

# Chapter 1

## The Future Around Journalism

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### ABSTRACT

*Journalism has a context. Before one can consider the future of journalism, one has to know something about the context – the setting of our future Earth. And while some aspects of the future are unknown, a number of dramatic changes are known with near certainty. The climate is entering into a period with no historical precedent. There is no near-term way to reverse the climate disruption being caused by the ever-rising amount of carbon in our atmosphere. Climate change will not be a story, but a setting: new and ever-changing rules of daily and seasonal life that will form the backdrop of everything that happens. One of the most evident consequences will be hundreds of millions of climate refugees—even in rich nations—with both international and regional borders hardened accordingly. In parallel to these climate-related changes, the quality of algorithmically generated text and videos will continue to advance. For any rapidly quantifiable task, deep-learning algorithms can quickly learn to outperform any human.*

### INTRODUCTION

In his classic science fiction novel *Foundation*, Issac Asimov (1951) imagined a scientific advance that would be the envy of any journalist: the science of “psychohistory”, in which the general structure of large-scale future events could be mathematically predicted with near certainty. Asimov postulated that even though individual human decisions were unpredictable, with a large enough population a statistical analysis could still compute essential future trends -- so long as the population did not know about the prediction, which Asimov assumed would void the calculation.

Leaving aside the plausibility of psychohistory, it’s not hard to see the allure of such predictive power, especially through the lens of journalism. Foreknowledge about developments thirty years from now would of course highlight the most important subtle trends happening today, trends in crucial need of documentation and analysis. And if mere knowledge about the future can change the sweep of history, then such journalism could have enormous influence, feeding back into the calculations in a way that could steer us towards preferable outcomes. With this in mind, it’s really too bad that psychohistory

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is entirely fictitious, that a modern understanding of chaos theory means that Asimov's idea is entirely unworkable.

Or is it?

As it turns out, there are at least two large-scale future trends that are indeed entirely predictable, with dramatic consequences for not only journalism, but humanity itself. Just as Asimov envisioned, the key to this predictability is the sheer number of human choices, much in the same way that the random motions of a large number of molecules can still result in perfectly predictable thermodynamic behavior. And, as Asimov also foresaw, the feedback factor is crucial: knowledge of what is coming can at least in part steer us onto a different path.

For these reasons, Journalism is going to shape, and be shaped by, two essential trends that are bearing down on us with all the inevitability of a mathematical calculation: Our planet will become less hospitable, and our choices will become more subject to automated and external manipulation. The first issue is that of climate change, which is coming at us faster and stronger than most people have internalized. The second issue relates to deep learning algorithms and artificial intelligence, and how auto-generated content is going to become all but unavoidable.

But humanity is nothing if not adaptable, and there is no doubt that we will make adaptations to these changes. Indeed, the nature of this adaptation remains one of the greatest *uncertainties*. Maybe we will respond to auto-generated content by retreating into tribalized information communities, unaware of what is going on outside our tribes and unable to engage with the best responses to the unfolding climate catastrophe. Or maybe we will adapt by learning to tune out the automated din, engage with the physical world, and intentionally transform our planet for the better. Which future will come to pass is truly uncertain, but will largely depend on factual journalism, and how it will be used to inform, connect and motivate humanity.

## **The Inevitable Earth of 2050**

After being exposed to a few dozen articles about climate change, the average person would seem to be perfectly justified in having a great uncertainty about where the planet is heading in the next 30 years. (Yes, there's still a great deal of climate denialism in the U.S., but the indefensible claims that it's a "hoax" are here set aside, until the final section.) One source of uncertainty comes about because many of these articles spend far more time talking about distant timescale outcomes, often the year 2100, rather than what things are going to look like in just a few decades (Vince, 2019; Scharping 2021). If an article tells you how bad things might be in 2100, but barely even mentions 2050, one might incorrectly imagine that the major effects of climate change might not even kick in during your lifetime.

But the biggest source of uncertainty, these articles almost always point out is "What we do next?" The uncertainty is our very point of control: the unknown decisions that humanity will make in the next few years and decades. Business as usual will result in disaster, but it is (almost always) at least implied that these disasters can be avoided by dramatic actions that we might yet still implement. This focus on control is perfectly reasonable -- collectively, we *do* have control -- but these climate narratives almost invariably give the wrong impression on where our control lies. The truth is, the average temperature of the Earth in 2050 is going to be just about 2 degrees Centigrade above normal, almost no matter what actions we take in those intervening years (Tollefson, 2020). On that timescale, there's a lot less uncertainty than you might think.

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