

WAYS OF SEEING: *Narratives Amidst Uncertainty*



CSF



CENTRE FOR STRATEGIC FUTURES
Strategy Group, Prime Minister's Office

The Centre for Strategic Futures (CSF) was established in early 2009, and since 1 July 2015 has been part of the Strategy Group in the Prime Minister's Office. CSF serves as a focal point for futures thinking within the Singapore Government and seeks to support a Public Service that operates strategically in a complex and fast-changing environment.

The CSF held an in-person Futures Conversation (FCx) on “Ways of Seeing: Narratives Amidst Uncertainty” on 1 September 2023. This report aims to capture the diversity of views and key insights from the conference.

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BACKGROUND

The CSF regularly convenes international and local thought leaders, along with senior public officers in the Singapore Government, to discuss emerging strategic issues in a small group setting. The CSF's flagship **Foresight Conference (FC)** is organised biennially and brings together international participants in-person to discuss emerging issues. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the CSF added a smaller, and initially virtual, roundtable series called **Futures Conversations (FCx)**, which were smaller in scale and scope, to complement the Foresight Conference series.

FCx 2023 was the CSF's first in-person event after the pandemic. Meanwhile, the in-person FC will resume in 2024, in conjunction with the CSF's 15th anniversary. Both events are key platforms for CSF to bring in fresh perspectives, broaden thinking, and challenge conventional wisdom.

FCx 2023 was held in conjunction with the visit of the CSF's Distinguished Fellows, Senior Vice-President of Salesforce Futures Peter Schwartz and Associate Fellow at the University of Oxford's Said Business School Cho-Oon Khong from 28 to 31 September.

The theme for FCx 2023 was Ways of Seeing – Narratives Amidst Uncertainty, which explored how societies construct meaning in today's chaotic information landscape. FCx 2023 pursued three lines of inquiry, namely:

- a) The blurring of realities due to new media and technologies and its implications
- b) How institutions should respond to uncertainty
- c) Reconciling grand and small narratives in meaning-making



PARTICIPANTS

The FCx brought together a total of 23 participants from the private and public sectors: 6 from abroad, 6 locally based guests, and 11 senior officers from the Singapore Government. The visual notes of the conference can be found at the end of this report.

EXTERNAL PARTICIPANTS (FROM ABROAD)

1) Benjamin Bratton	Professor of Philosophy of Technology and Speculative Design at University of California, San Diego and Director of Antikythera, Berggruen Institute
2) Cho-Oon Khong	Associate Fellow at Said Business School and former Chief Political Analyst at Shell
3) Mick Costigan	Vice-President, Salesforce Futures
4) Venkatesh Rao	Independent researcher, consultant, author of “Tempo” (a book about decision-making), as well as founder of the Ribbonfarm blog
5) Peter Schwartz	Senior Vice-President, Strategic Planning at Salesforce
6) Dave Snowden	Founder and Chief Scientific Officer of the Cynefin Co

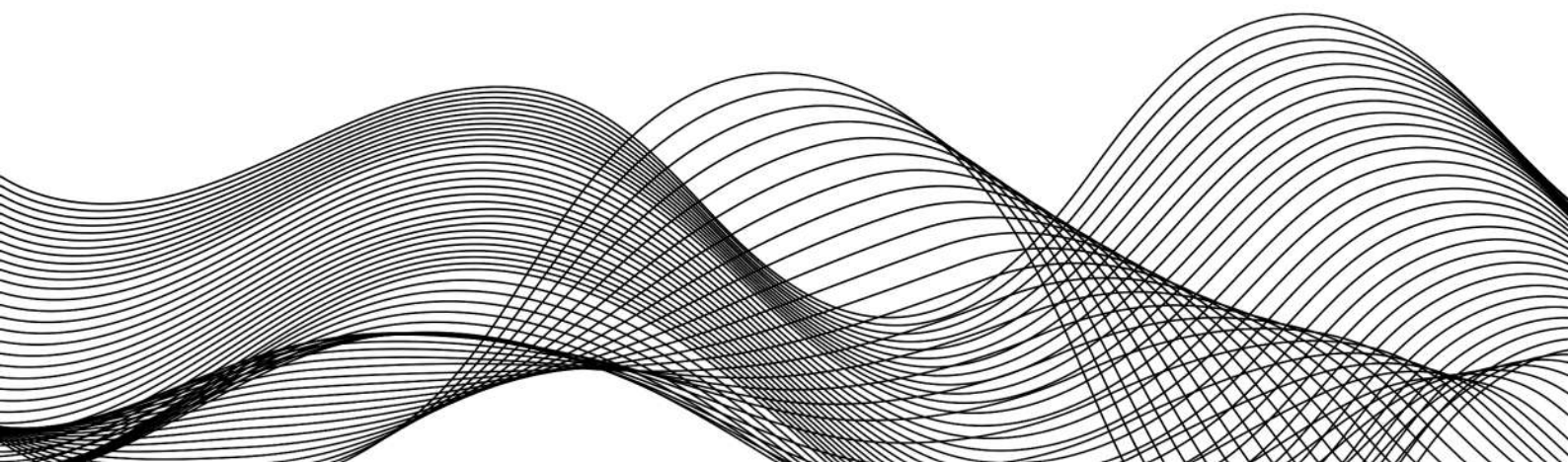
EXTERNAL PARTICIPANTS (FROM SINGAPORE)

7) Cheong Koon Hean	Chair of the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities, Professor of Practice at the Singapore University of Technology and Design, and concurrently Chairman of the Centre for Liveable Cities
8) Simon Chesterman	Dean of NUS College and Faculty of Law, Expert on AI regulation and governance
9) Cissie Fu	Head, McNally School of Fine Arts and Co-Founder of the Political Arts Initiative, focusing on ways in which people interact and compose political ideas and actions through technology and the arts
10) Lin Suling	Straits Times Opinion Editor
11) Aaron Maniam	Fellow of Practice and Director of Digital Transformation Education at Oxford University’s Blavatnik School of Government
12) Hafiz Rashid	Museum docent, and expert on narratives in the Malay World

PARTICIPANTS

SINGAPORE GOVERNMENT PARTICIPANTS

13) Gary Ang	Managing Director (Macro Strategies), Temasek International
14) Chan Heng Chee	Ambassador at Large, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
15) Cheong Wei Yang	Vice Provost (Strategic Research Partnerships), Singapore Management University
16) Rosa Daniel	Dean of Culture Academy, Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth
17) Foo Chi Hsia	Deputy Secretary, Southeast Asia and ASEAN, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
18) Peter Ho	Senior Advisor, Centre for Strategic Futures
19) Cindy Khoo	Deputy Secretary, Strategy Group, Prime Minister's Office – Strategy Group
20) Gene Tan	Chief Librarian and Chief Innovation Officer at the National Library Board
21) Liana Tang	Second Director, Digital Strategy and Futures, Ministry of Communications and Information
22) Yeoh Chee Yan	Chairman, National Heritage Board & Senior Advisor, Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth
23) Dawn Yip	Coordinating Director, SG Partnerships Office, Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth



PROGRAMME

31 AUGUST 2023, THURSDAY

7.00pm **Welcome Dinner**

1 SEPTEMBER 2023, FRIDAY

9.30am **Registration**

10.00am **Welcome Remarks by Peter Ho, Senior Advisor, CSF**

10.30am **Opening Keynote: Narrative Protocols for the Permaweird**
 How do we best describe the times that we are living in now? What are the ingredients that have gone into our constructions of past paradigms for conceptualizing the past, present and future?
 Speaker: Venkatesh Rao | Moderator: Peter Ho

11.15am **Morning Tea Break**

11.30am **Panel 1: Monsters at the Door**
 What are the new narratives that are coming up to make sense of developments such as the rise of generative Artificial Intelligence, climate change and the breakdown of the unipolar world, and how might they evolve?
 Speaker: Benjamin Bratton, Simon Chesterman, Hafiz Rashid
 Moderator: Chan Heng Chee

1.00pm **Lunch**

2.00pm **Breakout Sessions**

1. The Blurring of Realities due to New Media/Technologies and Implications

Conversation Sparks: Lin Suling, Gene Tan
 Moderator: Gurubaran Subramaniam
 Participants: Benjamin Bratton, Chan Heng Chee, Cissie Fu, Sharmini Johnson, Lee Chor Pharn, Aaron Maniam

2. How Should Institutions Respond to Uncertainty?

Conversation Sparks: Cho-Oon Khong, Mick Costigan
 Moderator: Jevon Chandra
 Participants: Gary Ang, Cheong Koon Hean, Foo Chi Hsia, Melissa Gay, Peter Ho, Venkatesh Rao, Wee Xue Ting

3. Reconciling Grand and Small Narratives in Meaning-Making

Conversation Sparks: Peter Schwartz, Rosa Daniel
 Moderator: Liana Tang
 Participants: Cheong Wei Yang, Cindy Khoo, Joel Nee, Hafiz Rashid, Dave Snowden, Yeoh Chee Yan, Dawn Yip

- 3.45pm **Afternoon Tea Break**
- 4.00pm **Large Group Shareback**
Facilitator: Jeanette Kwek
- 4.45pm **Panel 2: Everything, Everywhere All At Once**
How do we weave these new narratives together to guide us in navigating an era of unprecedented complexity and uncertainty?
Speakers: Dave Snowden, Cheong Koon Hean, Cissie Fu
Moderator: Cindy Khoo
- 5.45pm **Closing Remarks by Peter Ho, Senior Advisor, CSF**
- 6.00pm **Free and Easy**
- 7.00pm **Closing Dinner**



KEY THEMES

The key themes that emerged from the various discussions at FCx are:

THE DEFINITION AND IMPORTANCE OF NARRATIVES

Narratives are powerful constructs that may not necessarily be accurate reflections of reality. They are valuable because they bring people together and shape how we perceive and respond to the world.

HELPING OR HINDERING THE FORMATION OF NARRATIVES

Acceleration, fragmentation, and radical uncertainty in the current global operating context had resulted in a diversity of (contradictory or conflicting) views, which made it increasingly difficult for narratives to form and take hold. Art and culture could provide important avenues and safe spaces to do so.

ROLES IN FORMING AND INTERPRETING NARRATIVES

Narratives can be formed by different agents. Participants debated whether narrative-building today was driven by elites or had become more democratic in the digital age; and whether governments should do more, do less, or do differently in shaping and interpreting narratives.

THE INFLUENCE OF NARRATIVES ON REALITY

Participants also reflected on the human psychology underlying the formation, interpretation of, and responses to narratives. For example, when faced with uncertainty and overwhelming change, we may need to take incremental steps and allow for the development of negative space, instead of rushing to gain clarity or take action.



Emerging from these themes, and the wide-ranging and divergent conversation, were several **questions** that merited follow-up:

- What narratives were emerging from uncertainty today?
- What did accelerating change entail for the ways narratives were formed?
- How would emerging technology change how people saw themselves, and change what engagements could be?
- What happened when narratives formed by fictions were adopted by some as gospel truth?
- Was there a risk in domesticating uncertainty?
- Could we even get common narratives in this environment and was this desirable or needed?
- What was the best way for governments to move in this space?
- What might be the best narrative(s) for Singapore?

WHAT WERE NARRATIVES FOR?

There was a general consensus that **narratives played a critical role in bringing people together and providing a common reference point in interpreting reality**, with a participant pointing out that narratives were core to human history and humans making sense of the world, for example through fable, folklore, religion and national identity. That said, there was some discussion of what narratives were.

Narratives in their simplest sense could be considered works of fiction that people collectively agreed upon,

and as such had immense power in shaping understanding, guiding actions, and coordinating large groups, regardless of their relationship to reality. Other interpretations included narrative formation as a retroactive exercise that served to sense-make developments; and imagined communities in the sense of Benedict Anderson, which served a more profound purpose of mythmaking and build a shared sense of community.

Narratives could also be thought to exist at three levels: state narratives, public narratives, and personal narratives. State narratives were self-explanatory while public narratives referred to what public intellectuals, organisations and companies created. Personal narratives were created by individuals and were thus private.

Narratives could also be seen as **protocols for manufacturing a shared sense of normalcy out of private experiences of “weirdness”** arising from novel experiences for which people did not have a good frame of reference.

Shared narratives could thus help to ground and unify people, as civilisations evolved new narratives in response to novel things or events, previously unaccounted for.



Narratives allowed **processing of new realities**, with a “new kind of human” emerging thereafter. The inner structure of such narrative webs was not necessarily linear and allowed civilisations to account for non-sequentiality and anomalous phenomena.

The group struggled with the notion of “weirdness”, pointing out that any perception of “weirdness” was subjective – what might be considered weird to some could be perfectly normal and rational to others. It was thus crucial to understand others’ differing frame of normalcy and alternative realities.

Additionally, trust and empathy could help to reconcile conflicting narratives, built through face-to-face interactions and common experiences across people from different walks of life (“smell is a large part of trust”).

WHO CREATED NARRATIVES?

There was much debate over the authority and appropriateness of different agents involved in forming narratives.

Some saw the process as mostly a preoccupation of elites, not the masses, to resolve their thoughts into semi-coherent views. In the past, for instance, the creative class had processed the nuclear age into “campy” tropes like Godzilla, and in the process drove shared folklore. Others responded that narrative-building was not unique to the upper class, and in fact, elites tended to be co-opted by established ways of thinking or narratives.

Regardless, the participants recognised there were different ways of participating in the process, and the creation of metanarratives and futures of large populations were now more democratic. Where there had previously been only one or a few metanarratives, today a “rowdy caucus on Twitter” could influence thinking.



A participant introduced the idea of **Mutually Assured Derangement Disorder (MADD)**, where people were unable to generate stable responses to emerging phenomena that would be accepted by others, and thus evolved mutually unintelligible internal narratives. However, in the longer run the increased number of voices and multiple different metanarratives could possibly positively lead to a “higher degree of sanity”.

From a complex adaptive systems perspective, for instance, **micro-stories created the dispositional space for grand narratives**. People made decisions by “hallucinating” micro-stories, then matching them to reality. These micro-stories were intensely hyperlocal (e.g., developed in the pub after work) and create dispositional stakes.

Hence, unless grand-scale problems like climate change became hyperlocal, there would not be dispositional space for real attitudes to change, and preaching to people would not work.



The relationship between narratives and reality

The impossibility of narrating an objective reality was raised by several participants. Some said that all narratives were speculative and selective, and by their very nature unable to encompass all aspects of a complex reality. A participant challenged the value and pragmatism of narratives, noting that narratives could serve as distractions and coping mechanisms, and that “reality doesn’t care about narratives”. Others noted the tendency to “make complexity simplistic” through the use of common frameworks such as the 2-by-2 matrix.

On the other hand, narratives could be a way to construct reality. Narratives could shape not just how we saw but how we experienced the world, and rationality did not always apply (as evidenced by the difficulty of convincing people to get vaccinated during the COVID-19 pandemic). The relationship between the narrative and the “real” was something that needed to be considered more directly. Otherwise, there was a tendency to lapse into a kind of “populism” where narratives were conflated with the real.

CONTEXT IN FORMING NARRATIVES

There was also consideration for how environments and sense of scale shaped narratives. At the very large scale, for instance, the scientific concept of climate change itself was an epistemological accomplishment, allowing us to understand though technology change and compensation at a planetary scale. Given the level of interconnectedness and access to information the average individual has, **planetary computational stacks*** might be the most relevant reference for individual narratives.



**First introduced by Benjamin Bratton in a 2014 essay, planetary computational stacks is a term used in the philosophy of technology to describe the multiple interconnected layers involved in computation at a planetary scale. It draws from the concept of the stack in programming and the layered architecture of the internet protocol. According to Bratton, we have “constructed, in essence...a massively distributed accidental megastructure” that both reflects and constitutes our societies. (“A New Philosophy of Planetary Computation”, Noema, Oct 5, 2022.) The layered framework of the stack can be used to analyse how power, control and governance are enacted globally through technology.*

Planetary scale computation should be understood not as one single giant, undifferentiated mega machine but a modular apparatus, not unlike a network architecture system, composed of modular and interoperable layers. Thus multipolarity in geopolitics and the multi-polarisation of planetary computation did not merely track each other; they were in fact the same thing. Similarly, the notions of the Anthropocene and the agency of humans in this regard were second order effects of planetary scale computation. Another relevant analogy might be the **concept of “hyperobjects”**, coined by philosopher Timothy Morton to describe a class of things so huge in time and space that it was difficult for one human or institution to grasp it in its entirety in their lifetime.

Participants noted that the current global environment was making it difficult for narratives to form or take hold.

It took longer for narratives to become dominant - to outcompete other narratives and capture the imagination. There were two main barriers to this: **a) acceleration**, where things were happening more quickly (e.g., climate change, demographic changes, governance and governance structures, and values and beliefs), and narratives did not emerge fast enough as defensive mechanisms against these changes. This was compounded by: **b) fragmentation** created by technologies such as social media and artificial intelligence (AI), which facilitated the creation of divergent narratives, and which allowed personalisation to an already highly divided audience. The interaction of such forces produced radical uncertainty.



To illustrate the severity of the situation, a participant pointed to a study by McKinsey on the performance of Chairmen and Chief Executive Officers of big global companies in the last 10 to 50 years, and those of the generation before. The study had shown that current leaders could expect to face an existential crisis for their organisation every two to three years, whereas company leaders 20 to 30 years ago would face an existential crisis only once in their entire tenure, if at all.

Human psychology also presented pitfalls when facing uncertainty, especially radical uncertainty:

1. The **“hockey stick effect”**, which was an **optimism bias** that occurred when analysts faced a situation that they had not seen before and expected normality to return, e.g., the market expecting a quick rebound in aviation fuel demand in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic;

2. The **tendency to take assumptions as facts**, which led to a tendency for decision-makers to question new facts that came in rather than the assumptions under which they had been working; and

3. **Paralysis** in the face of overwhelming change.



Some wondered whether big hegemonic narratives and metanarratives could even evolve and emerge in today's circumstances. A participant theorised that **narratives had a lifecycle comprising three phases (in sequence): madness, horror, and banality**; each of these phases played a role in helping people process reality productively. However, the high cognitive stress involved in making sense of multiple and co-existing narratives and identities could have implications for society's mental well-being.

It was also more **challenging to reconcile conflicting value-based narratives**. For example, when Nicolaus Copernicus introduced a model of the universe centred on the Sun rather than Earth (and humanity), it triggered the scientific revolution, but also engendered fierce resistance because it challenged the notion that the human experience was central. Such "**Copernican trauma**" is repeated when new values and beliefs challenge existing ones. Part of the enjoyable perversity of our fascination with AI is a negotiation of this trauma.



There was extended debate, particularly among government participants, about challenges the state faced in constructing shared narratives in fluid contexts.

In the past, there had been sufficiently common experiences for the state to base shared narratives on, even though citizens might have experienced different lived realities. The current environment disintegrated such common frames of reference. The more the state attempted to create a single narrative, the more brittle the identity it sought to foster, such that it diminished rather than built resilience. Even where there were still common frames, they were not so easily referenced because there were more players in the narrative building process. Narratives could no longer be made by any one state or institution, thus spurring individuals and organisations to find better connections.

POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES OF SITUATION GETTING OUT OF HAND

The confluence of all these factors meant that narratives had begun to fail, with negative consequences for individuals. A participant said that a reduced sense of overlapping normalcy and consensus led to a phenomenon termed **Mutually Assured Derangement Disorder (MADD)**, an unstable emotional landscape where everyone was utterly convinced of the rightness of their paradigm while accusing everyone else of being deranged and never attempting to meet in the middle.

Hence, "crises" tended to thrive, and to mutate into long-term "shambolic" debacles as people felt the need to marinate in their own distresses. One resulting phenomenon was "**doomscrolling**", the practice of obsessively checking online sources with the expectation of seeing negative stories, and confirmation bias thereafter resulting in poor mental well-being. This had become a way of life.



On a societal level, new rifts were emerging as individual narratives and big (national) narratives moved apart.

One such rift was between "insiders" and "outsiders", where a vast number of people felt left out (of decision-making, or of information flows), engendering a deep split and a sense that elites were either out of touch, or lying. **Social delamination** also was taking place, where a society's identity, which was based on a ranked hierarchy of physiological, sociological and psychological needs, was being sundered. This could lead to one of two possibilities - people either believed or trusted nothing, or they just gravitated towards what they already believed.

Where there was no sense of what put people back together again, populist politics resulted, where the most muscular and simple (usually nativist) narrative won out. The last time this had happened it resulted in World War Two, but there had been hope then: at the end of the war, the story of rebuilding created a shared sense of purpose. There was no such catalyst for unity today because major challenges were not unidirectional.

Some participants debated whether narrative-making in the past was as rosy as pictured.

With regard to the lifecycle of narratives, there was also no guarantee of a productive outcome. The banality phase itself could lead to complacency, instead of fostering a healthy reaction. While the first two phases, madness and horror, created fear and a compulsion to change, the banality phase could lead to acceptance and therefore inaction, or a "last man" passive nihilist attitude toward life. Of course, banality could also allow people to "find a new foothold in new realities not previously comprehended", in situations where framing big issues such as climate change as problems rarely led to creative or transformative solutions.

These rifts meant that it was **increasingly harder for society to mobilise and address pressing issues**. The structures and protocols humanity had evolved over time could make it very difficult to not just cooperate to solve the policy problems, but to even agree on the definition of the problem. One reason scientific consensus changed was not because everyone believed something new, but because people that had held firmly to the old beliefs eventually died. Was this what it took for progress to be made? This invited a further question on what to do with the part of ourselves that was attracted to the monsters at the door, and a remark that the real monsters were humans themselves, not AI or other things that were common subjects of human fear.

POSSIBLE STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS UNCERTAINTY AND GET NARRATIVE COHERENCE WHERE NEEDED

Despite the degree of challenge, participants generally agreed that **some form of narrative coherence was important**. Some discussion was devoted to considering alternative ways to achieve coherence, for instance by presenting narratives differently. Classical narratives had a “sense of doom” in their popular acceptability and so seemingly being a “foregone conclusion”. A different means of presenting narratives could break this. Alternatively, there could be a way to “journey” between two worlds with different narrative priors and referential bases of truth.

Dealing with these challenges would require us to confront increasing complexity, and to be comfortable with uncertainty, perhaps even to thrive in it.



One way to approach this might be to rethink how we look at time. The field of geology, which worked in the timescale of millions of years, introduced the **concept of timefulness**. It was essential to know the true/full timescale of a problem to know broadly how long things took to unfold and thus to calibrate one’s expectations accordingly. For example, one would not say that a chicken was slow to hatch from an egg after 5 days when we knew that 20 to 21 days was needed. To add another layer to the concept of timefulness, people could consider the idea that the world was “**polytemporal**”, in that time was experienced differently in different industries and with different instincts. Disagreements between timeframes could be productive and/or lead us to understand our own instincts about time better and expectations better.

ROLE OF GOVERNMENT AND INDIVIDUALS IN NARRATIVE-BUILDING

The role of the government in forming and interpreting narratives was a clear preoccupation for many participants. Particularly in Singapore, the government had traditionally had a strong hand in shaping the national narrative. The question was whether it could **evolve from shaping the story to facilitating and arbitrating differences in views**. Even in recent whole-of-nation conversations (e.g., Singapore Together or Forward Singapore), the government picked its own facilitators and continued to try, or at least appeared to be trying, to impose its own narratives, rather than allowing individuals to tell their own stories.

Leadership style was crucial in fostering this.

Organisations needed more than one kind of leader: managers who excelled at day-to-day operations, as well as leaders who would act decisively when faced with a crisis. In the context of radical uncertainty, it also behooved organisations to have leaders who had experience bouncing back from crises and were personally resilient. Given this, the civil service might need to rethink its leadership selection, including how quickly candidates moved through the system, and what leadership qualities were needed. The current practice of moving leaders fairly rapidly from post to post did not necessarily produce good leaders, as they rarely were in place to face the consequences of their decisions.



Thinking with granularity was one way to ensure that governments could find success in this uncertain space.

Instead of setting grand objectives and big picture goals, governments could pursue the **“adjacent possible” by prioritising incremental steps which demanded less energy to execute***. This could counterintuitively lead to faster results, because the smaller steps would demonstrate patterns that allowed them to do the “bigger things”. However this approach required a thorough understanding of the ecosystem’s disposition before embarking on experiments and deciding on policy. If not, governments were “guaranteed to get it wrong” and incur the law of unintended consequences.

**Estuarine Mapping, a new framework by Dave Snowden at The Cynefin Co, takes estuaries (a partially enclosed body of water) and the flows of water therein as metaphor. An observer could identify the most likely future by identifying the path with the lowest “energy gradient”, i.e., the path of least resistance. Snowden, D. (2023) Estuarine Framework. Cynefin.io, retrieved on 6 September from www.Cynefin.io/wiki/Estuarine_framework*

Organisations also had to strike a balance between analysis and action. Individuals often felt a bias toward taking action and feared analysis paralysis. However, individuals and organisations had fundamentally different responsibilities and options. While one person could act on instinct, in the context of an organisation, articulating that instinctive response to one's colleagues could paradoxically change the nature of the instinctive behaviour and thus ultimately alter the desired outcome.

The group also discussed how individuals had increasing influence in a fractured world. A participant suggested that there were three possible postures of individuals within a country: subjects, consumers, and citizens. Grand narratives were the easiest to construct if individuals were merely subjects receiving wisdom from their rulers. Once individuals saw themselves as citizens or consumers with rights, they would have their own micro-narratives, which might be very disparate across the society.



In response, the group's metaphor was for the government to **"grow corals in the sea"**. Corals grew on objects that provided some structure, and when conditions were suitable for microorganisms to latch on. It was impossible to have absolute control over how the corals grew and the final shape. Governments could likewise provide some scaffolding for societal narratives to grow, which allow for the organic growth of healthy micronarratives, which were thought to be more effective than macronarratives.

Governments would also have to accept they did not have (if they ever had) control over the emergent narrative. Many participants were in favour of empowering individuals by experimenting with a more citizen-led approach, with opportunities for average citizens to have agency in shaping conversations and action. They recognised that outcomes might not always be fair but thought that a more inclusive and generative process would in itself make such an experience be perceived as fair.

One of the key concerns in this regard was ensuring diversity in views (to bring in truly eclectic and disruptive people) while still keeping the space safe for discussion.

Experimenting with group composition, size, and objectives was one approach to address this concern. For instance, transgenerational pairs (one very young and very old person) asked to come up with solutions to common problems allowed them to productively draw out different perspectives in pursuit of a common objective. It was crucial that people saw each other as humans and not as mere avatars online.



It might also be more productive to collect (and subsequently sense-make) micronarratives as people organically engaged each other in a relative unstructured setting, as opposed to “taking people into a workshop and asking them to get along”. It was not about imposing a grand macronarrative by splitting-the-difference amongst various views, but about finding the one that organically emerged.

Another concern was if organic citizen conversations led to a “bad narrative”, for example xenophobia. To address this concern, governments should first shape the conversational field, in this case to identify problems that were independent from identities and focus the conversation on those problems.



There was agreement that such issues could be alleviated by appropriate group and facilitation choices – the design of such sessions would predispose people to raise some narratives and not others. To understand this properly, those who studied larger strategic trends needed to go down to the ground to get a clearer sense of people’s feelings and fears, while recognising the multiplicity of their experiences. These big trends then needed to be communicated to individuals beforehand. The goal should be to empower individuals with agency as important actors in the process of change.

Nonetheless, it was important for governments to take the findings from such engagements in the right way. A participant raised **Pournelle’s iron law of bureaucracy**, where the people devoted to the benefit of the bureaucracy itself would always gain and keep control of the organization, while those dedicated to the goals that the bureaucracy was supposed to accomplish would have less and less influence and may be eliminated entirely.

OTHER WAYS TO SUPPLEMENT NARRATIVE-BUILDING



One participant shared how traditional methods of storytelling remained relevant to the current (and future) context, which the group found energizing and thought-provoking. Instead of just following “enlightened” western rational liberal processes, which focused heavily on shared texts, we could employ other mediums such as textiles, visual and the performing arts to create and spread shared narratives.

We should also not be afraid to bring emotions into the equation, as these were strong signals that should be paid attention to.



An example of a particularly effective but little recognised archetype representing emotion was the Malay female ghost form known as the Pontianak. The Pontianak expressed the patriarchy’s fear of uncontrolled feminism, and represented the scary antithesis of what was deemed to be the ideal Malay woman. The Pontianak had long hair, went out late at night unsupervised, and she failed to be a mother because she died during childbirth.

What was interesting was that people immediately recognised the Pontianak, and its image induced fear, but they might not understand how this image or archetype was rooted in their own folklore or history. We should also be aware of the potential pitfalls of taking traditional/indigenous stories and icons into new contexts without first understanding their roots in traditional/indigenous folklore and history.

Art and culture could play a huge part in facilitating the creation of shared narratives.

The development of AI and the entrenchment of the Digireal universe allowed people more independence in creating their own narratives, but artists could help to bring people together and bridge communities. For consumers of art, arts and culture could serve as an anchor in a complex world, creating a grand narrative tied to narratives at an individual level. Cultural assets and strategies could engage people through storytelling, visual arts, theatre, music, dance and other modes, and increase empathy and understanding of human nature.

Another approach was to **slow down and not rush to fill negative space**, which held much potential and possibilities. Rushing to fill negative space to gain “control” might be akin to “hurtling down the slope towards authoritarianism”, regardless of how benign or even beneficent our intentions might be. There should remain room for “empty space” and openness.

We should also **acknowledge the value of our senses**, not just our intellects. Sensory stimuli were often received unconsciously, but nonetheless caused synapses to fire and eventually formed “instincts”. We should thus consider what feelings we wanted to tap into, before we thought about making narratives, and how should we link and weave these different instincts to give them proper places in how we understood the world. The appended diagram provides a visual summary for these key pointers to take note of when forming and interpreting narratives.



INTERPRETING NARRATIVES

Fools, full persons

- What (subconscious) assumptions are being made about audiences?
- Fools: fundamentally irrational, need guidance and intervention
- Full persons: fundamentally rational, can be trusted

Foundations

- Everyone constructs their own interpretation of the narratives they receive and responds differently - what is the basis of interpretation?
- Varying degrees of tolerance for obedience and epistemic disobedience

Functions

- What do we do with narratives after understanding them?
- What conditions for practice might cultivate agency?
- How do we respond and what instincts do we use when the given narratives do not fit?

FORMING NARRATIVES

Fractal, Fragmented

- Different narratives - grand and small, tangible and intangible, single and multiple
- Narratives fractalise or fragment as they travel across societies and communities
- When is it alright for narratives to be fragmented within a community?

Fixed, Framework

- Fixed narrative: everyone adheres to the same understanding of how the world works
- Frameworked narrative: scaffold predisposed growth, not prescribe or constrain

Fit (for purpose), Flawed

- Approaches and reasonings are suited for different times and occasions
- Consider changing substrates and environments in forming narratives

Facilitated, Free yet Frictioned

- What would the narrative creation journey look like?
- At a national level, what is the role of the government in shaping citizens' experience and participation?
- Agency, fairness, agility, inclusion

Family resemblances, not Factory standards

- The Medusa effect: doing too much can turn things into stone, rather than let them thrive
- Look for family resemblances, not identical factory standards - how do Singaporeans resemble each other?
- You don't have to tick all the boxes to identify, make exceptions in a more malleable fashion, to have more fruitful and inclusive conversations



FURTHER QUESTIONS

The rich discussions across the different sessions raised several gaps and contradictions, as well as fundamental questions for everyone to think about further, especially governments seeking to manage narratives amidst uncertainty.



Several questions came up on the relationships between uncertainty and narratives, such as:

- **what narratives were emerging from uncertainty today?**
- **what accelerating change entailed for the ways narratives were formed?**
- **what happened when narratives formed by fictions were adopted by some as gospel truth?**

On the second question, a related unknown was how emerging technology would change how people saw themselves, and change what engagement could be. There was some talk about fostering a “generative society” that would change and adapt according to every person that interacted within it. What the contours of such a society would look like was still very much unknown.



On the last question, although some of us might find such a phenomenon baffling, its occurrence suggested that we had not fully understood how narratives were formed and came to be believed.

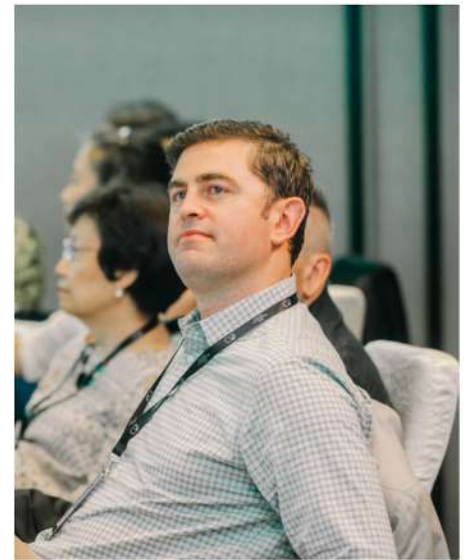


Was there a risk in domesticating uncertainty? There were different views on how useful and stimulating uncertainty could be for people and organisations, and where the balance should lie in trying to deal with it in a productive way. There was the possibility that in trying to manage uncertainty to make it palatable for organisations, situations were oversimplified, and resulted in useless or meaningless discussions.

This fed into the question of whether we could even get common narratives in this environment. Relatedly, could we ever be holistic in the narratives and other responses we create to deal with uncertainty, and was this something we should even do in the first place? Some participants reflected that being holistic was impossible amidst complexity and the ensuing uncertainty, and we needed to collectively rethink our assumptions about “holistic thinking in government”.

Another issue was whether we even needed common narratives. The need for a national narrative in particular was keenly debated, as fragmented communities might form micro-constituents which could be “stickier” in terms of the narratives that won out. This was also a cautionary tale for governments and states.

The more they attempted to make and impose one narrative, the more brittle that narrative would become, eventually creating more problems instead of resolving them. We needed to learn how to be pluralistic but not incoherent, and how to find that balance. In the end, the core elements of narratives could just be a list of family resemblances* that people could construct other lived experiences with.



**Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein argued that things which could be thought to be connected by one essential common feature may in fact be connected by a series of overlapping similarities, where no one feature was common to all things.*



What also was the best way for governments to move in this space?



The degree to which governments could “shape” narratives was contested. If narratives formed and gained traction organically, should the government reconsider the efficacy of spending resources to scaffold and formulate these narratives?



Perhaps reflecting the composition of the group, many thought that the government had a role in shifting narratives on a large scale.

There nevertheless remained room for an organic, evolutionary process which the government facilitates or scaffolds, rather than engineers or controls every step along the way.

What might be the best narrative(s) for Singapore?



It was generally agreed that the larger Singapore narrative existed alongside many smaller narratives, irrespective of whether citizens or the government consciously knew about or acknowledged them or had contributed to creating them. However, it was important to consider if this combination was a sustainable one that would bring Singapore to a better place, or whether existing narratives needed to be shifted, how quickly, and in what direction(s).



NEXT STEPS AND LOOKING AHEAD

FCx 2023 has served as a valuable platform for looking ahead to the challenges and opportunities of society in grappling with narratives amidst accelerating change, complexity and uncertainty. Insights gleaned will shape deeper conversations with relevant thought leaders and stakeholders in the future.

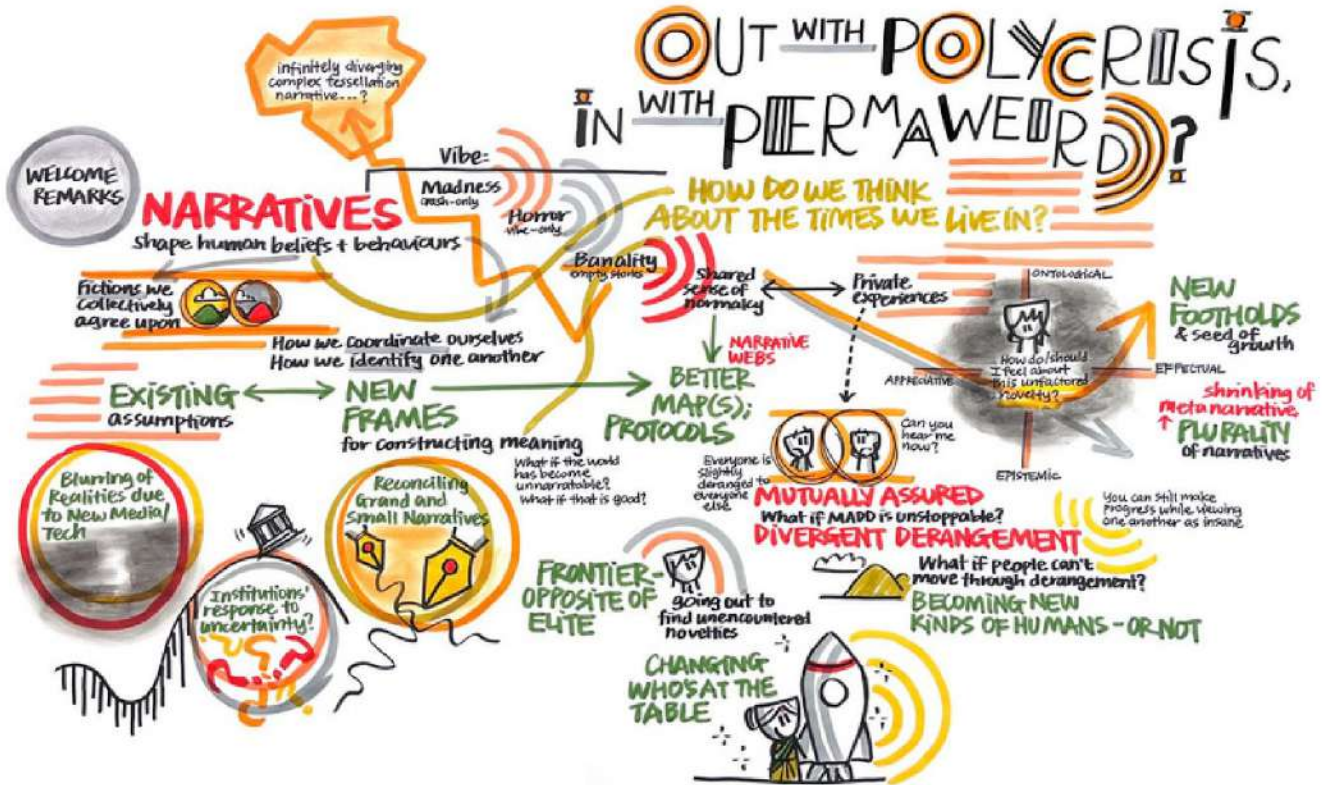


THIS REPORT WAS WRITTEN BY THE CENTRE FOR STRATEGIC FUTURES,
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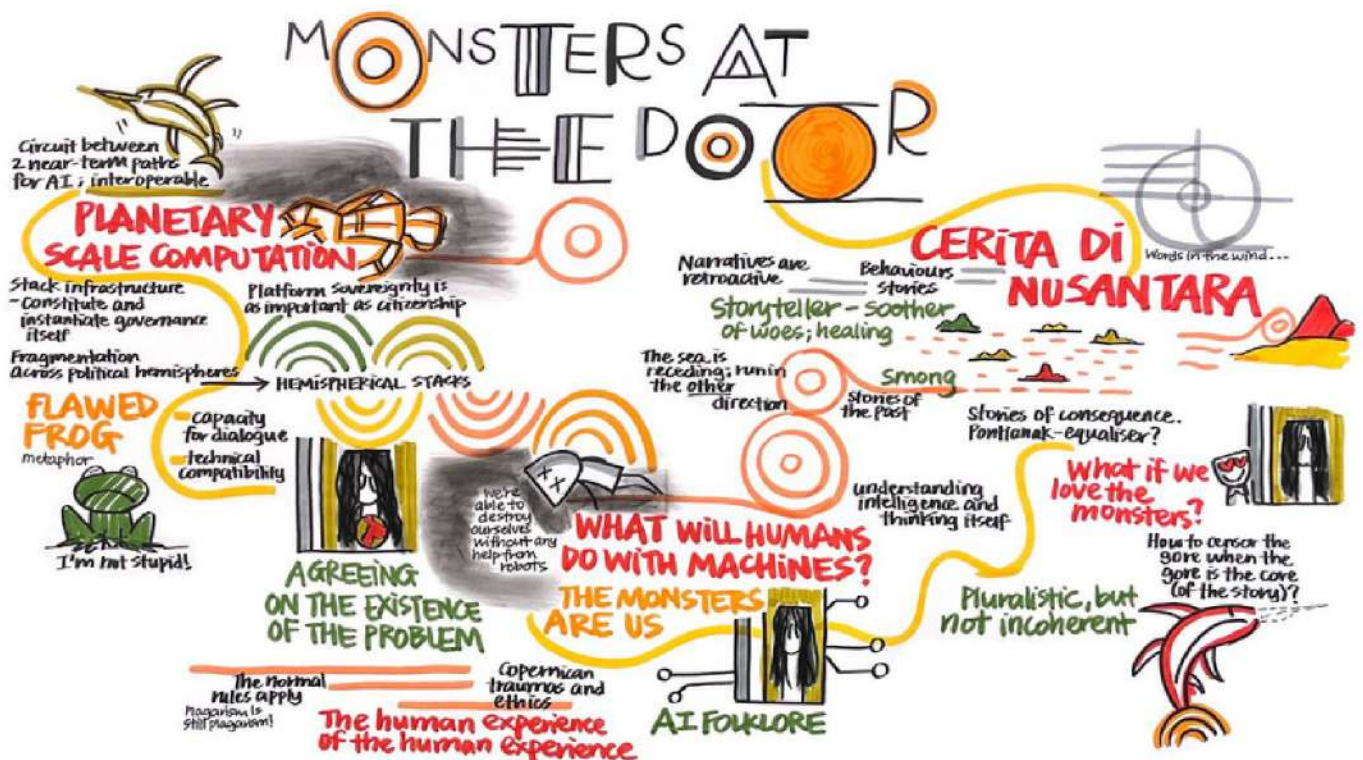
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VISUAL NOTES

Opening Keynote: Narrative Protocols for the Permaweird

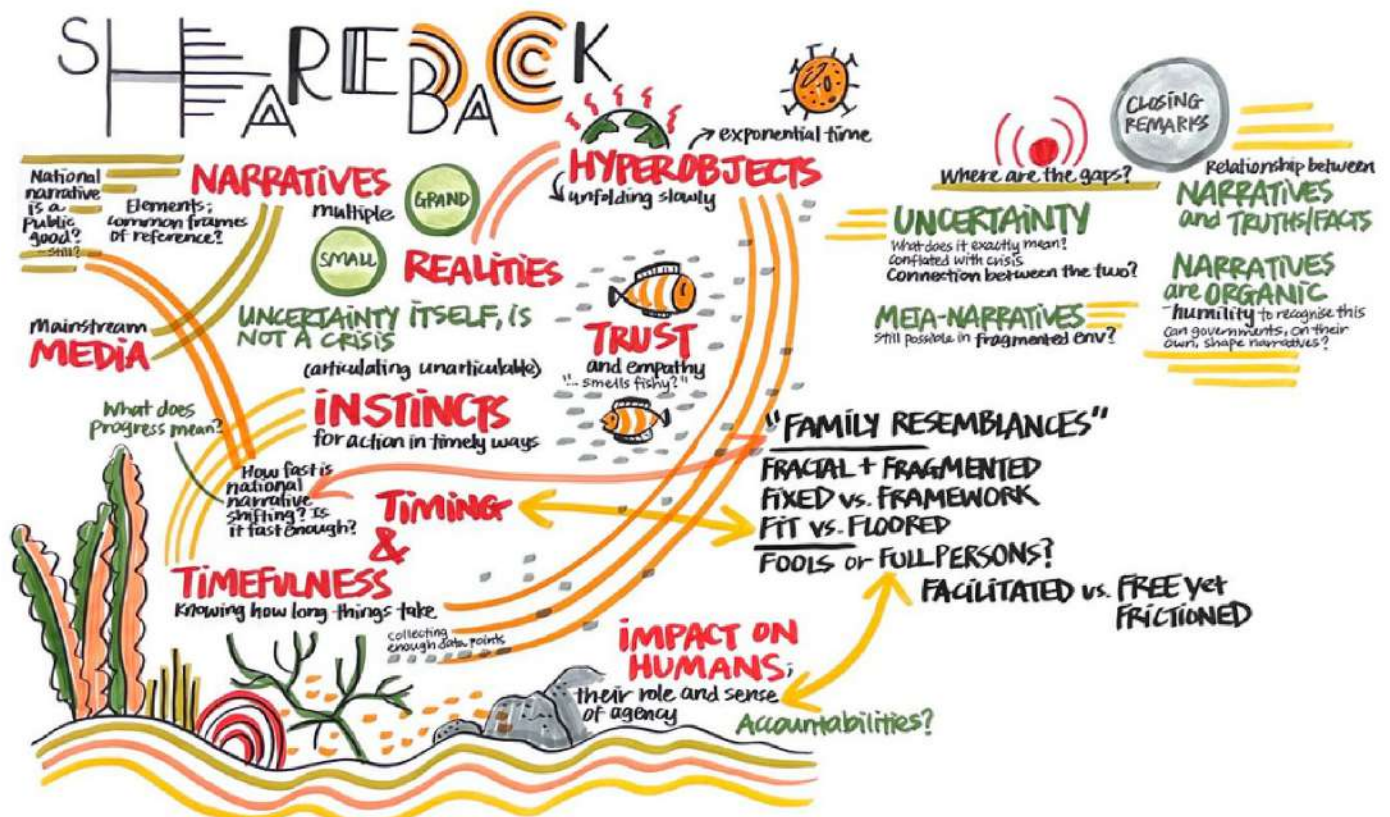


Panel 1: Monsters at the Door



VISUAL NOTES

Large Group Shareback



Panel 2: Everything, Everywhere All At Once

