

The Narrative Form and Forms of Truth: An Alternate View of the Post-Truth Era

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Abstract

Within the last decade, it has been commonly claimed that societies in the United States and other countries, have entered a 'post-truth-era', a time when deception and falsehood have flourished, and the value of factual truth is diminished. Paradoxically, at the same time (1) concerns with truth have become more prominent in popular discourse and in the priorities of institutions, and (2) definitive empirical evidence of an unprecedented recent increase in false or misleading information is lacking. Therefore, how is it that the idea of post-truth earned such widespread acceptance? The possibility explored here is that the idea of a post-truth-era is symptomatic of a deepening commitment to increasingly compelling and divergent narrative truths (as opposed to factual truths). This process is related to the use of the internet and social media platforms and the opportunities they afford for individuals to co-construct their own narrative accounts of reality. While prevailing conceptions of a post-truth-era show some recognition of the challenges this divergence in realities poses—particularly for the geographical communities that most directly sustain infrastructure and institutions—because these conceptions are grounded in a correspondence view of truth and language, they are fundamentally unable to recognize and address the challenges at hand. The latter, we show, can only be adequately grasped and addressed by recognizing the role of the narrative form in the construction of reality.

Keywords: narrative, post-truth, social construction of reality, media

A post-truth era?

In the USA over the last decade, alarm has arisen over a perceived ‘crisis of truth’. Indicators include recent choices for ‘word of the year’ by lexical and journalistic authorities (e.g., *post-truth*, *misinformation* and *fake news*¹), significant attention by political and religious leaders (De Witte, Kubota & Than, 2022; Puletta, 2022), and the creation of government and corporate/media task forces (Department of Homeland Security, 2022; Wang, 2022), to name just a few. The prevailing sentiment is encapsulated in the claim that society has entered a “misinformation age” (O’Connor & Weatherall, 2019) or ‘post-truth era’, i.e., “circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Oxford University Press, 2022, para. 2).

While the current discourse on post-truth² (PT) has some connection with 20th century sociological theorizing about mass audiences and electronic media, the recent concern with these issues developed within the context of specific political events in the mid 2010s, specifically the 2016 presidential election in the United States (e.g., in response to candidate Donald Trump’s claims about fake news). Yet, these concerns have proven enduring and appear to transcend that original political context. For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus characterized its threat as not merely a biological one, but also as an “infodemic [...] a global epidemic of misinformation” (Zarocostas, 2020, p. 676, see also van der Linden, 2022). This suggests that the concerns about PT reflect a broader social change as opposed to being a consequence of the idiosyncracies of particular politicians.

The broad and enduring popularity of PT presents a paradox because it is so lacking in empirical support. Assertions that truth no longer matters have received broad acceptance at precisely the same time as the study of popular discourse reveals a preoccupation with truth. This is reflected in a near “fixation” on dishonesty, an escalating focus on (and demand for) fact-checking, and the growth of research measuring and attempting to explain distrust (Harsin, 2020, p. 2). Furthermore, the disputes about the truth around certain issues which are taken as indicators of PT are often a response not to false information but to challenges to traditional authorities that are made possible by how digital technologies have expanded access to information that is broadly accepted as factual (Gurri, 2018; Harsin, 2020).

In both popular and scholarly discourse, claims about a PT era are often supported largely or exclusively by anecdotal examples of currently prominent individuals blatantly disregarding certain widely accepted or easily verified factual truths or behaving in a blatantly deceptive manner. For example, to establish the last decade as a ‘post truth era’ or ‘misinformation age’, O’Connor and Weatherall (2019, p. 8) open with the example of a fabricated news story of the Pope endorsing Donald Trump, while McIntyre (2018, p. 6) mentions the same president’s brazen lies about his inauguration crowd size and disputes over election results. That such evidence indicates a distinctly novel and/or unprecedented phenomenon is simply assumed—despite the somewhat obvious risk that those relying on

¹ As chosen by Oxford University Press (2022), Dictionary.com (Strauss, 2018) and Collins English Dictionary (Meza, 2017), respectively.

² Henceforth, we will use the term *post-truth* or its abbreviation (PT) to generally refer to the various manifestations of the perceived crisis of truth described in the first paragraph.

such assumptions end up exemplifying the problem they seek to call attention to. Given that past cases of arguably more consequential high-profile deceptions are widely known (e.g., the Pentagon papers, deception by Tobacco companies), why has the idea of a PT era within the last decade been so resonant and earned such wide acceptance?

Some of this popularity is a consequence of the idea of PT figuring prominently into influential messaging by powerful media and political figures, who use the idea to strategically counter threats to authority within the context of “anxious elite negotiation of mass representative liberal democracy with proposals for organizing and deploying mass communication technologies” (Harsin, 2020, p. 2). Yet it is our contention that the paradoxical popularity of PT has another important cause.

In the remainder of this paper, we explore how the popular acceptance of PT might reflect a widespread awareness of the escalation of genuine contests about what is to be accepted as true or real. Yet, these disputes concern ways of judging what is true or real that are largely overlooked in both popular and academic discourse on PT, which rely on an inadequate conceptual system within which judgments of truth are understood only as judgments of factual truth and language is conceived of as a transparent representation of reality—a mirror of nature.

Language and truth as a mirror of nature

Prevailing popular and academic discourse on PT relies, usually implicitly, on a representationalist (“mirror of nature”, in Rorty’s [1979] terminology) view of language, and the conception of truth that follows from this. In this view, truth is a matter of point-to-point correspondence between entities in the world and in language. What is or isn’t true is, in this sense, solely a function of what is or isn’t objectively the case in the world. Truths are not constructed; what is true is a matter of the state of the world itself.

Such a depersonalized conception has enabled researchers to treat truth as a sort of independent variable. For example, several studies have investigated the relative spread of true versus false information on social media platforms and concluded that false information receives more engagement and is more widely spread (Edelson et al., 2021; Vosoughi et al., 2018).

While these studies were quite popular, they rely on an inadequate conception of truth that overlooks certain key issues. First, truth is fundamentally a matter of judgment, not an objective feature of a particular utterance or other representation. This point is often lost, with judgments of truth assumed to figure into only normative but not descriptive claims, or only with the allegorical, metaphorical or figurative meaning of utterances rather than literal meaning. Yet the assumption of objectivity of literal or actual meaning is mistaken. All linguistic meaning involves metaphor (Olson 1996, pp. 142-143) and any account is “bound to obscure what it seeks to reveal” (Cassirer, 1946, p. 7). To the extent that linguistic meanings are ‘fixed’ to something, this is first and foremost to the social practices of a particular form of life. To imagine a language is not to imagine a world, but instead “to imagine a form of life” (Wittgenstein, 2009: §19/11e).

If truth is a matter of judgment rather than of isomorphic correspondence with the world, then what are judgments of truth judgments of? Abandoning the representationalist view removes the justification for our “preoccupation with verificationist criteria of meaning” (Bruner, 1990, p. 8), and hence, with the narrow conception of truth that accompanies it

according to which truth is only understood to mean factual truth. This ‘preoccupation’ has severely hindered the development of ideas on misinformation and post-truth, since the conceptualization of the term at the center of their concern—*truth*—is severely restricted.

Narrative

Bruner’s (1986) well-known distinction between “two forms of thought” reveals the need for an expanded notion of how we make judgements of what is true or real in the discourse surrounding post-truth and elsewhere. Judgments of truth are not simply judgments of what is factually true. These, in Bruner’s formulation, correspond to just one of two forms of thought:

There are two modes of cognitive functioning, two modes of thought, each providing distinctive ways of ordering experience, of constructing reality. The two (though complementary) are irreducible to one another. Efforts to reduce one mode to the other or to ignore one at the expense of the other inevitably fail to capture the rich diversity of thought. ... Each of the ways of knowing, moreover, has operating principles of its own and its own criteria of well-formedness. They differ radically in their procedures for verification. A good story and a well-formed argument are different natural kinds. Both can be used as means for convincing another. Yet what they convince *of* is fundamentally different: arguments convince one of their truth, stories of their lifelikeness. The one verifies by eventual appeal to procedures for establishing formal and empirical proof. The other establishes not truth but verisimilitude. ... A story (allegedly true or allegedly fictional) is judged for its goodness as a story by criteria that are of a different kind from those used to judge a logical argument as adequate or correct. (Bruner, 1986, pp. 11-12)

As this quote from Bruner demonstrates, fictional narratives can be judged as lifelike or realistic, and conversely, non-fictional narratives can be rejected on the basis of seeming unrealistic. Such judgments are a matter of verisimilitude or of a narrative appearing ‘true to life’, rather than of being factual or proven true by logical-mathematical means.

The relevance of the narrative form has not entirely escaped the attention of researchers focused on PT. Yet insofar as they conceptualize individuals’ assessments of what is true/real or otherwise as if this could only be a matter of their perceived factual truth, the role of the narrative form is considered only in terms of how the unique properties of narrative influence judgments of factual truth of information within or beyond a particular story. So, for example, although Marsh and Yang (2018) stress that the “one must evaluate information structured as narratives rather than as one-off claims about, for example, macadamia nuts or Icelandic glaciers” (p. 22-23), the underlying concern in this and related work (e.g., Marsh & Fazio, 2006) remains limited to how the features of narratives impact the reader’s perception of what is factually true about, e.g., macadamia nuts or Icelandic glaciers. Other researchers document the unique persuasiveness of more prototypical narrative forms over genres more defined by logical-mathematical argumentation typical of scientific writing (Braddock & Dillard, 2016; Haase et al., 2015), and show how individuals are more likely to dismiss statistical and other results of research when these conflict with narrative accounts the individuals are also aware of (Betsch et al., 2011; Haase & Betsch, 2012).

In all the previously cited examples, the concern is with individuals’ judgments of what is factually true. The fact that narratives can transport us to worlds that we may judge to be convincingly real or true to life despite knowing them to be fictional is overlooked. Instead,

the narrative form is seen as relevant only insofar as its psychological effect “inhibits counterarguing and epistemic monitoring [and] paying attention to the truth status of a narrative” (Green & Donahue, 2018, p. 116). Because the idea that evaluations of whether something is true or real could involve anything beyond checking for point-to-point correspondences between propositions and states of affairs in the surrounding world is typically overlooked (or considered only in a limited way, e.g., Dahlstrom, 2021; Dahlstrom & Scheufele 2018), the spread, appeal and persistence of misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy is treated as explainable only in terms of how various generic affordances, rhetorical strategies and other linguistic devices disrupt, manipulate or otherwise interfere with individuals’ ability to determine what is factually true—the only form of truth that is recognized. Yet, as Bruner’s work has made so abundantly clear, judgments of truth can be made in a different way—as judgments of narrative truth.

But what is narrative truth? How are judgments of narrative truth made? In the following sections, we first consider what the narrative form is in greater detail, and then turn to the question of what judgments of narrative truth are. Having done this, we show how this can be used to make sense of some of the psychological consequences of technological and social change that the original notion of a post-truth era sought to explain.

Narrative truth

The distinction between narrative truth and factual truth has been succinctly described as between truth of fact versus truth of meaning (Abbott, 2008, p. 153). This way of putting it is useful in that it provides a clear way to distinguish between judgments of factual truth which may be made about certain parts of a narrative as these may or may not correspond to factual parts of the world (e.g., characters, locations, etc. borrowed from history) and judgments of what is true or real that have to do with the intrinsic features of narrative itself. But what are the latter? Drawing on a long-debated philosophical distinction (David, 2022; Young, 2018), White (1978) characterized such truths of meaning as “truths of coherence” (p. 122). Such judgments of truth relate to factual judgments about the world in a way that is indirect, metaphorical or “figurative” (p. 121-134). Nevertheless, “the image of reality which the novelist thus constructs is meant to correspond in its general outline to some domain of human experience which is no less ‘real’ than that referred to by the historian” (1978, p. 121-134). This ‘image of reality’ is false only in a certain factual sense—perhaps what Werner characterized as “geometric-technical” (Werner & Kaplan, 1963, p. 26) or “objective-technical” (1978, pp. 149-152)³.

White’s notion of coherence truth bears some resemblance with Bruner’s suggestion that narratives that make sense and are judged as real are those in which the characters’ actions

³ Werner’s distinction is between ‘geometric-technical’ (or *objective-technical*) and physiognomic perception/cognition (Glick, 2013; Werner, 1978; Werner & Kaplan, 1963; see also Crain, 2011, p. 101-103). Geometric-technical perception is concerned with what are judged to be objectively literal depictions, e.g., a blueprint, and is characterized by distinctions/differentiations that are ignored in physiognomic perception, the latter being apparent in the unrealistic-yet-expressive drawings of young children and modern artists. This is particularly relevant in the present context insofar as Werner shows that depictions that are ‘incorrect’ from a geometric-technical perspective (e.g., an expressionist painting) may nonetheless convey a more deeply and intimately real sense of that which they aim to depict.

are ultimately (i.e., by the end of the story) rendered legible in relation to what we understand to be canonical (or, alternately, our understanding of the latter is convincingly expanded [Bruner, 1990]). Or, as Harré (1979) stated, “I presume that in a play, the psychology of the characters which did not reflect that of the audience in a considerable measure would be unacceptable” (p. 92).

It is not immediately clear what the “reflection” that Harré refers to could be. The judgment that a story seems lifelike cannot be a matter of its corresponding isometrically or *iconically* (in Peircean terms) to extra-textual reality, for reasons described previously relating to the problems with representationalist views of language. It is tempting to suppose that the ‘reflection’ is a matter of consistency with Wittgenstein’s *forms of life* or Bourdieu’s *habitus* (Byers, 2022). This is one way to interpret Bruner’s (2004) claim that

life stories must mesh, so to speak, within a community of life stories; tellers and listeners must share some ‘deep structure’ about the nature of a ‘life,’ for if the rules of life-telling are altogether arbitrary, tellers and listeners will surely be alienated by a failure to grasp what the other is saying or what he thinks the other is hearing. (p. 699, citing Sartre’s remarks on autobiography)

While such an interpretation is useful and unproblematic for certain purposes, it overlooks the radical ontological gap between narrative accounts of particular events and the lived experience of such events—and in so doing, overlooks the defining characteristic of the narrative form that is crucial to judgments of narrative truth, which is the way the narrative form can be used to create meaning and construct reality. To explain this in detail, it is useful to begin with the difference between statements of fact, chronicles and narrative, a set of distinctions that is central to the understanding of narrative developed in socio-cultural psychology (Bruner, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1988).

A set of statements describing particular events may be judged as either factual or otherwise. And, if we compile these statements into a chronicle, this may be judged in the same way. Yet, a chronicle is not a narrative. What defines the narrative form is the choice of chronicled statements that are included, the way they are arranged to create a plot, including which are chosen to begin and end the narrative. This arrangement creates a new level of meaning which may be judged independently of the factual truth of the plot events (Bruner, 1986; 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 61). This is Abbott’s (2008) “truth of meaning” (p. 153) and White’s (1978) “coherence” (p. 122). It is also what has been entirely overlooked in the discourse on post-truth where it would appear to be so deeply relevant.

The social conflicts and disputes that were the grounds for declarations of a ‘crisis of truth’ have to do with disagreement about *the way things really were*, which the prevailing discourse on post-truth characterizes as disagreement on facts. Yet, as White (1978) explains, individuals’ conceptions of ‘the way things really were’ are clearly not mere judgments of what is factually true but have to do with the coherence constructed by particular narrative:

‘reality’ is not only perceivable but is also coherent in its structure. A mere list of confirmable singular existential statements does not add up to an account of reality if there is not some coherence, logical or aesthetic, connecting them one to another. (p. 122)

Mnemonic communities and narrative templates

So far, our account has shown how narration constructs new levels of meaning and new ways in which judgments of truth may be made. The previous section suggested that this may explain how the idea of a post-truth era has become so popular despite a lack of empirical support and the fact that contemporary discourse reveals an obsessive focus on truth rather than its obsolescence. Yet, there is a problem with the explanation proposed thus far. While we can account for how individuals may differ in their views of *the way things were* (and hence are and will be), nothing in the account thus far explains why these differences in perspective should lead to persistent conflicts. While individuals may subscribe to different narrative accounts that construct different realities, what is to prevent them from resolving these discrepancies by simply narrating their opposing accounts to each other? To come at the issue in different terms, we may say that although our account so far can explain how narratives construct particular versions of reality, it does not explain why one or another version should be more or less compelling for certain individuals.

A promising solution is found in a set of concepts developed in Wertsch's (2007) work on narrative. First, drawing on the work of Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp, Wertsch distinguishes between specific narratives (i.e., the telling of a particular story) and narrative templates. The latter refers to the common general function served by different specific narratives, each with different characters and events (Wertsch, 2007, p. 653). These "functions of characters serve as stable elements of a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled" (Propp, 1968, p. 21, cited in Wertsch, 2007, p. 653). In addition to the distinction between specific narratives and templates, Wertsch also introduces the notion of a *mnemonic community* to refer to a group for whom a particular narrative template "plays a particularly important role and takes on a particular form" (2007, p. 655). Using these terms, we can interpret the perceived contests over truth that define the post-truth era as reflecting the boundaries between different mnemonic communities.

Membership in a mnemonic community, like other communities or cultural groupings, is not discrete (in/out), but a matter of degree. One is a member of a given mnemonic community to the extent that its distinctive narrative template(s) are personally significant and meaningful in terms of the intensity of response they garner (the response here likely contains intellectual, personal, and emotional/ bodily-autonomic dimensions). While this is clearly a consequence of one's own life history and socialization—i.e., where and with whom a person was raised and comes to live—it must also be a function of the extent to which the mnemonic community exists as a functional, integrated social system within which life is collectively narrated. The greater the extent to which this is the case, the greater the opportunities for individuals to be engaged in the community and to be compelled by the narratives that define it.

Of course, the compellingness of a specific narrative to an individual is also a function of the features of specific narratives themselves—the inclusion of particular plot elements and the way these have been combined to construct a particular reality. From this perspective, we can appreciate the compellingness of works of fiction as owing partially to "the enormous arsenal of available resources [with which] an author can fashion characters into representative types and combine them in such a way as to bring out vividly the moral and practical consequences of their actions" (Abbott, 2008, pp. 153-154).

This point can be applied to non-fiction in a way that connects to the previous point about mnemonic communities existing as substantial, actual communities. Depending on the size

and integrity of a given mnemonic community, members of such communities would have larger or smaller “arsenals of available resources”, and by extension a greater potential to engage each other in compelling narratives. This brings us to the topic of technological change and the final aspects of a revised understanding of the post truth era we wish to propose.

Technological change and mnemonic communities

Recent developments in digital technology and social networking—commonly cited as playing a central role in the transition to a post-truth era—have had two important consequences of particular relevance for our purposes here: First, they have vastly increased the availability of factual information to (many) individuals. One estimate concluded that the amount of information produced in the year 2000 exceeded that which had cumulatively been produced in all previous years, and that this quantity was then doubled the following year (Lyman & Varian, 2003). Secondly, online social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Tik Tok) have facilitated the formation of social networks between geographically and temporally dispersed individuals. What are the consequences of these changes?

In the available research, we again see the prevalence of representationalist views of language and purely factual conceptions of truth with nothing to say about the role of narrative in human life. For example, one popular account holds that the ease and convenience of connecting and interacting directly with similarly interested others is leading individual to cluster into groups with like-minded others and, consequently, to engage in increasingly extreme maladaptive behavior (Sunstein, 2009). This has been variously attributed to those individuals being oblivious to outside viewpoints as a result of filtering by social media platforms (Pariser, 2011) and social epistemic bubbles in certain social groups (Nguyen, 2020), or as a result of their membership in groups that actively ideologically resist and discredit outside viewpoints (so-called *echo chambers*, Nguyen, 2020, citing Jamieson & Cappella, 2008).

The concepts of epistemic bubbles and echo chambers are attempts to account for observations that users of online platforms can be frequently observed disregarding certain institutionally endorsed truths. These concepts provide a way to explain such behavior as being fundamentally a result of access/awareness to certain information, and by extension, that judgments of truth and endorsements of particular worldviews are fundamentally a matter of factual truth.

The present analysis compels us to call this into question. Do persistent disagreements primarily reflect access to different facts and different judgments of factual truth, or do they reflect the predictable consequences of interaction between individuals in different mnemonic communities, committed to different narrative templates, and by extension, to different narrative constructions of reality? More significantly, have we entered a post-truth era where facts no longer matter, or has the infrastructure for social connection and exchange made possible by the internet and social media platforms profoundly invigorated mnemonic communities by drastically expanding their members’ ability to access and share information with which they may co-construct ever more compelling narratives that deepen engagement and commitment to the realities they construct?

If this is correct, then it would provide a way to make sense of the ongoing and seemingly unresolvable disputes on political issues where interlocutors seem unswayed by facts. From this perspective, the fact that individuals’ disagreements on issues such as immigration,

racial disparities, and climate change are so persistent and unyielding to logical argument or appeal to facts is not an indicator of factual truth no longer mattering but of the fact that the basis of such conflicts is a clash between different narrative truths rather than factual truths. If in the course of such disagreements, the relevance of certain facts becomes irrelevant, this may be a reflection not of the categorical irrelevance of factual truth, as the idea of PT suggests, but of the irrelevance of factual truth to the resolution of conflicts that are fundamentally about narrative truth.

Conclusion

We began by describing the widespread perception of society as having entered a post-truth era in which deception and falsehood have flourished and the evaluation of factual truth has diminished. This perception was shown to be problematic on the grounds that (1) popular discourse and other social changes show a growing rather than diminished concern with truth and related issues in recent years, and (2) evidence that misleading or false information is more prevalent today than in the past is lacking. This raises a puzzle: How has the idea of post-truth earned such widespread popular and academic endorsement if it is not clearly valid? Our analysis suggests that the idea of post-truth reflects an attempt to make sense of deepening commitment to different narrative constructions of reality, and that this deepening commitment results (in part) from how the social networking capacities of the internet and digital technology greatly expand the potential for individuals to engage with and contribute to certain mnemonic communities within which they construct accounts of their reality.

It is worth noting here that these expanded possibilities are not expanded in every direction. ‘Available information’ has to be made available by someone, and accessed by someone, neither of which occurs automatically or without infrastructure. Especially on the side of access, this introduces a strong bias towards information fitting into preexisting social categories and related to the preexisting institutions and other structures of society. Consequently, this information enhances the possibility for narrative construction of some realities more than others

Psychology in the service of community

This article comprises one part of a special issue whose theme is “Building Community: Theoretical Psychology in the Service of Social Issues”. Among other things, this includes the question of how theoretical psychological knowledge and practice can reach local communities to contribute to positive social change. The choice of such a focus is hardly surprising. The need to address broader social needs is an ever-present one for any scholarly field, whose continued existence depends on the support of the broader society. Not surprisingly, much of the work in academic psychology is focused on addressing popularly recognized social issues, at least nominally and/or indirectly. While such work is instrumental in the short term in eliciting popular support, this entails a unique challenge and a serious risk for psychology and related fields, particularly sociology. Unlike the other sciences, “the social issues” that psychology and sociology earn popular support for addressing are discursively constructed phenomena and thereby fall within the bounds of the subject matter that these fields, properly understood, should aim to explain. Yet the tasks of explaining the social-psychological construction of these issues and addressing them on their own terms would seem at odds with one another. A related version of this problem is described memorably by Rommetveit (1975), who suggested that “psychology and social

psychology have, indeed, been awarded scientific status only insofar as they could proclaim and legitimize their lack of concern with the Kantian question [What is man?]. They may thus ...even be interpreted as symptoms of evasion” (p. 108). Addressing social issues in ways that are most readily appreciated by those outside the field on whose support the field depends involves treating the issues as real objective facts. Yet, by doing this, social science scholarship risks becoming a simulation of itself, overwhelmed by and subordinated to the socio-cultural processes it should properly be explaining. In other words, rather than identifying and studying what Barthes (1972) called the “mythology of everyday life”, it becomes just another myth.

The risks this entails appear particularly acute in the context of research attempting to address the challenges of a PT era. As numerous examples discussed earlier showed, much mainstream empirical research has attempted to understand cognitive and other factors that influence judgments of truth. Such work presumably aims to make a positive social contribution and insofar as it is perceived to do so, it effectively garners broader societal support. Yet if, as we concluded, the very idea of PT is a social construction that obscures and explains away what are ultimately conflicts between different narrative constructions of reality, then attempts to use research to identify and address perceived manifestations of PT only function to further obscure matters and consequently, to fuel the very social divisions that research would ostensibly help to solve.

Future possibilities

Assessments of technological and social changes made as they are occurring are invariably limited. Yet, there is some justification for expecting the consequences of the changes discussed here to be quite consequential. After all, it was in the context of classical Greece in the centuries following the spread of literacy that we see such developments as prose (Goldhill, 2002), the mentalistic/intellectual conceptualization of the human being (Snell, 1953), and the emergence of abstract theoretical concepts, e.g., references to *justice* as an abstract object or thing, rather than merely to *a just person* or *a just action* (Havelock, 1978; Ong, 1982). The introduction of the printing press catalyzed numerous drastic changes in society, including the nature of childhood and education (Postman, 1982; Eisenstein, 1979). While some common accounts of the cultural consequences of technological change in Greece are disputed (e.g., Havelock & Havelock, 1963) or even quite far-fetched (Jaynes, 2000), certain changes seem indisputable. One can hardly read Plato’s critique of literacy (Plato, 1997, sections 275-278) and deny how profoundly it has transformed our understanding of memory (records), interpretation and intellectual activity.

The aforementioned contemporary accounts from past eras in which new communications technologies and media emerged are particularly instructive for our assessments of today’s emerging technologies. While the effects of digital technology and social media are frequently understood today as posing threats to truth, we may expect that, from the vantage point of the future, this assessment may appear as limited as 15th century assessments of the printing press as primarily leading to blasphemy and the deterioration of serious scholarship (Ong, 1982, p. 80, see also Lowry, 1979), or Plato’s assessment of writing and literate culture as threatening memory and sophisticated thinking. It is also interesting to note the striking semantic connections between the future-oriented anticipations and concerns about the effects of then-new technologies and our own backward-looking appraisal of what these effects turned out to be. Plato’s concerns about the consequences of literacy for memory and 15th century concerns about the consequences of the printing press for scholarship are

striking from the vantage point of the present where memory (written records) and scholarship are more readily understood as benefits rather than costs of the technologies in question. It remains to be seen whether and how the same may be true for our sense of what is real.

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