17. New media technologies have created a cacophony of truths. Should technology companies have the ethical responsibility to regulate truth on their platform? What role should tech companies play in assisting governments or protecting citizens?

Recommendations

18. Storytellers and creatives must wield the power of fictional narratives responsibly. This means having an eye to diversity and representativeness of casting choices and narratives produced and writing the near futures that they would like to see into being. Past works of fantasy and fiction have shaped our social movements, our language and our domestication of new technology; the relationships between what storytellers imagine and what the world creates as a response are clear. Looking forward, storytellers have a renewed call to imagine responsibly.
19. Storytellers have accrued new responsibilities towards the emotional state of the public. Rather than creating narratives that perpetuate or manufacture fears, they should strive to put those fears in context. Storytellers can wield the power of their craft to compose stories that promote empathy and education. There is a great deal of work to do in crafting stories and characters that help the public aspire to make great choices.
20. Governments, as self-interested organisations, should hold one another accountable in the truths they put forward. Now more than ever, governments have tools available to them to create transparency around their positions. Governments should hold one another to standards of truth that are shared both quietly behind closed doors and aloud on social media. Action at the UN or supranational level to create a code of ethics around truthiness would be encouraged.
21. New media companies can no longer stand by while their platforms become vehicles for creating alternate realities. Tech companies should be at the forefront of driving sensible and sensitive policy that protects freedom of expression while encouraging objective facts from being understood. These kinds of innovations in policy and infrastructure will require creativity, empathy and negotiation and should be supported wherever appropriate by government and citizen communities.
22. Storytellers and new media experts should be working together to craft positive stories that tap into the same viral sharing patterns that promoted a resurgence of extremism. These stories must be emotionally compelling on an individual level, but also speak to new and positive social constructs. They should be designed for democratic consumption, taking into account how mobile storytelling differs from traditional linear stories.

Encouraging better consumption, content and connectivity

New Patterns of Consumption

23. Consumption of content is no longer a passive act. More than ever, civil society is able to engage with the subjects they view and think about and promote those subjects to their online spheres. This exacerbates the echo chamber effect, where one's curated social media audience only ever feeds back positively on the things one shares. Moreover, through data driven feedback loops based on engagement indexes and pay per click advertising, media companies have started to produce and headline news based on what they perceive their readership wants to read. This further contributes to the echo chamber, where content outside of a reader's perspective rarely makes it across their screens.

Recommendations

24. Government, media and technologists all have roles to play in encouraging more positive patterns of consumption. In the UK, government is able to use television as a soft power to promote messages of empathy and critical thinking; government should look to explore other media (perhaps mobile media, more frequently used by younger generations) in order to do the same. Media companies should be brave in exercising their editorial privilege and encouraged to take risks in reporting stories from different perspectives. Support should be given to long-form journalism and other forms of media that encourage depth of thought. Technology companies and particularly those with social dimensions, should be conscious of how they are aiding or disrupting echo chambers on their platforms; they should be innovative in their approaches to introducing users to more unusual content.

Promoting Critical Thinking

25. In media rooms, there is such an intense pressure to churn out content for digital consumers that there is little time to verify or critically assess content. Moreover, such vast output promotes more cursory patterns of consumption and shallower understandings of key issues. This not only contributes to more hastily and poorly written policy, but also to the general public's ability to make well-informed judgments. In a fast moving news environment, the public has few ways of accurately assessing the complexity (let alone the veracity) behind the subject matter presented to them. Nor do they have much incentive to engage in that kind of critical thinking.

Recommendations

26. Participants who explored the shrinking attention spans of new generations recognised that promoting critical thinking in both government and media output is key in motivating citizens to connect. Alternate forms of media, like games, can provide spaces where players have to actively consider the consequences of their actions; games could be an excellent arena for encouraging critical thinking and political engagement. Both creators of games and their supporters in political and cultural institutions should encourage such kinds of content to be developed. Creating a market for these kinds of games is an additional challenge.

Taking Risks in New Content

27. There was a general lament that the world of big-budget film left little room for risk and controversy because there is a pressure to sell on a globally appealing scale. It is challenging to convince people to watch a certain kind of content when there is competition from better-produced, more widely viewed stories. One participant observed that film tends to sell emotional rather than intellectual content; crossing that line can be difficult to do when revenue is a concern.

Recommendations

28. New technology platforms have an opportunity to innovate in the colour of content they promote, to whom and the kinds of content themselves. There is space for new hybrid forms of media that learn from both the film and game industries. The film industry as it exists today should view such forms of content as an opportunity not only to reach new audiences, but to reconsider the narrative and ideological freedoms that new media could afford.

Encouraging Empathy

29. Despite the vast increase in ways that people can connect to one another in the digital era, the rise of populism suggests that many people are actually feeling disconnected and ignored. Such tensions are manifesting as much at the individual level as the international level, where states feeling excluded from international narratives choose more isolationist paths.

30. The current structure of social networks supports diffuse knowledge and fringe narratives, making it more structurally difficult to encourage empathy between groups on the peripheries of society. This causes increased polarisation of extreme political views.

Recommendation

31. Media companies need to re-evaluate their ability (and perhaps responsibility) to operate as forces of empathy, allowing people to connect with and understand those that do not vote along the same lines. They are uniquely skilled and situated to do so. Storytellers should find ways to innovate in their creation of new narratives and humour that cuts across socio-political divides. Technology companies can assist in helping produce experiences of empathy, more actively exposing people to narratives and others outside of their immediate circles.
32. Despite the diffuse forms of online social networks, people remain tied to powerful central nodes. Leveraging the platforms granted to social media stars could be a great way to achieve quality connections with those who follow them. Empowering celebrities as key voices in new digital communities and giving them tools and narratives to reunite a fragmented society could be a way to help heal disconnection and isolation.

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