

The West Is GASLIGHTING Everyone — Now With AI | Profs. D. Riches & J. Eddebo

Dennis Riches and Johan Eddebo examine how dominant narratives are produced, defended and transformed by technology. Kyoto University Symposium 2026: "Geopolitics in the Time of Monsters" Presentation 5: Professor Dennis Riches (Literature) & Professor Johan Eddebo (Philosophy) Riches presents a contested interpretation of Rwanda and the Great Lakes conflicts, using it to question institutional authority and historical representation. Eddebo explores artificial intelligence, simulated reasoning and the erosion of meaningful dissent. Their Kyoto Symposium discussion considers internet countercultures, propaganda, media influence and human rationality, asking whether new forms of community and engagement with reality can resist the pressures of an emerging monoculture. Dennis and Johan's Links: Dennis Riches Substack: <https://dennisriches.substack.com/> Lit by Imagination: <https://dennisriches.wordpress.com/> Johan Eddebo university profile: <https://www.uu.se/kontakt-och-organisation/personal?query=N12-1513> Neutrality Studies Links: Neutrality Studies Substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com> Support Neutrality Studies: <https://neutralitystudies.com/donate> Neutrality Studies shop: <https://neutralitystudies.com/shop> Time Stamps 00:00 Introduction: narrative control before and after AI 03:46 Riches on Rwanda and the Great Lakes conflicts 12:11 How dominant historical narratives are established 19:00 Eddebo: the post-digital condition 31:03 AI and the simulation of independent reasoning 39:47 Q&A: where can dissent survive? 47:18 Human rationality, technology and pessimism 58:38 Reality, worldviews and alternatives to monoculture

#Dennis Riches

Thank you, everyone, for coming today. And I just wanted to say at first, I'm going to read from a script here because I was afraid of just ad-libbing too much and going over the time limit. So please bear with me. So we're going to speak today about the risks and consequences of AI becoming a system that has the potential to consolidate, censor, and filter information. Johan is going to speak about this aspect of AI, but I'm going to talk about the earlier forms of narrative control as they were in the late 20th century. So I wanted the slides on the screen to be only a sort of visual backdrop for my speech. You can think of them just as a list of references that I've used in my research.

So I'm going to focus on the events that occurred in Rwanda in the 1990s, events which also must be considered in connection with the decades before that time and with the conflicts in the Great Lakes region of Africa since 1994. So at this symposium, we're talking about geopolitics in the time of monsters. And my talk is a reminder that in many places, it has been the time of monsters for many years already. So to discuss how the official narrative of the Rwandan genocide was solidified

in the propaganda system, I'll first have to describe the main events as they can be seen in two competing narratives: the predominant official narrative and the unofficial narrative that lives in the margins of media coverage and scholarly studies.

It is a complex story that is difficult to cover within the time limit, but I'll try. So first, an analogy or a metaphor. The Conversation was a film directed by Francis Ford Coppola in 1974. It's a great film about the state of paranoia and alienation created by surveillance states. It shows in a compelling way that the meaning of all information depends on context and interpretation. And quite often, the meaning remains entirely ambiguous and ready for exploitation by the powerful. The protagonist, Harry Caul, is an expert in high-tech audio surveillance. He has taken a job to spy on a young couple, and from the limited segments of conversation that he's able to collect, he understands that they fear being murdered by someone, perhaps by the client that he's working for.

He imagines they must be seeking ways to escape or hide. So on the recording, he hears them say, "He'd kill us if he got the chance." It seems they clearly fear being killed. It is only toward the end of the story, when Harry has cleaned up the recording and listened to it carefully, that he hears it with a different stress pattern: "He'd kill us if he got the chance." The audience does not know even if the difference in intonation is real or if it's just a matter of Harry hearing it differently and being shocked that he overlooked this way of interpreting the words. Now it seems that the couple is plotting a murder, justifying their ulterior motives by stating that their preemption will be justified as self-defense.

So this is my metaphor for what I want to talk about today: this ambiguity and this difficulty in interpreting reality from a set of superficial facts that all agree on. And this can help us understand why two narratives exist regarding what happened in Rwanda in 1994, and why some of them were made convincing and dominant simply because it fit with the rationalizations required by powerful states that were acting behind the scenes to achieve regime change in Rwanda and eliminate the role of France in this part of Africa. So in 1959, there was a revolution to overthrow the feudal order. The minority group that used to rule, comprising various high-status Tutsi clans, lost its power in the new republic.

There was violent revolution and counter-revolution during this time. Many from the minority group, among them the former ruling clans, took refuge in neighboring Uganda, while some went to other parts of the world to become a Tutsi diaspora or a Tutsi lobby. Most members of the Tutsi minority stayed in Rwanda and adapted to the new order. Thirty years later, the refugees and their sons went to war against their homeland in order to reverse the revolution. They were sponsored by their host country, Uganda, and Uganda was sponsored heavily by the most powerful nation in the world, as well as a few others, such as the UK and Israel. These attacks by exiled Tutsis destabilized and terrorized their homeland.

President Juvénal Habyarimana had to fight this foreign aggression while trying to hold back the people who wanted radical, drastic measures against the invaders and against the Tutsi civilian

minority, some of whom were working covertly for the forces living in exile. So paranoia, suspicion, and anger spread as the nation fell into economic crisis. On April 6, 1994, President Habyarimana's plane was shot out of the sky as it was about to land in Kigali. The murder was investigated many times, but never solved definitively. The new president of Rwanda, Paul Kagame, would not allow the UN to investigate, even though it had a mandate to do so.

So was Habyarimana killed by extremists at home who didn't like the compromises of the 1993 Arusha Accords? The other explanation was that he was killed by the RPF, the army of exiles, who knew that a decapitation strike would make conquest possible and who also knew that conquest would cancel the Arusha Accords, under which they would have had to share power only as a minority within the country. So the invaders did not care about the chaos that they had provoked for the last four years, nor were they deterred by the fact that further aggression would provoke radical groups in Rwanda to react with extreme violence within Rwanda. Their RPF army and their sponsors had no objections to their plans for invasion.

The Hutu extremists used the threat of mass violence the way some nations use nuclear deterrence. Unfortunately, that bluff was called, and they carried out their threat, regardless of all the innocents they planned to murder in a hopeless strategy of fighting against the war of external aggression. So these questions about the events and the facts are known. They're like the words in the film *The Conversation*: "He'd kill us." They're just transcribed on paper. Everyone sees the same thing on the surface. Their interpretation is in what we choose to hear in the metaphorical intonation, in the emotions and motivations that we hear or attribute to the spoken words.

So this interpretation is subjective, ambiguous, and highly exploitable. Once the words are in the transcript, it's easy for the powerful to propagate their preferred interpretation. So if we choose to see Rwanda in 1994 outside of its historical context, we see thousands of people who, for vague reasons, underwent a mass psychosis killing spree against their fellow citizens. The pursuit of justice must be focused on the individual responsibility of those who chose to kill their neighbors. They should take all the blame and be vilified forever for their deeds. And the army that fought them and chased them out of Rwanda should be seen as the heroes and the new legitimate rulers of the country.

#Pascal

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#Dennis Riches

This is the predominant narrative that has been firmly in place in the Western propaganda system since 1994. This is the preferred interpretation because it takes the focus off the ultimate causes:

the U.S.-U.K.-Israel plan for covert destabilization and regime change in Rwanda, a plan carried out with no regard for its predictable consequences. So the unofficial narrative has gained some ground in recent years as more researchers have looked more deeply into what happened in Central Africa over the last four decades. But they are still often denounced as genocide deniers.

Books by some of these researchers appear in the slides that failed to show here, but I believe that the unofficial narrative is the correct interpretation of events because it focuses on those that the poet Dante assigned to the lowest depths of hell, the sinners who spent their lives splitting people, families, and societies apart. People in powerful positions are responsible for the foreseeable consequences of their actions, much more so than the people farther down the hierarchies of power who are manipulated, terrorized, dispossessed, and propagandized into committing crimes. So in the counter-narrative, there was no so-called civil war in Rwanda.

It is called such by the conventions of historical classification because the warriors identified themselves as Rwandan. This choice of label is, however, disingenuous and never should have been used. The U.S. and U.K. poured massive amounts of aid into Uganda in the 1980s and 1990s, and this support allowed Uganda to finance the army of exiled soldiers and their invasion of Rwanda. So many of those soldiers had been born in Uganda after 1959. This was a foreign aggression, a violation of international boundaries that could have alarmed President Bush at the time as much as the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. So when placing the focus on ultimate causes, I need to also stress that the number of deaths in Rwanda in the spring of 1994 has never been determined.

Estimates vary widely, but the high number of 800,000 used by most researchers and the Rwandan government is much higher than the number of Tutsis who lived in Rwanda in the early 1990s, according to census data. And there were many Tutsi survivors as well. And in some regions, there were no mass killings. So the number of excess deaths in the following longer tragedy far exceeds the number killed in 1994. Rwandan forces have fought the Hutu refugees in eastern Zaire, later the Democratic Republic of Congo, since 1994. And just coincidentally, they profited from the enormous mineral wealth in that region, which finds its way into Rwanda and then out to the world from there.

Millions have died in this conflict, okay? The UN accused Rwanda and other actors of genocide in the DRC in its 2010 Mapping Report, but the international community did not intervene, in spite of the supposed lesson learned in 1994 that the international community must intervene early in such atrocities. So what about these two narratives in the public consciousness? Now that I've outlined the substantial differences in the two narratives, which one became dominant and why? I want to mention how this was done in spite of the highly implausible aspects of it that citizens of Western nations believe, to the extent that they have any knowledge at all about what happens in Africa.

So this dominance was achieved by the skill with which the leaders of the Tutsi diaspora quickly established rapport with all the important sectors of the information sphere: media, governments, academia, and NGOs. The Westerners who were approached were quick to see an African victim, and they let themselves be led by the nose through this very complex historical event. And I think, in

their arrogance, they could not imagine that these African victims could be clever enough to deceive them by being cunning, cynical, and manipulative. In the mid-1990s, before search engines and long before large language models, the artificial intelligence of the propaganda system functioned very effectively to filter out the unofficial narrative, regardless of the evidence and rational arguments that supported it.

There are numerous books and academic articles that support the unofficial narrative, and it has been covered in the media, such as the New York Times, the BBC, and the Globe and Mail in Canada, to their credit. Yet such reports never overturned the official narrative. If I assign this topic to an undergraduate student who knows nothing about it, she'll do internet searches and produce a paper citing nothing but the sources that support the official narrative. And in 2026, 32 years after 1994, Wikipedia, that arbiter of truth that you see under many YouTube videos, has an article on the Rwandan genocide that still upholds the official narrative, with some nuanced concessions toward elements of the counter-narrative.

One outrageous example is that it cites Africa expert Gérard Prunier's 1999 book 31 times. But it does not cite a book by the same author written in 2010, in which he entirely reversed his interpretation of the genocide and received the condemnation of the Rwandan government. He's persona non grata there now. There is a separate Wikipedia page called the Double Genocide Theory of Rwandan Genocide that includes more sources that support the unofficial narrative. The debate on that page, interestingly, revolves around whether the RPF forces committed genocide or merely crimes against humanity. Are we supposed to be relieved if it's only the latter?

Internet searches return in their top 30 entries only sources that support the official narrative. If I subscribe to articles on Rwanda in a service such as Academia, most of the articles sent to me support the official narrative, and those all cite the same few sources. Hundreds of student theses have been written on the subject, and Academia sends them all to me. All of them are very derivative of the few usual suspects, I call them, the sources that I see in all of them. And none of them place any emphasis on the U.S., U.K., Israel geopolitical strategy and ultimate causes of the disaster: that Rwanda was a victim of an external aggression and destabilization project in the 1990-94 period.

And that's what radicalized segments of society that President Habyarimana, to his credit, was trying to control in order to implement the Arusha Accords, which were the grand compromise that he was willing to accept. So the AI overview responding to "What were the causes of the Rwandan genocide?" produces an explanation very similar to Wikipedia, describing the invasion as a civil war and placing no emphasis on that war's destabilization of Rwanda. At first, they offer the official narrative, but if you ask the right questions, you can make it admit that there are contrary claims about what really happened, and scholars who insist it was not a civil war. So I'll conclude by saying that some of our worst fears about AI have already happened without AI. AI is a stupid but highly sophisticated autocomplete program.

And before its appearance, there were already highly developed autocomplete systems planted in the public mind. The propaganda system worked effectively, giving self-believing, knowledgeable citizens a false assurance that they were smart people with the correct answers. They were taught how to fill in the blanks without thinking beyond the information fed to them. So large language models may not be doing anything new, but they have the potential to strengthen and accelerate the mechanisms by which official narratives filter, censor, disseminate, and entrench state-sponsored narratives of historical events, perhaps simply by mistaking repetition and quantity for truth and quality. So thank you for listening. I would have liked to support my argument by covering more of the details.

So if you want to know more, or you want to know what sources I have used, I can send you a list of references. And I just want to thank a few researchers who helped me personally: Freddy Usabuera, a great activist in Montreal who came to Canada as a refugee after the Rwandan genocide. Judy Rever also lives in Montreal. She's written some great books. Keith Harmon Snow worked on this issue for a long time. And the Canadian lawyer Christopher Black, who worked at the UN Tribunal for Rwanda as a defense attorney, wrote extensively about that. So these last two, Keith and Christopher, unfortunately passed away in recent years, but I can recommend their work highly. Judy continues to be one of the bravest writers on this subject after having faced many threats against herself and her family.

#Warwick Powell

So thank you very much. Thank you. Okay.

#Johan Eddebo

Okay. And this is... So it's interesting to think about why Dante places the traitors at the lowest rung of hell, while avarice and greed and those sorts of things are the least problematic sins. So, you know, he puts Brutus and the guys who killed Caesar—those are the worst types of people. There could be some meaning to decode from that. It's very difficult for me to speak at the end of such a long line of luminaries, so I hope you will bear with me. I'm going to try to connect with some of the issues that Matthias has talked about, and also... in relation to what Mr. Bartolo discusses in terms of why do we not know the best interests of our societies anymore?

I'm going to try to say something intelligent about what we call the post-digital condition and how it impacts on knowledge production, on thinking, on our access to reality, to the world. So there. It's strange and a bit disconcerting to be living in a time when George Bush Jr., in retrospect, seems to have been a most eloquent and competent statesman. So 25 years ago, as we remember, the general observation was rather of a low watermark in public discourse. But now, in comparison, things seem to have deteriorated much further. Sorry. So, yeah, things seem to have deteriorated quite a bit in terms of the quality of public discourse, even in comparison to the low-water mark of the early 2000s.

As an example, on the 1st of October this month, Donald Trump spoke at a rally in Oklahoma, describing how these big, beautiful American war machines were striking the nuclear drug factories of Iran, the nuclear drug factories. And I was reminded of an early viral video of a young four-year-old Protestant Christian preacher. This young boy was, of course, not preaching in any real sense. He was play-acting, and quite convincingly. He repeated key words and phrases appropriate to the context. He delivered them very well with an enthusiastic intensity, but without any real rational coherence. So he, yeah, and accordingly, he ended up wiping his brow from the non-existent sweat with a handkerchief, just like he had seen his father do.

And my point is that political discourse today, in a similar sense, seems to be almost exclusively performative. It's, in a sense, devoid to a large extent of rational coherence, except superficially. And it has purposes of an entirely different sort from that of producing rational reflection in the public. So it's only superficially coherent. At first glance, it makes sense. But as soon as you try to tie things together in a more comprehensive, logically integrated set of statements, it tends to collapse. In 1985, in a pretty famous book by the U.S. cultural critic Neil Postman by the title *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, he produced similar observations around the deterioration of public discourse, which are tied to it being predominantly shaped by image-based entertainment media.

Since the advent of mass culture, especially in the wake of television, Postman argued that modern public discourse was no longer well anchored to long-form writing and the exacting demands on rational coherence and harmonious complexity we see in connection to long-form writing. He observed, however, that now the content of culture could be massively diverse in a certain sense, in a superficial sense, but at the same time it's become increasingly fragmented and disjointed and devoid of logical coherence. This was also the opinion of at least a couple of the members of the Frankfurt School already in the '30s and the '40s, when they were talking about the impact of the Western culture industry.

Theodor Adorno's amusingly acerbic music sociology is a good example of this discussion. It's well known because he doesn't seem to like jazz, but it's got some interesting substance here. He talks about the pop song, the commodified pop song, as the predominant example in the beginning of this book. He thinks it's a fragment or a shard of the complex context of meaning that he finds in serious music and in traditional composition. So in successful serious music, according to Adorno, I quote, "Every detail gets its concrete meaning from the total course, and the totality in turn receives it from the living interrelation of details that oppose and continue one another, pass into each other, and recur."

In other words, this is a sort of a coherent intercourse between the parts of this more complex piece, type of composition that forms a narrative that coherently resonates with all the other parts, and you get a unique long-form statement about what the world is like, or some aesthetic observation or experience, or some moral truth, or something of that sort. What substitutes for communication in our algorithmically curated post-Twitter discourse, I argue, is something actually

devoid of coherent, complex propositions from a bird's-eye view, something quite more debased than the simplistic pop music or the television advertising that Adorno and Postman criticized in their respective periods. So we have a new and quite different sort of situation that's sort of the outgrowth of this previous period.

What has emerged instead of the rational discourse that we've arguably had in place since Plato, arguably since human beings started telling each other stories about what the world is like, is, from my point of view, instead something like these ready-made, prefabricated narrative building blocks, which are not really narratives in any coherent sense, but rather symbolically framed and emotionally provocative moods or atmospheres. They're so devoid of content that I hesitate calling them narratives in this way. Similarly, Postman observes that what passes for opinions in the 1980s should best be described as emotions in comparison to what the concept opinion used to mean in the early 1900s. And again, this should be appreciated in light of how an opinion was a far cry from a well-reasoned conclusion, even so.

All of this is to say that the building blocks of the media discourse, and increasingly of the popular conversation, are generally not coherent, long-form propositions any longer. It's the same difference here as between the formulaic pop song and the classical symphony that Adorno gets at. So the media narrative, the prefabricated and symbolically framed mood or atmosphere, is superficially rational, or only rational in a very circumscribed and self-enclosing sense. It doesn't branch out into a more comprehensive statement about the world and what it's like, built on an interconnected set of propositions, of truth claims. So we're not dealing with arguments that build towards definitive statements of fact that can be interrogated meaningfully, that can be proven or disproven. That's the point.

And it's not only that the language of the public discourse is increasingly simplistic and lacking in nuance. The main issue is the lack of rational coherence within the entire set of stories that make up media narratives, the lack of rational coherence between different narratives in the environment that's supposed to form a cohesive whole about what the world is like and what's happening. And we have a couple of amusing statements by Trump that are sort of emblematic of this general zeitgeist. We can kind of—I guess I can skip that—but fun soundbites like how the U.S. Air Force is attacking Iranian nuclear drug factories, or how the noise from windmills causes cancer. They're good, amusing examples. There's another one on how electric vehicles force us to choose between the Scylla and Charybdis of shark attacks and electrocution.

It's a fun one. So it's nonsense from the point of view of logic, but on the associative level, it makes sense. The connotations are clear enough, especially with regard to the intended audience, who see the connection between the liberals and electric vehicles and men in women's sports and all of those sorts of things. And my point here is that you cannot argue with this sort of thing. You cannot discuss with this kind of entity. It's like fighting smoke. And neither can you interpret it and explain it

and point out that there's a problematic incoherence to an audience that is no longer accustomed to receiving complex argumentation, to an audience who's rather trained to consume these symbolically tinted moods that run on association rather than in terms of comprehensible meaning.

So if you have an audience that is trained to think and you're faced with these sorts of communicative entities that you cannot argue with, in such an environment, how do we express dissent in a meaningful way? How can there be any space for a neutral point of view that doesn't affirm the dominant spirit of the discourse if we have an information environment that is rather like a mood or an atmosphere and not a rational discourse? How can you disagree with it meaningfully? How can you meaningfully position yourself outside of it as a neutral party without becoming antagonized, without getting into conflict with it?

You cannot really refute an emotional disposition. You can't prove a cultural atmosphere wrong in an immediate sense because it is not a truth claim. It's not intended to be a truth claim. You cannot prove to a bunch of soccer fans that they shouldn't be angry over their team losing the championship. It's meaningless. But you can get on the wrong side of them, and they're not going to come back at you with eloquent arguments if you do. I used to think that maybe the internet, maybe digital communications technology, was the answer to Postman's problem. It felt a little bit like these technologies, coupled with a radical turn towards freedom of information, could have counterbalanced some of these problems, like back in 2002 or so.

But what I'm certain of is that the subsequent developments—the platforms, the Twitterification of discourse, the dominance of short-form video and all that, the erosion of memory, attention span, and last but not least, the AI technologies—I'm sure that this is making the situation far worse, even if there might have been potential early on. So the public-facing large language model, the AI chatbots, that's, in my view, the digital counterpart of this four-year-old Protestant preacher play-acting at delivering a sermon. It pretends to reason quite convincingly while lacking any actual understanding. So you get these weighted averages of the large language model operating on probabilistic associations and so on, but not on comprehension of the actual meaning, conceptual meaning.

We could say they run on correlation and not on causation in the logical sense, right? And when human beings increasingly interact with conversational models like ChatGPT, the discursive template we are exposed to is not that of genuine human reflection. It is a kind of ready-made, prefabricated simulation of genuine reasoning, like the pop song in relation to the symphony in Adorno's criticism. It's a representation of reasoning that amounts to a cherry-picked associative rationalization, whose function, I think, is to provide an experience of warrant for the dominant narratives of the discourse and for reinforcing your identity as part of the in-group.

A simulated, ready-made-for-consumption experience of the feeling or the mood of independent reasoning, which by default will tend to align with the dominant narratives. It's going to align with the conforming group and the Asch conformity experiments, if you will. And dissent in this kind of

situation becomes much more difficult and also much less meaningful. And my point in terms of it becoming less meaningful is that in the Asch conformity experiment, the situation is quite straightforward. Just like in the story of the Emperor's New Clothes, there's a fact you can point at and disagree with.

The cognitive dissonance is really strong. So all it takes is for a partner to point out that there's something wrong here, there's a discrepancy between narrative and reality, and you will form this unit of dissent. You just need the child to cry out that the emperor is naked, and everybody can see that that's the fact. In this situation we're in at the moment, when we're in an arbitrarily generated experience of understanding in a predominantly non-rational public discourse, the situation is different because there is no obvious reality to point to. There's no obvious radical discrepancy between narrative and reality that you can hammer on, that the non-conforming partner can affirm to strengthen the spirits of yourself as an isolated test subject.

And this partly relates to how our hyper-mediatized society increasingly lives in self-enclosed representations of the world. But this is a condition now, I think, that's increasingly reproduced by the large language model and their role as this universal epistemic intermediary, this arbiter of truth. So it doesn't quite matter if the child points out that the emperor is wearing no clothes, because you're not actually seeing him parading by buck naked. So you only know a story. We only know a story. And what's important about the story is not whether it's true or false. It's whether it's the good story to believe in. It's whether the right sort of people also believe it. So how can we be neutral in this kind of situation? How can we meaningfully dissent? That's the problem I'm seeing here. And I'm a bit pessimistic.

I believe that these emerging technologies have a strong inherent authoritarian potential that acts as a force multiplier for established systems of propaganda and consent manufacturing. I don't have any obvious solutions to tell you apart from the remarks that have been made previously today. I think outsourcing our critical thinking to an AI that functions towards rationalizing dominant narratives, as per Dennis' example, and which minimizes cognitive dissonance to reproduce this experience of understanding without the requisite knowledge, I think that's going to radically reduce the space for dissent or dissident perspectives in the public discourse. It's also—how many minutes do I have? Three? Three. It's also an empirically verified effect. I'm not just speculating as a philosopher here. We have quite a good bit of empirical research that establishes this to be the case.

From a paper this year, a philosopher by the name of James Bisbee showed that the chatbots function in exactly this manner by, I quote, "...adjusting agreement, validation, and confidence in factual claims to infer ideology." They recommend ideologically distinct news sources converge towards users' initial viewpoints in 60 to 90 percent of conversations. And they express differing confidence in identical facts depending on the ideological positioning of the person who interacts with them. Right. The ephemeral experience of understanding without the requisite knowledge is equally well researched. It's established through empirical research.

And we can just note that students who try to learn using AI technologies, they exhibit greater confidence in their knowledge, in their skills, in their purported knowledge, while they actually retain less than the non-AI-using control groups. So that phenomenon is also established. So I'm pessimistic, but I do know, however, in connection to some of your more hopeful, forward-looking statements here, that the human being is a rational animal. At least that is my profound belief. I believe we have a hunger and thirst for truth. And I think that the contemporary mediatic environment is by far the most impoverished one in history in this regard. And I find a kind of paradoxical silver lining here. So our tolerance for what George Orwell called duckspeak is not unlimited.

I think we have a breaking point where too much unreality becomes impossible to bear, and where the uncanniness of the simulated and incoherent narratives, garishly vivid and beautiful and attractive as they may be, becomes just as tangible as this naked emperor strutting by wearing no clothes. So I think the uncanniness of this hyper-real, as per Baudrillard, of the artificially reproduced and structurally incoherent narratives, is something that human reason cannot, in the end, abide. I think it's something abhorrent to human reason. And when we, as a culture or as a global community, approach a point of saturation, I think that a sustained and courageous affirmation of truth and of meaning and of rational consistency will tend to stand out to the majority as an oasis in the desert, as this non-conforming partner in the Asch experiment that you know of.

Can I just end with a quote? I want to end with a quote along these lines from G.K. Chesterton's 1905 work, *Heretics*. It's a title with many dimensions, and it's reflecting on similar developments in the period of the turn of the last century. "Fires will be kindled to testify that two and two make four. Swords will be drawn to prove that leaves are green in summer. We shall be left defending not only the incredible virtues and sanities of human life, but something more incredible still: this huge impossible universe which stares us in the face. We shall fight for visible prodigies as if they were invisible. We shall look on the impossible grass and the skies with a strange courage. We shall be of those who have seen and yet have believed." Thank you so much.

#Pascal

Thank you. Thank you very much. And I invite now questions to both of them. We only have 20—we have 25 minutes if you want to stay five minutes longer. I just wanted to say that I find that, you know, not only do we have competing narratives, now we have the question: what is a narrative? And that it is a symbolically framed emotional disposition. That doesn't really make it easier to approach. But I think this is actually very, very important, this emotional part of the narratives. And then we go to—let's start with Chris and then to David.

#Christopher Mott

So this question is for both of you. I remember—I guess I'm of the right age demographic to remember—in the mid to late 2000s, when the kind of online subculture really began to take off,

particularly with humor, ironic humor, and that kind of thing. And, uh, it was—it began as an alternative, right? The television news was the mainstream, and everyone knew it was propaganda. As the war on terror collapsed, the recession loomed, everyone knew that was BS, and there was this jokey, you know, not-too-self-serious aspect of that early meme culture. It was genuinely alternative. Now, it seems to me that the internet, which used to be the escape from the oppression of, you know, the meatspace, as it was called, the internet is now the monoculture.

The internet is now the establishment. Does this mean that the future alternatives, the counterculture, if you will, will be found in the meatspace? It will be an in-person thing. It will be by invite only. There will not be an online invite. There will be underground venues, kind of like hidden bands and whatnot. And this will be the next place that the future ideas of resistance to monoculture will come from.

#Johan Eddebo

Yes. No, you're entirely correct. I think that internet culture was clearly recuperated, like, 2015 or so. I have no idea where the new spaces for dissent will emerge, but meatspace is a good option because I think the internet, the platforms, all of that stuff is so heavily colonized. And I think it's very difficult to... I just read on my phone, I got a pop-up or something of that sort that told me, "I am in control of the content of my feeds," which I found wonderfully ironic. Of course, I would normally—why do you have to point that out? But yeah, I hope so. I hope we can find new ways to connect in the actual physical world. Right. What do you think? Wait, wait. I can't.

#Dennis Riches

I agree, and I'd just say that I think the internet is still full of dissenting voices too, but you've just got to find them. And it's becoming more difficult because there's so much hidden control in what's being fed to us.

#David Gibbs

Okay. I wanted to address a question to Dennis Riches with regard to your very interesting presentation on Rwanda and the Great Lakes area. You noted, basically, that there was, shall we say, a regime change operation orchestrated by the United States, Britain, and Israel against the existing Hutu-dominated polity that existed in Rwanda at the time, provoking a vicious civil war. That's a narrative that's been suppressed. I would agree with that. Now, I'm just wondering, to explore a little bit more, the motives for this regime change war. I saw it—and again, correct me, because you're more familiar with this than I am—it appeared to be, shall we say, a neocolonial competition between the United States and France for influence in Central Africa. Just by way of a little bit of background, France and the United States had long had this very intense competition.

Under Charles de Gaulle, de Gaulle had always seen the United States, not the Soviet Union or China, as France's main enemy in Africa, and felt accurately the United States was trying to push France out so they could come in, which is exactly what the U.S. was trying to do. France did retain outsized influence on the continent, at least into the '90s, to some extent until recently. For what it's worth, I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Niger, a poor French colony. I was extraordinarily impressed by the numerous ways France controlled its former colonies, this in the 1970s. And so I'm just wondering if you would see the regime change operation launched by the United States and its British and Israeli allies as related to this effort, as a way of, shall we say, expelling France from that part of Africa.

#Dennis Riches

You know, I remember in the research, there were quotations by the French president at the time saying, like, "What are we supposed to do, go to war against our NATO allies over this?" And they just basically surrendered at a certain point in that conflict. After the mass killings started, the French president just said, "No, there's no government there to support anymore. And the people who are doing these killings, they're not the legitimate government. They were never part of that. But there's no way to go to them and try to establish a Hutu government now." So they essentially acknowledged, yeah, they were at war with the United States, but they weren't going to fight it. They had to give up.

#David Gibbs

But I was wondering, so are you saying you would agree with the interpretation that the main motive for the regime change was essentially anti-France, anti-French?

#Dennis Riches

And also control of the mineral resources. Oh yeah, of course. And a lot of private corporations were driving that as well.

#Radhika Desai

Sorry.

#Radhika Desai

Yeah.

#Radhika Desai

Okay, very quickly, that was one of my questions. But a second question is, since I'm from Canada, I can't help but ask: can you shed light on the role of Roméo Dallaire in all this? Because he became so big in Canada, you know, on the grounds that he valiantly tried to protect, you know, I guess, you know, like protect people there and so on. So what really happened, according to you? And yeah, just...

#Dennis Riches

Yeah, there was something very controversial about him in Peterson's book on Rwanda, talking about the fake fax. This fax that was supposed to have been sent in January 1994, which proved planning for genocide, was actually a fake copy, and it was backdated. And that's in the files, and they uncovered that. But there's no official acknowledgement that that was a fake. It was just in the controversial history of it. And Dallaire himself, he was quoted at one point as saying, you know, there was no planning in advance. And that was early in his comments after the genocide.

But he changed that and went along with the narrative afterwards. And when I talked to Christopher Black, he lived in Africa and he was up close with the situation during the tribunals, and he didn't believe Dallaire was traumatized by the violence that he saw. He said, "He's a soldier; they're supposed to be accustomed to violence." His trauma was something deeper because he had turned a blind eye to the Tutsi advances, and the UN mission had been harsher on the Hutu government and disarming them. So, yeah, Dallaire is not believed very seriously in that counter-narrative.

#Speaker 1

Yeah, I have a couple of questions for Johan. The first one is very short. You said that you, in terms of hope for the future, fundamentally, you still believe that humans are rational beings. I found that a little bit surprising. I wondered how anybody could believe that. The second question concerns your pessimism, your general pessimism about the effects of the technological environment. This is something I'm very sympathetic to. To be honest, I feel exactly the same way. Postman was very pessimistic. Jacques Ellul was pessimistic. Marshall McLuhan tended to keep the pessimism out of his writing, which for me made it all the more valuable. But I remember hearing that in private he implored his daughter not to let his grandkids watch TV. So...

#Speaker 1

When I'm trying not to be so pessimistic, I remind myself that in the first half of the 20th century, which was much more of a print culture than we have now, and in print, arguments proceed logically and, hopefully, logically and chronologically, and can be thought about at some length. In the first half of the 20th century, we had two world wars and the use of nuclear weapons. And then now, if we take something so superficial as a meme, for example, there's a meme. It's actually a quote from Norman Finkelstein, and it's a picture of the Taliban. And the text says, "If you're ever feeling dumb

or useless, remember that it took the U.S. \$1 trillion in 20 years to replace the Taliban with the Taliban." So in that instance, you have a fundamental truth expressed very amusingly and pithily using the new technology. So my general question is, you know, are we completely doomed by the technological environment today? I'll stop there.

#Johan Eddebo

I guess those are three questions. Yes, I think human beings, as per Aristotle, are rational animals. He says that I can draw you a triangle here on the wall, and you can understand what I mean, and you can infer that it has three angles, that sort of thing. You can see what's true about it. We can see how the meaning of the triangle as an abstraction can support all the conclusions that have to be truthful. We can see that, we can understand that, and we can act on abstract truth, and hence we are rational animals. That doesn't mean that things are, you know, that we're in the clear for that sake, but I do believe fundamentally we are rational animals, and we can distinguish what is false from what is true, we can distinguish what is good from what is evil, and so forth.

Otherwise, then all of this is of no use, I think. Technology—I'm a pessimist. I'm a Buddhist, I would probably have to admit, but this is arguably because, as for another one of these television critics from the '70s, '80s, Jerry Mander, he takes pains at length to point out that technology is not value-neutral. It reproduces teleologies and structures of society and types of behavior, and so also you cannot build a nuclear power plant in your backyard and run it with your friends, stuff like that. Technologies have implicit effects on societies and modes of behavior and how institutions develop. And I think many of the technologies we now use have significantly detrimental effects. That doesn't mean there couldn't be any options, right? So there could be a... There's a potential infinity of unexplored options.

#Speaker 2

That's probably my most optimistic response to that.

#Speaker 3

I just wanted to add a comment on that. I tend to be quite pessimistic myself about human behavior in society, but more neutral on technology. And when we look at the previous print era, going back 50, 60 years, it tended to only be the well-educated, literate people who shared their opinions. So those opinions were well-informed and well-framed. And now social media allows everybody—the uneducated, the ignorant, anybody—to share their opinions. If we traveled back 60 years in time, going back to my country, Ireland, and traveled around the pubs of Ireland and listened to the average people sharing their opinions about the topics of the day, we'd probably also go, "Oh my God, people have never been so ignorant."

So I think it's just an awareness of the general level of ignorance that we're tapping into with technology, not that people are getting dumbed down. And with the responses that some countries have to AI and social media—banning them for younger people, taking them out of schools now—there's a realization that it is damaging human capital, not because people care so much about individual human development, but when it starts to impact countries economically, governments take steps. And the countries that respond to that effectively and have stronger human capital because of it will become much more successful in all fields. And so there's an incentive to prevent this becoming too corrupting, I think.

#Johan Eddebo

Those are good points, and I don't have a good answer for them.

#Ulrike Guerot

I just wanted to pick up Dennis on, because at some point you said you were called genocide deniers, right? So it just seems that there are two words which are always in play, which is conspiracy and denial. Climate denial, corona denial. So can you just elaborate a little bit on these words? What does this do? And the second, just to respond to this, I agree that there is something weird about all this AI because it totally neglects the haptics. What I mean is that the Buddha was always saying, "Don't believe anything you haven't experienced yourself." Yeah. So I agree. I would agree that all this AI is to basically push away anything which is natural intuition.

You know, I mean, the sort of what you are feeling. I mean, push away the feeling to get us cognitively basically destroyed with whatever, oblivion, other stories, and so on. But my point here is because we are now going back and we see Corona, and then it's now Rwanda, and then you go back and back. But I read a quote from Horace, and that is 2,000 years ago. And he basically said, the quote runs, "The glue of society is lies." And that's basically, I mean, if we go back to Plato, it's basically those who look over the fire to the lie, and those who say, "Okay, the exit is there, the light is there." So are we discovering something which is very old independently of AI or not?

#Dennis Riches

Well, I'll just say about denial, I think that's an emotionally charged word. It's got heavy connotations of some kind of sin, and you're a horrible person if you deny what's obvious to everyone. So it's got that emotional impact to shut down discussion and debate. So, of course, nobody wants to be called a denier simply like that when you're trying to engage in an informative discussion and exchange of opinions and viewpoints.

#Johan Eddebo

I hear you. Plato would say that a statue is one step removed from reality, and a painting of a statue would be two steps removed from reality. I would guess his take on AI would be that additional step, three from reality, is representations and representations of this sort. So, yes, in a sense, we're discovering something very old, but I think there's a new spin on it with these details, and even the level of enmeshment in representations we're now seeing. At least since COVID, I think the situation has changed, and I think the cultural environment has become more, in a sense, we're living more in representations than ever before.

#Michael Riches

Yeah. So this is more of a, I guess, a comment maybe or an observation that maybe either of you can just sort of react to. It's not really a question. But I find it interesting that regarding Neil Postman and some of the other media critics that you referenced, you know, and with talking about the internet, it's like... But half the people in this room are either hosts or guests on a lot of internet podcasts that get higher ratings than a lot of mainstream shows. So if you look at MSNBC, CNN, whatever, they might get 50,000 views. Rachel Maddow or Wolf Blitzer might get 50,000 views in a night. And then some other, one of the internet shows that we're all familiar with might get half a million or a million views. Yet it's still the mainstream media that controls the discourse and shapes the popular narratives.

And my theory for that is that these major networks, if you walk into an airport, if you walk into any parliament or Congress or the White House, they've all got CNN or MSNBC on. So these mainstream networks are basically the medium by which the corporations and the general elite are giving instructions to our leaders. But by doing so, our leaders repeat what they're supposed to repeat, and everyone sort of goes along with it. But I'm still kind of perplexed, though, how a lot of these internet programs, who have much higher ratings and much greater numbers of viewers, still haven't had the influence that you would have thought they would have. Yeah.

#Pascal

Oh, yeah. Yep.

#Dennis Riches

You want to comment?

#Pascal

If you want to respond, then these two gentlemen over here. Okay, let's take some... And we can do five minutes longer, right?

#Radhika Desai

We may get hundreds of thousands of views.

#Alexander Mercouris

We may get hundreds of thousands of views on YouTube, but that doesn't mean that we have the kind of reach that the mainstream media still has. I mean, television still is a much more powerful medium, reaching specific demographics. If you're talking about older people, for example, they definitely still prefer to go to television. And they're the people who are more likely to vote, and they're the people who have, as a result, greater political weight. So, yes, we are growing in influence, but we're not there yet where they are, and it will take some time before we do get there, if they let us. So, I mean, that's what I wanted to say.

#Warwick Powell

Quick question, probably more for Johan. You spoke of a few things which I thought I'd love to get your take on. One was—and these are just some ideas, because I'm interested in how you connect them, I guess—this idea of cognitive dissonance, this idea of steps removed from something that we speak of as reality. You spoke of Baudrillard, and when he talked about the simulacra, from memory, he also spoke about the sacramental order of reality. And for me, and the last piece was this idea of monoculture. I think we do experience this sense of being blanded out all the time, particularly when algorithms are enforcing an incredibly powerful averaging mechanism.

But because I speak more than one language and I read materials from a totally different world, I feel that, in fact, there are possibilities in our world for a relationship with the world that does not succumb to this sense of monoculture, that in fact provides a way of reclaiming something of a relationship with the sacramental order of reality, and that in fact it is not a Western world, and that the pathways and possibilities, if we want to put it on a spectrum of pessimism and optimism—and I'm never known for being an optimist—but that the optimistic path is actually to discover something about humanity's relationship with the world around us through the ontologies, epistemologies, and cosmologies that we find from a non-Enlightenment experience.

#Dennis Riches

Absolutely.

#Warwick Powell

There we go. There's the answer.

#Dennis Riches

Next.

#Warwick Powell

I think that's entirely...

#Johan Eddebo

So I think a key part of the problem resides in the worldview, or the ontological starting point of metaphysics. As per also Matthias' statements earlier on, there's a sense in the Enlightenment worldview and the mechanistic approach, in the Kantian and Cartesian view of the self as this detached object which looks onto the world from afar and has nothing whatsoever to do with the world. It's really shallow, reproducing Kant, of course, and I think the camera obscura is the most vivid symbol of this detachment, with this non-relationship to the world. And I think part of the solution is figuring out new ways to relate to the world, approaching—renewing or rebuilding—a worldview where the subject and object are not detached from each other, that they are interpenetrated. So I think you're totally right, but how do we get there?

#Warwick Powell

I'll give, I guess, like, one last couple points, and really more as shining a torch in different directions more than anything else, is that I think that there's a lot in the Daoist tradition, number one, because it's one that I'm familiar with. But I think that there is something in the pre-Kantian Western philosophical tradition that might seek to grasp at this. And as controversial a figure as he is, I think Heidegger tried to do something like this, largely through reinterpreting—and this is a cosmology that he got through some Japanese or Italian figures, which gets recognized or not—but principally the idea of present-at-hand is an attempt to grasp this distinction between ways in which we relate to the world, one in which we have a mesh mode of relationship that is deeply connected through the cares that we have.

And the other one is this detached rationalization post hoc. So I think that there are ways in which we can try to find pathways to reframing what could be some new senses of shared worlds, because monoculture is not unimportant either, because it's the bulwark against fragmentation. Because without shared worlds, we risk the fragmentations that lead to some of the other maladies that have been discussed.

#Radhika Desai

I work on this score. I mean, Fritjof Capra, Buddhism, the Upanishads, the Vedanta, all religious texts are basically saying that the I of the whole is the same. So there's no differentiation between subject and object. And that's basically the ritual space between the Asian and also the Shalik. And a lot of quantum physics. Physics has some really bad days. In Germany, at least, you have bird horses. I don't know the English scenery. But Joachim Pierschok and others are basically deconstructing Newton now. So there is a reversal in natural science now.

#Speaker 2

And last point goes to...

#Johan Eddebo

Okay, I have a... Yeah, please. Just to summarize: enduring communities of dissent that are critical of what a master of Enlightenment holds in production should probably not reproduce Enlightenment ontology. So I think that's a good observation to sum up.

#Speaker 3

Sorry.

#Speaker 2

Yeah, I have one observation. I want to ask your opinion on that. I think when we talk about the internet's influence on propaganda, this morning we were talking about Nazi Germany propaganda, the Shoah, and right now we were just talking about Rwanda. I think those are the classical ways through which propaganda mobilizes people, and then they form some sort of politicized groups and then get into conflict and things like that. But the internet, on the one hand, is definitely fueling this type of thing, stimulating this formation. But at the same time, the internet makes people more difficult to discipline in an organized way. And I was thinking about the example of, let's say, Japan. Right.

It's like a lonely society with a lot of people who are not very happy with the status quo. And I think it's a fact that Japan is going much more right-wing, like increasingly right-wing. But at the same time, the young people are, like, in entertainment, anime, games, and all of those things. So they're fine, they're definitely fine with the right wing taking power, but at the same time, every year, it's very difficult for the right wing to recruit enough people into the army. Young people are like, "Oh, I like to see people becoming nationalists, but I don't want to join the army because I want to play my games and stuff." I mean, the re-militarization of Japan is something that the Chinese are afraid of every single night.

It's like our worst nightmare. But we have been expecting that for like 20 years and then some, and we still don't see that today. Like, we see a right-wing government with all of those right-wing talking, rhetoric. But the problem is that the young people in Japan still don't want to join the military. And I think that has a strong correlation with technology, and especially entertainment. Basically, entertainment makes people weaker. So even if they're right-wing enough, they just don't want to join the war itself. And I wonder, what's your opinion on this thing? And do you think that this Japan issue, Japan as an example, you might see that with Western Europe and the United States in the future as well?

#Johan Eddebo

Really superficial take from my point of view here. So I would probably just think about that discrepancy from the point of view of a Poles' distinction between agitation and integration propaganda, and also sociological propaganda. And I could perhaps say that that might be an example of how you have effective integration propaganda in this specific cohort, but you have not yet mobilized it with agitation propaganda, or agitation propaganda is ineffective. But I really would like to hear your view of this stance, because I think you have more inroads into the culture and the process.

#Dennis Riches

I was reminded of something by what you said: military planners recently just bounced out an idea that, in order to recruit these young people into the military, they could just skip basic training and all the hard stuff, and anybody who likes video games can become a drone operator, and they'll be the new military force. Yeah. Sorry, I didn't have any special thoughts on the other aspects.

#Pascal

I mean, we've already been 10 minutes over, so I suggest that we close it here. First, give a big hand to Jay.