

DEEP FAKE: PLATO'S CAVE AND THE VIRTUAL WORLD

Who are We Becoming?*

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ABSTRACT • Human beings are animals who use tools. But the tools we use also reshape us – changing the way we think, the way we organize our lives, our relationships, our societies. Each time, the introduction of a new technology into human societies has brought war, the destruction of human lives. Because with technology change, we get paradigm change. When there is paradigm change, what it means to be human changes too. For the way we see and interact with the world around us determines who we are.

And yet, some things don't change. Essential to being human are two things - ideas and love. But today, with the coming of the internet and the smartphone, how we access love and ideas has changed. No technology has had quite as much of an effect on so many human lives at once as the internet. We all spend at least a few hours on our computers and phones. We all have at least two identities, a digital one and a real one. This is as true in Africa as it is in Iceland, in Delhi or New York. Today we find and enact love through apps. Accessing news and ideas is happening mostly through apps. We see ourselves through the eyes of social media apps. We listen to music on apps. And social media 'influencers' can bring down governments or get a president elected.

Technology also affects the words we use. It can even produce new words. In the eighties, the spread of cheap music technology brought words like 'rewind' and 'fast forward' into the English vocabulary. 'Groovy', a very seventies hippie word, came from records and vinyl technology. Most of these words died along with the technologies that produced them. But some didn't – they lingered, taking on a life of their own as they attached themselves to concepts that were important to us humans.

The internet has generated all kinds of interesting words – 'reddit', 'ping me', 'like', 'emoji'. But I will concentrate on one word, 'deep fake', for it symbolizes, for me, the central problem of the internet age: trust. I came across this word around the time of the first Trump election and since then my mind won't let go of it for it symbolizes the central conundrum of our internet world – the loss of trust. Society is built on trust. One has to have some trust between people in order for society to function.

* The following speech, delivered by the cosmopolitan author Radhika Jha at the 32nd Biennial Conference of the Italian Association for the Study of English (AIA) at the University of Turin (September 11-13, 2025), engages with the conference theme "Human, Humane, Humanities. Voices from the Anglosphere" through a uniquely creative lens. Contrary to the conventional structure of a normative academic paper, Jha's address employs a method of creative imagination and speculative connections, integrating themes such as the philosophy of Plato's cave, the media theory of Marshall McLuhan, the anthropology of Yuval Noah Harari, the digital saturation of modern life, the erosion of public space and trust, and the evolving role of fiction and the humanities in an age of deepfakes and artificial intelligence.

Trust is an important part of any relationship whether it is with one's partner or with one's banker. But how do you trust a person when you are communicating through a machine? How do we know what is real and what is not?

Deep Fake, to me, refers to something that is fake, but which people believe in and act upon because they no longer trust. I believe we are living in an age of 'deep fake' where certain concepts such 'truth' no longer play an important part in our political and social lives, what matters more is liking or not-liking ideas/people. Trust has been replaced or is being replaced with liking or disliking, loving or hating.

Lastly, I will look at the relationship between trust and education. What does one study in a world where one cannot trust that what one is being taught/learning is important? What can one learn if liking what one is learning feels more important than learning something new? And how does the crisis of trust affect literature and writing fiction?

Which brings me to Plato's allegory of the cave. Today Plato's cave is the digital world. When we are online, we do not, or cannot, look behind or around us. We forget that it is not the real world at all, but a simulacrum of the real world, and that the knowledge we seem to be able to access so easily, is not really knowledge at all but a shadow of knowledge, a compilation of knowledge with some important elements left out or misunderstood. Have we entered a time when even philosophers cannot get out of the cave for 'light' (truth in Plato's case) itself is no longer important?

KEYWORDS • Technology; Paradigm Change; Trust; Deep Fake; Simulacrum / Cave (Digital World).

In the allegory of the cave, Plato asks us to imagine that human beings are living from childhood in a cave, chained by the neck to look straight ahead and see a wall. Behind them there is a fire and between the fire and them is a low wall, and a path on which people move up and down holding objects in their hands above their heads so that the shadows of these of objects fall on the wall in front of the people. The people don't know that what they are looking at isn't real. They think it is, and they describe what they see to each other and argue over whose description of what they are seeing is the best. For they think they are seeing the world. Only it isn't. The real world is outside the cave, in the sunlight.

Today, the virtual world is Plato's cave, and the wall that people are looking at is their computer or smartphone. As more and more of our daily lives go online, and with the technology now available to make what we see in the virtual world indistinguishable from the real, we are in danger of losing the capacity to get out of the cave altogether.

This may seem strange coming from someone who has her face glued to a screen for several hours a day and who has been doing this for years. But the words that appear on my screen come from inside me, not from the internet. But, as Marshall McLuhan once famously said, tools are "the physical and psychic extensions of our selves". The things we invent, our tools, our stories, are like our children, they come from us, and then they take on a life of their own. The more powerful the tool, the more it changes us.

The tool par excellence of our times is the smartphone. It only came on the market about twenty years ago but now it's as if we've always had them. But these phones, these super versatile tools, have changed us more than any of us can truly fathom. The key to understanding how they have done so does not lie in how much we use them, but in how they have affected our perception of our real, physical environment and, through that, how they have affected the capacity to trust and the imagination, both essential aspects of our humanity.

1. Human beings are not born human, we 'become' human

But let me start with what I have learnt about being human. I became 'human' through fiction. Writing fiction has taught me that human beings are very mysterious creatures. Each time I start to write a character, I feel like I know nothing about him or her. I can't even predict half my characters' actions – I am constantly being taken by surprise. Often, I close the computer after a day of writing wondering how I am going to write the next section, for my character is taking me to a place where I have never been.

But that is the fun of writing a book. Going to unexpected places, feeling things, I haven't felt, learning things I never dreamt of learning, seeing the world in a different way. In a way writing is similar to traveling. I have had to move countries five times in my life and each time it was as if I had been returned to the state of a baby, a state of not-knowing anything. I have started from zero, learning the language, trying to form relationships. And what I have realized in the process is that we aren't born 'human', we become 'human'. This is because 'being human' involves being recognized as human by the people we are living amongst. And for this, you have to get to know the people amongst whom you live, their values, their language. In the process, you change. If you don't make the effort, you become a ghost, psychically invisible to the people around you.

Becoming human is a complicated process. And our myths, worldwide, are testimony to this. In India we have a myth that Vishnu, the preserver of life in the universe, came to earth in ten incarnations, ten *avatars*. First, he came as a fish, then as a turtle, a boar, half-man-half lion, a dwarf, a warrior, *Rama* the good king, a farmer, Krishna or love, and finally Kalki, a kind of apocalyptic figure who is still to come. The story didn't particularly interest me until, one day, I saw what the myth symbolized: stages in the development of a human being. Matsya, the fish symbolizes the unborn child; the turtle - a baby crawling on all fours; the boar - a young child without reason or the capacity to understand the consequences of his or her actions; Narasimha, half man-half beast – the adolescent ruled by his/her desires. Vaman the dwarf – the birth of intelligence; Parashurama, the warrior – action untempered by wisdom; Rama the king – the birth of morality; Balaram the farmer - providing and nurturing, Krishna – the birth of love; and finally, Kalki, the understanding of justice.

2. A tool using animal – the Anthropology story

In Anthropology we learn that humans are primates who walk on two legs, live in groups, and use tools. Moving about on two legs meant that females could not carry the foetus full term the way animals could and so we give birth to our young when they haven't reached their full gestation periods and are not able to survive without 24/7 care from other adult humans. So unlike animals, we don't get born fully formed, we become progressively human after birth, and other humans play a huge part in our development. It is this that gives humans a certain plasticity, a capacity for change that exceeds that of animals because a lot of our brain development happens outside the womb through interaction with other humans, not necessarily of our immediate family. So right there, our identities get split, or become two – a group identity based on group needs and values, and a single identity, with unique needs and desires. If you break things down even further, to paraphrase Levi-Strauss, a person cannot be understood in and of himself, he or she has to be understood as a sum total of a network of relationships. These relationships aren't just with other humans, but with nature, with animals, with the gods. They are symbolic and mythical, conceptual and structural – and are all governed by the imagination. The imagination is the key to our world. It is how we organize our relationships, our lives. Tools have come out of the imagination for we use our minds to get what we need – that is the peculiarity of humans.

3. Marshall McLuhan: we make tools, but then the tools re-make us. Biggest agent of change today, technology

Homo Sapiens used tools first to get food, then to kill, then to help them move quickly from one place to another, and finally to communicate with each other over long distances. One of the first people to really understand the relationship between man and his tools was Marshall McLuhan. In his brilliant work, *“Understanding Media: the extensions of man”*, he argued that humans create tools to help them fulfil their needs, their desires, but thereafter, the tools we make, especially those we use to communicate, change our environments completely and in the process, they change us. “All media work us over completely.” he said, “They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments.” By media what he means is tools, but particularly the tools we use to help us communicate.

4. A tool that has inserted itself into every part of our humanity

Today, the most widespread tool of our times is a smart phone. Of course, the smart phone is not really a phone at all, it is actually a walking computer, and more than even a computer, it is a portal into the mind of humanity. McLuhan saw this coming. In the beginning of *Understanding Media: the extensions of Man* he says “Today after more than a century of Electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned. Rapidly we approach the final phase of the extensions of man – the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society.”

But why, you may be wondering, am I choosing to focus on this one technology? Because of the speed with which the smartphone became ubiquitous. As far back as 2010, I remember seeing a group of young Japanese at a restaurant. They were all looking at their phones and tapping away. Occasionally, someone would look up and laugh. After a bit, I realized that they were all looking at the same website or game, so they were communicating, it’s just that the mode of communication was not language and smiles and touch anymore but smartphones. In 2013, I moved to China and saw the same thing, except that by this time, it no longer surprised me. In India, by 2017, Delhi’s street cleaners and daily labourers all had smartphones.

In 2022, on 50th street in New York, I met a refugee - he was begging. But what he wanted the money for was not food or clothing, it was a sim card. “Why?” I asked. And he explained. A refugee/migrant can’t get a monthly paying card as he has no papers. He or she has to buy the more expensive temporary rechargeable sim-cards. Even the rechargeable sim cards require papers, and so there is an entire shadow economy of people who buy these cards and then sell them at a premium to refugees/migrants. When recharging must be done, without a bank account, again, they have to go to a middleman and pay extra. And yet, they all have phones. “I would rather go without food for a week than go without a SIM card,” the man ended. The smartphone, unlike the phone, is the most personal thing we possess. More than a passport, a toothbrush or underwear. It holds the key to our memories, our relationships, our bank accounts, our health, our movements. And even our politics. Which is why the Trump government wants to get hold of the phones of foreign students applying for a visa to the US, and why the first thing that is taken away from a criminal is their phone. In India, Mr Modi has already gone several steps further. You can get jailed for treason if you write something against Mr. Modi on social media.

Understanding Media was so influential in the seventies that it got people unplugging and throwing their TVs out of their windows. But it was too late, the genie was out of the bottle. The civil rights movement was fought not in Mississippi, or wherever else Martin Luther King and others went, it was fought in every living room and on every television set in America. Similarly, today, the Gaza war is being fought on our smartphones. It doesn't matter that the Israeli government won't let journalists in there. The news is now secondary, it is the tool that is doing the informing, that is shaping public opinion. Which is just what McLuhan realized. "Societies", he said, "have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication" (McLuhan 1967).

5. Bringing the market to our minds: smartphones have changed us more than any tool or technology before it

What makes the smartphone so special is that unlike other tools — a car, for example, or a camera, or a computer — the smartphone doesn't help us fulfil one single need, it seems to read our minds, anticipating our desires and thus inserting itself into every nook and cranny of our lives. For this reason, it is the ultimate capitalist tool, for it takes the market to our minds. Anything we want, we have only to press a button to obtain – that is the promise of a smartphone.

So how exactly has the smartphone changed us as humans? I can think of a thousand ways but here are the ones that I think are the most significant:

- A) Smartphones have changed the way humans navigate/move across the planet.
- B) They have changed the way we access knowledge/information.
- C) They have changed the way we interact with each other.
- D) they have shifted the locus of human interaction from the public to the private sphere.

a. Movement: Unlike the computer, smartphones are mobile, we are their legs. When we go out, before we go, we consult Google. If we are lost or even just confused, we don't ask people on the street where to go anymore, we first ask Google. Only if Google proves inadequate, do we ask a human being. As a result, we have opened ourselves to 24/7 surveillance and could well lose our freedom of movement. During the Pandemic, smartphones were used to track people in countries all over the world. In Greece, where I lived at the time, we had to send a message to a number stating why we wanted to leave the house, and carry the phone with us, in case we were stopped by the police. If we didn't have the phone with us showing that we had reported our movements, we were fined. In China this was taken to an extreme, phones were used to determine who could go where with an elaborate system of 'gateways' and checkpoints. Only when your phone beeped 'green' could you pass. If it was 'red' or 'yellow', you were either made to isolate at home or in a surveyed facility. When I read about this, I was horrified...because I knew then that it was only a matter of time before the technology would be used again. But more than this, smartphones have made it unnecessary to go out at all. We can pay taxes, order food, buy medicines, see a doctor, invest money or spend it, learn a language, find a lover or a friend – without having to leave the comfort of our home.

b. Access to information/ideas: The smartphone has also become the main means by which we access information, displacing books, television and newspapers. Television had one big disadvantage from a user's point of view – it was not mobile. Newspapers were mobile as were books, but they were time consuming and didn't give you just the information you needed, but a whole lot of other distracting stuff you didn't need. The smartphone did away with all three of these problems, making research and information gathering so much easier, faster and more

efficient. But, as a result, the way we research has changed. It's certainly faster and more efficient, especially with the chatbots, but it is more limited too, and what it doesn't do is give space for the unexpected connections, those creative leaps of faith that make the search for knowledge so addictive, "It is the art" – as my philosopher friend puts it, "that sets the science ablaze". No, instead, those creative leaps are being left to the A.I. to do. We wait passively, we take decisions like good bureaucrats do, based on the information we have. We work on perfecting the machine that provides the information. But the 'art' is not in our hands anymore. The 'art' is in the computer programmers' hands or the A.I. chatbot's hands. We accept this because it is easy and nothing is more addictive than convenience.

c. Relationships/ human interaction: The smartphone is also a super-networker and communicator. Thanks to it, being connected with the people we love has never been easier. And yet, making new friends, the real physical kind, has become harder. This is hardly surprising. In public spaces, there is little or no eye contact anymore, people are staring at their screens. Flirting happens on a screen, not through eye or body contact. The smartphone is wonderful when you know people and have solid relationships in place. It allows you, for example, to travel without ever feeling lonely. Yet loneliness is important. It is what forced people into public spaces in the first place and made an understanding of our shared humanity possible. But it is in the sphere of new relationships that the split between the real world and the virtual world, the real self and the online self, becomes most apparent. How we look on a screen is not how we look in reality. What we say about ourselves, how we present ourselves in the virtual world cannot be verified through a network of friends and family connections. True, the smartphone has made it easier to access a wider pool of possible mates. But by and large, online dating is hard and mostly disappointing, because, let's face it, the pressure to lie about oneself or to simply not try to find a 'real' partner intensifies as one compares oneself to thousands of others who all seem prettier, handsomer, more successful, wealthier and having more fun. Social media, accessible 24/7 on our phones, has turned us all into voyeurs. Voyeurism is addictive. It makes people dissatisfied with their lives in the real world and creates a lot of anxiety. According to a Kinsey Institute survey, the people who study sexuality in America, those aged 18-27 are more likely than any other age group to be celibate. In China, there are 10 million A.I. boyfriends, according to an article by Elaine Moore in the Financial Times. Everyday new apps spring up for A.I. partners, friends, lovers.

6. From 'public selves' to 'private selves'

The most significant change brought about by the smartphone, however, is the shift in the locus of relationship building from public to private spaces. In the past, we formed our sense of self, our identities, through our interactions with other people, especially those who were not immediate family. Through other people's reactions to us, we came to understand the limits of our own power and to learn to modulate our behaviour and emotions, we developed empathy. Our identity was formed through our reactions to others and to the unexpected events that befell us. Now, it is the smartphone that gives a young person a sense of their own identity. Through it, they look at the world, and the world looks at them. And when what the internet will have them believe about themselves conflicts with what the 'real' people around them would have them believe, it leads to, alienation and distrust towards the real/adult world. It also means that a whole lot of unknown people can influence a young person's identity when it is at its most malleable. The internet also shields the young from having to respond to unexpected situations, the very thing that builds character.

Of course, televisions began the shift away from the truly public space, the street, into the house. But within the house, television watching was for many years a family activity because

people couldn't afford many televisions. Nowadays, the smartphone owner decides what he watches or doesn't watch. What families don't do anymore is watch something together and talk about it. Not even in India, where in the past, it was the headman or some other rich man in the village who had a radio and then a TV, and the whole village would arrive there to learn what was happening in the rest of the world, and now, everyone just gets their news and entertainment on the phone. Each person interacts with ideas and with the world privately. This represents a huge change for us humans as a species, for it privileges the 'private' self over the 'public' self.

7. The Pandemic and the evisceration of the public sphere

In "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere", Jurgen Habermas explains how the bourgeois public sphere came about, first, as a space to exchange information about the market and prices, and then it became a space of discussion and a forum for 'the public' mainly merchants and propertied people in those days, to discuss the limits of state power and to push back against it. Implicitly, this means also that every reception area of a government building where civilians/citizens confront state actors is also part of the 'public sphere'. This transformation of a public space into a civil space, and the transformation of people into a political force because of the existence of this space was one of those crucial, decisive moments in human history and the importance of the public sphere and the concomitant rise of the media which came out of it cannot be underestimated.

With the pandemic, all 'public spaces' were shut down simultaneously across the globe. For two years we interacted with others through our smartphones and computers. No longer were they tools; they became our connection to the world. They became our 'selves' in the world. It was a strange time, for frankly, never have I felt so connected as I felt then, to the world. But it was an illusion, and as the curfews continued, collectively we recognized this, and most of us were thrilled to be back on the streets again.

But the streets felt different. For public spaces – airports, railway and bus stations, the underground, hotels, banks, restaurants, cafes - had all been retooled to minimize contact between strangers. And, as if subtly reinforcing the message that public spaces were dangerous, there was less reason to go out. For much of what we went out for in the past could now be done on the internet.

What the Pandemic did, to my mind, is that it destroyed in one fell swoop, the physical part of the public sphere, leaving us only with the virtual part – the internet. It also deprived us of those interactions which are the most interesting – the conversations with people who are not our relatives or close friends, who don't think 'like us'. In other words, it deprived us of being able to see ourselves in the eyes of 'the other'.

The young were the ones most affected. For them the message had gone home: the outside, the street, is a dangerous place.

8. The stickiness of habits

When a habit forms, it is difficult to break. Why? Because it becomes invisible – we don't realize it is there anymore. After the Pandemic, we didn't dial back, we went full swing ahead with digitization and we eviscerated the physical part of the public sphere. Everything – restaurants, coffee shops, government, newspapers, cultural institutions, cinemas, every single 'public space', every single constituent of the public sphere went digital – except for the face-to-face interactions that created those public spaces – which began to shrivel and fade. Today we buy tickets to cinemas online if we even bother to go to them, we get doctor's appointments online, bank appointments,

you name it. For a while, till the A.I. revolution, you could still call and if you waited long enough, get a human to deal with your problem, but now even that is getting rare. Cafés have less than 50% of the tables they once had and encourage people to get out as soon as possible. For me, who spends a lot of time alone, cafes were where I went to write, in order not to feel lonely. Now the cafés are so noisy and the seating so uncomfortable that I don't want to be there. The people who have been most affected are of course the young – my children feel very uncomfortable in crowded spaces, they get jittery and beg to leave as soon as possible. They aren't the only ones; we have all become somewhat allergic to crowds.

We have also grown used to the idea that a machine intelligence, not a human one, is watching us, talking to us, and deciding whether we are human, and whether to give us access – to our bank account, a job, a place in a university, a friend or a lover.

9. The Trust Conundrum

In his mammoth book *Sapiens*, Yuval Noah Harari singles out gossip as being the pivot for the development of language. “Our language evolved as a way of gossiping,” says Harari provocatively, “It is not enough for individual men and women to know the whereabouts of lions and bison. It's much more important for them to know who in their band hates whom, who is sleeping with whom, who is honest and who is a cheat...Reliable information about who could be trusted meant that small bands could expand into larger bands, and *Sapiens* could develop tighter and more sophisticated types of cooperation” (Harari 2015).

Human societies are based on co-operation, and trust is the glue that holds them together. Cooperation happens through communication. To co-operate we must speak the same language. But speaking the same language doesn't just mean knowing the words. It means knowing what those words signify. It means sharing or at least understanding the value systems that underpin those words. Only then can one build trust. For trust building is what all animals who live in groups do, not just humans. Without trust, one cannot live with one another – this rule is as true for lions or black necked storks as it is for humans. Trust building happens through many things in our highly complex modern societies – but the most important one, the one that is hardwired into us, is social interaction. Trust is built through doing things together and by doing things for each other.

The public sphere is essential for trust building because it is where social interactions take place, where ideas, stories, information is exchanged.

In primitive societies it was enough to have trust in a few people, and this was easily obtainable through social interaction. Today we have cooperation on a global scale through trade and for this we have developed very complex systems of trust – money, laws, governments that enforce laws, banks, taxes. Harari says this explicitly: “Trust is the raw material from which all types of money are minted.”

Trust is based on getting reliable information and therefore a vital part of the public sphere is the media. The ‘old’ media – TV, radio and newspapers – all very present and accessible on our phones – came out of this same need for trustworthy, reliable information. But they were trusted because they were in the public sphere and could be held accountable. But today's world is no longer dominated by the ‘old’ media, it is dominated by the internet and almost everyone in the world gets their news through their phones first and foremost. The problem with the internet is that what exists there is not accountable. Nor does it have to be verified or verifiable. And this is where the trust conundrum begins. For how do we know that what we are being told on the internet is true?

We don't. We cannot transport ourselves into the virtual world to see for ourselves. Instead, we rely on an elaborate system of gateways, checkpoints, passwords and access codes. These are

supposed to make us feel secure, to make us feel we know who we are dealing with and to trust the information we are receiving from the platform. But like any house owner will tell you, the more locks you have the more insecure you end up feeling. Trust is the Achilles heel of the internet because one doesn't know who one is dealing with or how to hold them accountable.

Enter the smartphone and face recognition technology. Now, while the net is still seen as being a place where identities can be 'faked', the smartphone is seen as an extension of the self. Hence, the problem is solved. Most of us don't understand the technology that makes it possible for our phones to be 'us', but we believe it to be foolproof. We make a leap of faith. And this leap of faith is only possible because of a faith that we have hidden in our hearts, a blinding trust in the capacity of technology to resolve all of our problems and make life better. The fact that machine intelligence can be duped is one of the great contradictions of our times because it goes against the myth that machines/computers are more reliable than humans, a belief that underlies our belief in technology. This is why I call the problem of trust created by the internet the trust conundrum.

For like any conundrum, the trust conundrum cannot be resolved, it can only be replaced — by love, or faith, or a mix of the two. But there is a giant difference between love or faith and trust. Love does not judge, it accepts. Faith does not ask for verification, it believes. Trust, on the other hand, requires verification. It requires prior information. Trust is based on a process of information gathering and verification. It is not instantaneous, it requires time, it requires social interaction, it requires the imagination, fiction, to be more precise, to fill in the gaps. But the smartphone is like a jealous lover, it wants all of your time, your attention. It doesn't want you thinking and judging independently, it wants you buying.

10. Trust, mass-fictions and the public sphere

Gossip alone, Harare points out in *Sapiens*, would not have got us far. What really made it possible for large numbers of people to co-operate was fiction - the stories, the myths we make up about ourselves. When I read this, I thought, at last someone who understands the importance of a good story.

A story becomes a myth when a large group of people believe it. But stories can do even more – they can make people believe that something utterly fictional actually exists. Harare gives three examples – nationalism, religion, money and the limited liability company or corporation. These all exist because we trust in them. We believe in them.

But to believe in these mass-fictions as Harare calls them, we need to see that others believe the same stories too, hence, we need a network of relationships, we need society. It is not enough for the State to tell us to believe, or laws, we need confirmation from friends, family, and random strangers, the latter perhaps being the most important of all. For fictions to be believable by the masses we need the public sphere.

But the public sphere has shrunk with the digitization of so many of our everyday interactions (like banking, civic government, buying tickets to plays or movies, even shopping for groceries) and this has eroded trust. At the same time, given that our contact with the real world has decreased, we need stories more than ever to feel connected and build trust. That gives terrible power to those that create these mass-fictions.

11. How the trust conundrum influences the humanities

Language is the key to controlling the stories we tell ourselves; it is the entryway to the imagination. But those stories have to be believed, they have to feel 'real'. The increasing distrust in society has made us thirst for certainty. And this has made us privilege predictability over "not-

knowing”. We don’t learn because we don’t know and want to know, we learn because we want to be able to predict the future. This has led to a swerve away from the humanities towards science. And in literature, it has led to a muzzling of creativity by the requirement of ‘authenticity’.

Why science? For in the sciences, you have a method, you apply it, and you obtain a result which is definitive, which can be used to create other results of the same kind. The Arts - literature, painting, sculpture, music - function in the exact opposite way, deconstructing real life events into symbols, images, and signs to create an alternative interpretation of reality. The stress here is in the interpretation. For the arts don’t ask you to believe, they don’t tell you that what you are being told is the truth. The Humanities sit uneasily in the middle, somewhere between the particular and the general, the possible and the predictable – a little bit of science and a little bit of art. You have a method, but in its application, you must contend with messy reality, you have to reorganise and adapt your method to fit your particular subject. Therein lies the art. But therein also comes uncertainty.

The humanities had its hey-day when the public sphere was strong, when people bought and sold actual goods, when the traditional media as the voice of that space was strong. But as the physical public sphere has withered, and social media has replaced the older forms of information gathering, the humanities have suffered. This is because with the rise of social media, in the place of information, we have a cacophony of opinions. People don’t know who or what to believe, they are sick of conflict. They want someone else, or something else, to decide for them, they want a single voice of authority. And so, they turn to the only voice that that seems to have produced reliability and an end to argument – science.

But science developed as a tool, a way to learn what we humans wanted to learn. What to study was a decision to be made by us. Today, with the shrinking of the public sphere and levels of trust declining, it is science that is dictating how we should live, and what should be studied. Hence, the obsession with AGI. For, as the old collective myths lose their power, we need a new myth we can believe in, one that fits neatly with what was there before, but which also can normalize the central position of machine intelligence in our lives while taking away our power to question.

12. Fiction and the trust conundrum

As the belief in technology takes greater and greater hold, the space for literature decreases. In essence what a story or a poem does is that it puts the unsayable into words. In human interaction, a lot is left unsaid. What gets said is only what a person thinks will be acceptable and understandable. It’s the tip of the iceberg. But how a person reacts to what has been said depends on many of the things that are left unsaid. Fiction fills those holes and in doing so gives us a much better picture of our humanity. But its method is unclear. It relies upon the imagination – an uncharted space not unlike the ‘Dark Web’ where you can end up in strange places.

Fiction does not deal in ‘facts’. It sits in the realm of the plausible and hence it forces us to think. That is the challenge of fiction, that it forces you to question and to try to work out for yourself if what is being claimed is right or not. But in a world of easily accessible ‘facts’ and a cacophony of opinions, the individual, solitary and anxious, yearns to be reassured. He or she doesn’t want something that challenges, for thinking takes time, and time is what we all seem to be lacking these days. And energy.

This wouldn’t matter if stories were only entertainment. But they aren’t. Stories are the mirror of humanity. They nourish the imagination, enrich language, build trust. Stories have existed as long as ‘Sapiens’ have. But the slow erosion of trust is changing our relationship to fiction. Distrust is making us first demand who the author is, in order to help us judge if what she or he is writing

is “authentic”. This search for ‘authenticity’ arises from our growing isolation from our peers, and from the real world, and therefore a breakdown of the essential basis of trust. When we can no longer generate trust from our own experiences and interactions with our peers, we search for truth in assurances about the ‘authenticity’ of the sources of our information, or of the experience that is being described to us. In academia, it has led to the privileging of science over humanities. In publishing this has led to an increase in sales of non-fiction and auto-biographical fiction. In politics, this leads us to looking for people who can make decisions for us. That is when we get trapped in Plato’s cave, for that is when we begin to believe that the shadows being generated on the wall in front of us are real.

13. Deep Fake, and Plato’s cave

Which brings us to the title of this paper: “deep fake”. Fiction is being thrust, because of the internet, because of the smartphone, because of the trust conundrum, into the category of untruth, of “deep fake”. Because people don’t trust themselves, they don’t think of how a text speaks to them but look to the author of the text who has to pass a kind of ‘authenticity test’ before they can be hoped to be listened to.

“Deep Fake” is an internet generated word. It was the name given to a technology that developed on the web around 2015 to transpose faces and features from one person’s image onto another’s. This created chaos in the US election of 2016 and has now come to embody everything that is wrong with the internet. But “deep fake” to me, refers to something more. It refers to something that we know is fake but which we have faith in and act upon, because we no longer trust. It is similar, to my mind, to Plato’s idea of ‘transferred ignorance’. Transferred Ignorance refers to something that is presented as fact, but which is not verifiable or justifiable. The person who is saying it counts – he is seen to be ‘above’ others, so there is a power element to the transference of trust – and that is what leads us to authoritarianism.

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