

Narrative Part 1: Storytellers

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Human beings are, above all, narrative creatures, extremely sensitive to good stories. We can just as easily lose ourselves in a fairytale, sci-fi or fantasy story (book/movie, e.g. Harry Potter), as in a romantic comedy or true story. Although the structure of, say, a moralistic story differs from that of a fairy tale, all stories help to organize thoughts and define our points of view.

The (implicit) stories of futurologists, who can be booked for lectures at various agencies, also have their own characteristic structure, when they outline what our future full of technology will look like. I've seen quite a few, without exception they were all master storytellers. One element of their narrative structure is often that the speaker, through an important (personal) life event, has come to understand the deeper meaning of how we as humanity are moving from the still imperfect present to a perfect future. A classic, Saul became Paul, or Ebenezer Scrooge an enlightened and fine man, after his encounter with the spirits.

In the stories of futurologists, technology always has a heroic role, in addition to the narrator, who understands it all. We do not call someone a futurologist if (s)he claims that technology is not the future (a prophet of doom) or that God determines the future (faith fanatics). Then we shrug our shoulders in pity ...

Usually the futurologist story is that our technological progress is not yet perfect, but once it comes to fruition, we will live a very beautiful and dignified life. The story is always linked to what is seen as startling, such as the development of man from prehistoric times, through hunting and gathering, to the Enlightenment and now the 4th great revolution, in which AI and technical imagination (VR, AR) enter. As we become aware of the ecological problems caused by the Enlightenment/Industrial Revolution – we are in worse shape as a species/planet than ever before – futurologists are increasingly turning to ecology/nature as a startling exemplary analogy to explain the story of technological progress. Life, from unicellular to complex mammalian, has known many continuous and discontinuous transitions, sometimes involving chaotic and radical system changes, and this is reflected in the development of technology. Soon, they claim, all things will change for the better...

But, dear reader, a good story that moves an entire room doesn't make it true! Right now, when our entire future is at stake, stories from futurologists who get it all are very welcome; who wouldn't want a happy ending told by an omniscient prophet? Unfortunately, they are even more misleading than welcome. Technology brings us a lot, including pleasure. But whether we like to see it or not, technology has also put us in the plight we find ourselves in today. Do we – Enlightened Westerners living in technological luxury – really think that the life lessons and stories of Indigenous Peoples (natural peoples, for example) testify to a lower state of life? Their lives in harmony with their ecological resources could have continued for thousands of years if we had not forced our “Enlightened” technological “interventions” on them. Are we still clinging to the stories of futurologists?

Unfortunately I'm afraid we do. I read about technologies being developed to make clouds more reflective, so they reflect sunlight, in hopes of averting the climate crisis. I also read about the intention to host the Winter Olympics in the desert, with snow generated there. Despite huge energy and material costs, the technological dream still reaches for the sky.

Fortunately, there is that new (Greta Thunberg) generation that, unlike many generations before her, does not take for granted the story of infinite technological growth from finite resources. She also does not take issues such as gender identity, discrimination, pollution, and a large planetary footprint for granted. In an ecologically sustainable narrative, gaps between race, religion, sexual orientation, rich and poor are bridged. Not through technology, but through inspiration, love, and regained perspective.