The Post-Truth Information Environment, Artificial Intelligence, and International Security: Initial Scenarios

by

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Introduction

This paper offers three initial scenarios for how Artificial Intelligence (AI) and related technologies may transform international security affairs in the years ahead. While the scenarios are new, they build squarely on existing work by this author dealing with the "post-truth information environment," its components, and its existing and potential impact on international security.[1] "Post-truth" is defined here as an information environment characterized in particular by "truth decay," in which verifiable facts are widely ignored or distrusted, and in which such actual facts are replaced by mere opinions or even by outright fabrications.[2] In my larger analysis, the major components of a post-truth environment are: (1) the embrace of "narratives" rather than fact-based accounts of the world; (2) increasing "tribalism;" and (3) a breakdown of corrective institutions, leading to the "entrenchment" of these conditions on a massive scale. (See **Figure 1** for a summary graphic that the reader may find useful throughout this paper.)

After providing background on the existing framework for examining the implications of a post-truth culture in the context of international security, this paper offers three general scenarios dealing with the potential longer-term impact of AI, and then suggests brief conclusions about possible further research.

Background

Key Element	General Threats	International Relations / Security Scenarios
Narratives	Information Accuracy	Designed Crises / Ignorance
Tribalism	Decision Quality	Epistemic Coups
Entrenchment	National Resilience	Fatal Distractions

Figure 1: International Relations/Security, Post-Truth – A Definition

The large-scale narratives that characterize online information exchange consist of individual assertions that cohere into larger notions of how some aspect of the world works. However, narratives are not collections of evidence presented for questioning and eventual reassessment, in the manner of scientific paradigms. Instead, today's dominant narratives usually emerge from dramatic events and fragments of information, but evolve quickly into rigid dogmas – in the United States, for example: narratives claiming to describe rigged elections, systemic racism, the power of the Deep State, catastrophic climate change, the Great Replacement conspiracy, or Settler Colonialism. In contrast to scientific truths, moreover, *narrative truths* do not even aspire to move from objectively discernible data to generalized (and thereafter potentially falsifiable) conclusions; rather, they proceed in reverse, and with little or no falsifiability: any verifiable evidence must conform to the narrative if it is to be considered at all. (All else is just "disinformation" or "fake news," offered at least out of ignorance – and more likely out of malevolence – and under no circumstances to be credited.)

The notion of what constitutes "news" itself has been upended in this environment, as the assembly of narrative-conforming storylines by "influencers" replaces anything resembling objective journalism. As political scientist Jon Askonas aptly describes it:

> Today, journalists sell compelling narratives that mold the chaotic torrent of events, Internet chatter, and information into readily understandable plotlines, characters, and scenes. … Like Scheherazade, if they can keep subscribers coming back for more of the story, they will stay alive.[3]

The objective is not to achieve objective truth – or at least to get as close to such a thing as possible – but instead simply to maximize reader (or viewer) engagement.

Tribalism, meanwhile, describes the increasing segregation of individuals into antagonistic groups based on cultural, ethnic, and religious affinities, partisan alignments, and/or geographic proximity. Social media platforms encourage – indeed all but compel, via powerful algorithms – the clustering of these tribes into separate silos where the only available information confirms the particular narratives to which they have subscribed or succumbed. In this environment, many institutions that once offered correctives – such as traditional news organizations, universities, and even scientific organizations[4] – have taken the path of least resistance and greatest profit, opting to protect and further entrench prevailing narratives and tribalism rather than to challenge them.[5]

As described in my previous work, general threats to international relations arise from the current information environment because a post-truth environment places key values at risk: (1) the accuracy of information in widespread circulation; (2) the ability to ensure quality decision-making amid epistemic chaos; and (3) the ultimate resilience of a nation (or indeed any political or social community) if it operates without a shared fact base. These threats include what I call "designed crises" (exaggerated or fabricated situations compelling individual and/or government responses); "epistemic coups" (the effective silencing of information not consistent with tribal narratives); and "fatal distractions" (the elevation of post-truth crusades above national consensus on tangible threats); specific examples are provided in my earlier work.[6]

The following scenarios build on this framework, exploring how the advent of AI may accentuate such problems. Each scenario rests on one of the three key elements of a post-truth environment and examines the risks of AI proliferation to that associated "key value." **Figure 2** provides a visual depiction of this structure.

Key Element	Narratives	Tribalism	Entrenchment
Threatened Value	Information Accuracy	Decision Quality	National Resilience
AI-Driven Scenarios	Competing Realities	Catastrophic Disconnect	Virtual Retreat
Essence	**"Truth is Hard to Find"**	**"Truth is Not the Goal"**	**"Truth is Unknown"**

Figure 2: From Post-Truth to AI-Driven Scenarios for International Relations

Scenario 1—Competing Realities: "Truth is Hard to Find"

Key Element	Narratives
Threatened Value	Information Accuracy

Lying, manipulation of information, and the deliberate creation of propaganda have always played roles in international relations and war, both on the home front and on the battlefield. Artificial Intelligence will undermine the accuracy of available information about international relations to a much greater degree, however, potentially creating a scenario of "Competing Realities" between and within societies, in which governments are both players and targets.

This scenario requires only the smallest leap from recent experience. In a recent book and other work, disinformation researcher Renée DiResta coined the term "bespoke realities" to

describe the existing ability of any information consumer in the social media ecosystem to curate incoming information or simply accept a narrative on almost any topic, tailored to that consumer's prior beliefs and prejudices.[7] In an inversion of the scientific method, these narratives provide (or at least screen incoming data in order to find) exaggerated or fabricated information that supports existing biases, rather than deriving reasonable conclusions from verifiable facts. Social media algorithms, in fact, are practically built to do this.

Bruno Maçães, an analyst of global strategy and former diplomat, explains how virtual reality (VR) environments powered by AI and optical tools will make such bespoke realities even more plausible and tangible. He compares VR to the "enchantment" formerly associated with the fantasy worlds of J.R.R. Tolkien and similar fiction writers: "as with immersive technologies, the creator of fairy tales builds a secondary world that your mind must enter."[8]

The existing post-truth information environment already primes large-scale acceptance of unsupported claims and outright fabrications on international issues, abetted by the news media and ostensibly neutral organizations.[9] By supercharging the creation of exaggerated or fabricated information, however, AI will accelerate the spread of bespoke realities in the realm of international relations, likely consolidated into a small number of Competing Realities where any given conflict is concerned.

Today, what some observers already call "the war inside the war" describes the battle of narratives unfolding in parallel with military and geopolitical clashes.[10] Tomorrow, such efforts at reality-creation will occur at a previously unimagined level of quality, quantity, and speed. AI-driven tools will encourage attempts by savvy individuals, organizations, and authoritarian nations to create and reinforce bespoke worldviews on a large scale, serving their interests in real-world conflicts and even manufacturing new conflicts entirely.

The retired director of the U.S. Department of Defense's Joint Artificial Intelligence Center (JAIC), Jack Shanahan, points to the significance of such creation: "Given how humans have been shaped

by roughly 200,000 years of evolutionary selection pressures, perception is often indistinguishable from – or at least often accepted as – reality."[11] Already, according to a company offering narrative-tracking software to monitor the information environment:

> AI-driven content engines can: mass-produce articles, videos, and social media posts that mimic human-created content; manufacture engagement by generating comments, likes, and shares to boost credibility; [and] amplify specific narratives, making them appear more widely accepted than they actually are.[12]

At the same time, the verisimilitude of so-called "deepfake" photos and videos increasingly defies differentiation by human viewers, forcing news organizations, social media platforms, and government authorities to rely on detection technology that itself increasingly risks falling behind the pace at which deepfakes are improving. AI will only deepen the challenge.

Detection technology – and, of course, the organizations using it – will also be subject to potential manipulation, and such technology is likely to be readily available to fewer and fewer users as ever greater complexity and sophistication is required in order to identify a good fake. Moreover, subsequent corrections (if they are made at all) rarely erase the full damage of initially false or misleading reports, as coverage of the war in Gaza has demonstrated, even in the absence of deepfakes.[13] The result may be what I term "authoritative fabrication," through which incorrect information gains the imprimatur of accuracy even among those who still attempt to distinguish fact from fiction at all.

Through its ability to create misleading but utterly convincing content, AI will accelerate and intensify existing practices such as "rage farming," whereby targeted groups of people can be inflamed against an individual, organization, or nation via their media feeds. Countless social media-driven "cancellations" in recent years have proven the effectiveness of this approach in ending careers and forcing otherwise unimaginable institutional changes. Abetted by AI in the

Competing Realities scenario, such practices on the part of governments, activist groups, and armed belligerents alike will become the wholesale norm – serving to trigger, prolong, and intensify conflicts when a good-faith approximation of the truth might lead to more peaceful outcomes.

AI will also worsen the Competing Realities scenario through its basic functioning. As AI's large language models (LLMs) seek "answers," they mine a digital substrate containing ever-growing amounts of false information. Some of the false information is deliberately planted, often on a large scale, by Russia and other governments and organizations that are unconstrained by the rule of law.[14] Other information is so contradictory as to bedevil the operation of LLMs, as demonstrated in a recent analysis of the Grok chatbot's efforts to make sense of the Iran-Israel conflict.[15] Training LLMs on large open data sets that themselves already contain the output of *other* LLMs is likely to worsen the situation, making errors, hallucinations, and other distortions recursively self-reinforcing. (And this is even before the well-documented, often outrageous biases of major LLMs are taken into consideration.[16]) The resulting responses to user queries sometimes consist of what subject matter experts still recognize as fabricated claims. But millions of other users will accept the AI chatbots' versions of reality, adding an additional layer of epistemological chaos to an environment already manipulated by human actors.

Under the Competing Realities scenario, authoritarian governments will be the primary curators of their own populations' views on international relations and will also attempt to disseminate favorable worldviews among adversary populations. The government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) already appears to be well-versed in such "cognitive warfare," as summarized in an article in the *People's Liberation Army (PLA) Daily*:

> In modern society, the contest around "narrative" has become an important position in the battlefield of the cognitive domain. "The same fact, different expressions"

has become an important manifestation of cognitive warfare.[17]

For their part, remaining liberal-democratic governments will seek to elevate the domestic strains of "reality" most conducive to their global aims while playing the authoritarians' game of targeted information-shaping abroad. But governments will not have this playing field to themselves. AI's effects thus will be to create rising waves of misinformed citizens, whose biases and knowledge gaps may swamp the abilities of public officials to craft effective messages. (Something similar to this occurred recently around the Israeli and U.S. strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities, when hundreds of thousands of young Americans appeared to conclude, via no source more authoritative than postings on the TikTok platform, that World War III was at hand.[18])

The information contest among all governments will thus shift increasingly from the interpretation or manipulation of actual "facts on the ground" to the outright creation of competitive realities in order to influence the larger cacophony.

Scenario 2—Catastrophic Disconnect: "Truth is Not the Goal"

Key Element	Tribalism
Threatened Value	Decision Quality

Many prominent voices claim that millions of our fellow citizens have been misled by "disinformation" or "misinformation," and can be brought back to the fold of reality if such false information is suppressed and the truth is spread. Indeed, a veritable industry of well-funded organizations grew up around that notion in the last decade, confident in their own assessments of what constitutes "truth" and eager to harness the power of government to disseminate them.[19] In this conception, the answer to disinformation is to counter it with louder and more emphatic assertions that point out error.

Even setting aside the ideological biases and blinkered realities of most self-proclaimed disinformation fighters themselves, their premise is deeply flawed. Vehemently pointing out or even suppressing error seldom makes the truth more compelling. History and numerous contemporary examples make it clear that humanity generally prefers the warm embrace of tribal belief systems to the difficult pursuit of truth, even when the verifiable facts that comprise truth are readily available, which they often are not. In a scenario of "Catastrophic Disconnect" exacerbated by Artificial Intelligence, the quality of decision-making in international relations may soon fall victim to this aspect of the post-truth information environment, which increasingly afflicts supposed "elites" and average citizens alike.

AI's role in a Catastrophic Disconnect scenario takes two major forms: one through its efficiency in aligning beliefs with tribes, and the second through its impact on human behavior and discernment.

In the first case, AI will further enhance the power of social-media algorithms and essentially take over the role of search engines in determining which information most people see about the world.[20] It will know with even more exquisite precision which beliefs and sources (accurate or not) we "like" and "subscribe" to, and which ones we avoid. It will serve to remind us, even more than we are already reminded, which beliefs and sources are approved within our tribes and which must be avoided. In that way, AI will push the online realm further from the ideal of the "Viral Editor" (in which far-flung humans might make accounts of the world richer and more accurate through their inputs) and closer to the specter of the "Viral Inquisitor" described by Canadian media scholar Andrey Mir, which "forces us into compliance."[21]

"Wrong information is tolerated when it allows the right attitude," Mir writes. "And the right information is ignored if it supports the wrong attitude."[22] This will be familiar to anyone who has attempted to rebut false information aligned with tribal dogma online. In authoritarian societies such as the PRC, governments using "social credit" systems can punish anyone trying to correct the record

while rewarding conformity with a preferred line.[23] In liberal democracies, conformity inside our powerful tribes happens somewhat more organically but no less powerfully, as exemplified by recent attitudes around culture-war topics, the 2020 global pandemic, and the conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine. Indeed, what sociologist Musa al-Gharbi describes as "symbolic capital"[24] is nearly as valuable to Westerners as the more explicit rewards of social-credit systems – and even more manipulable by AI.

Some observers take comfort in the notion that technological interventions can prevent the Catastrophic Disconnect scenario, through regulation of social media algorithms and permission mechanisms, or through the widespread adoption of so-called "middleware" to curate our information feeds back towards actual reality. Prominent political philosopher Francis Fukuyama extolled the latter possibility in 2021:

> Users could insert their preferred middleware as plug-ins to the platforms and thus choose their own trusted intermediary to sort their news, rank their searches, and order their feed of tweets.[25]

Four years on, however, no such ameliorative trend is in sight. Algorithmic fixes and middleware assume that humans will favor accurate and truthful information to give themselves societal advantages. While this may *sometimes* be true in the case of financial or medical decisions, it is closer to the opposite of how humans perceive advantage in most other information choices, where conformity and entertainment are more likely to produce the outcomes that they seek. (In the social media age, after all, what is the business model for selling software that, in effect, tells you things you do not want to hear?)

As the communications scholar Neil Postman foresaw in a comparison of George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* 40 years ago – when bespoke realities were much less prevalent than they are now – Huxley's predictions are likely to prevail in the pervasive online realm:

> In the Huxleyan prophecy, Big Brother does not watch us, by his choice. We watch him, by ours. There is no need for wardens or gates or Ministries of Truth. When a population becomes distracted by trivia, when cultural life is redefined as a perpetual round of entertainments, when serious public conversation becomes a form of baby-talk, when, in short, a people become an audience and their public business a vaudeville act, then a nation finds itself at risk.[26]

Huxley's and Postman's prescience derives from their appreciation of human nature, which is also understood by today's most successful purveyors of online falsehoods. Especially when harnessed to AI, today's information marketplace practically assures that in public understandings of international relations and war, tribe-conforming and blood-stirring narratives will only grow in power over nuanced quests for truth.

AI's second role in the Catastrophic Disconnect scenario arises from its debilitating impact on human knowledge and reasoning. Such dynamics will affect elite decision-makers as much as the proverbial man on the street, and with consequences that are likely to be all the greater precisely to the degree that such elites *do* tend to monopolize important decisions.

The widespread adoption of AI tools in education and professional life seems destined to produce human decision-makers with significantly weaker foundations of context and knowledge, minimal analytical skills of their own, and limited ability to articulate recommendations (let alone develop *informed* recommendations) independently and confidently – precisely the skill set needed in competent international-relations practitioners. By nature, these deficiencies will be more severe among younger, rising generations of decision-makers who know no other world than one in which AI does their readings for them, formulates ideas and options, and writes these up as memos, papers, and presentations without the supposed author having to absorb any actual information or even reason at all.

If the resulting work products were generally accurate, rich in detail and insight, and strong in their appreciation of humanity's strengths and weaknesses, then some of the worst aspects of Catastrophic Disconnect might be avoided. (After all, even if the "author" of a paper had not actually used his or her brain in preparing it, at least there might be wisdom in its contents.) But the work product of AI agents is none of these things and, for reasons inherent in their design, are unlikely to become any of these things in the foreseeable future. As historian and professor Kate Epstein wrote recently:

> AI is antithetical to humanistic intelligence. … Data is not knowledge; executing an algorithm is not reasoning. … [AI] tries to make up for its lack of qualitative intelligence through brute quantitative force. In so doing, it rewards virality, which, to put it mildly, is not a reliable proxy for quality. The average of lots of garbage is still garbage.[27]

Educators, such as Epstein, have begun to sound warnings about the broader effects of relying on AI. Those of us who teach at the university level now see more and more papers with the hallmarks of AI: written without grammatical errors, but lacking the basic insights or even the exuberant mistakes of actual, flesh-and-blood students. As analysis and research skills diminish in actual humans, biases and false information are more likely to be over-expressed as they go largely unnoticed by their "authors" and largely unchallenged by their supervisors and teachers. The flatness of AI-generated "learning" and writing will be reflected more and more in the flatness of the human minds who aspire to diplomatic and military decision-making.

The risks of such disconnection from the sources of competent decision-making are numerous and, as this scenario's moniker suggests, potentially catastrophic. For 80 years, to note the most obvious example, the deterrence of nuclear war has hinged on the assumption that "rational" human decision makers would have final authority over the use of nuclear weapons. And, in fact, the Cold War's troublingly frequent nuclear near-misses were averted in most

instances by humans who drew on their own knowledge and trained instincts, at times against the "evidence" presented by technology.[28] Far from lowering these stakes, AI-driven automation of surveillance and weapons systems may increase the opportunities for incompetent or lazy human operators to make poor decisions based on incomplete or misleading information. Having a "human in the loop" will be of little value if that human has been trained from childhood to avoid reasoned judgment and outsource his or her thinking to AI.

While their immediate implications for human life may be less severe than decisions about nuclear-weapons use, countless other top-level and even workaday decisions about economic instruments, arms shipments, signals to allies, troop deployments, and the use of conventional weapons systems are made better or worse by the knowledge, analytical rigor, and indeed humanity brought to bear on them. The more these skills degrade, the worse the resulting decisions will be.

Scenario 3—Virtual Retreat: "Truth is Unknown"

Key Element	Entrenchment
Threatened Value	National Resilience

The entrenchment of a post-truth information environment – powered by Artificial Intelligence – may also lead to a scenario of "Virtual Retreat," in which international relations as practiced for centuries take place, if at all, beyond the basic awareness and involvement of most human beings. Such a scenario would redefine the meaning of citizenship, undermine the ability of some governments to respond to opportunities and provocations abroad, give new technology unprecedented power over its ostensible users, and pose fundamental questions about the resilience of the nation-state.

Virtual Retreat assumes an AI-driven acceleration of recent trends that enable human interactions to occur in digital realms.

Already, hundreds of millions of people in the world's most technologically advanced societies earn their livings, learn, shop, socialize, and entertain themselves primarily through on-screen digital tools and their associated applications. Growing numbers of people are almost never away from screens except when sleeping.

While these legions remain superficially aware of their actual surroundings and cohabiting creatures while using screens, and step away occasionally for in-person interactions, even that limited non-digital engagement with the world seems likely to diminish in the years ahead. The rise of augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) technologies involving hoods, visors, and similarly "immersive" environments will allow their users to separate almost completely from physical reality and to conduct even more of their daily lives in digitally generated surroundings. Some people will resist this further detachment into a "Metaverse," fearing a loss of humanity or simply clinging to the undeniable joys of human interactions. However, many others will be drawn to environments – the ultimate in "bespoke realities" – which may be (and are likely to be *designed* to be) much more engrossing, pleasantly populated, and stimulating than their drab corners of the actual physical universe.

Maçães makes a compelling case that the "builders" and rule-setters in an emerging digital universe – including both businesses and governments – will have enormous advantages over their lagging competitors, who will be reduced to accepting rather than shaping their economic and geopolitical surroundings. "There is nothing more terrible … than to be captured by the dreams of others," he writes.[29] Initial world-building advantages, however, may be quickly overshadowed by the more fundamental risks of AI-driven Virtual Retreat.

In the emerging hyper-digital environment, an increasing amount of information about business, culture, health, politics, and war will be detached from any widely shared reality, let alone from the pursuit of objective truth. Some shared experiences will persist, as people interact with others to manage their physical existences and what remains of their offline personal and professional lives, but

individuals' subjective circumstances will become as varied as they are. In a virtual universe, one can just as easily "live" on Mars and pledge allegiance to mythical sand creatures as live in the United States and pledge allegiance to a creaking constitutional republic.

Two information-technology specialists with backgrounds in international security, Sean Guillory and John Carrola, recently coined the term "Online-Offline Convergence" to describe the widespread use of "Metaverse/Web3, synthetic training environments, Integrated Visual Augmentation Systems, digital twins, brain-machine interfaces, and other biodigital convergences," in which "a person can't differentiate between the information environment dimensions [physical, informational, and cognitive] and sees it as one 'reality.'"[30] Applying their assumptions, at least three general and unprecedented risks for international relations arise from the Virtual Retreat scenario offered here.

First, the widespread detachment of individuals from the concerns and duties of citizenship will be difficult to avoid. Throughout recent history, the primary practitioners of international relations have been a small number of elite national leaders; yet at least some degree of consent from and involvement by mass populations in public affairs have hitherto been unavoidable, even in authoritarian societies. As soldiers, taxpayers, and production workers at a minimum, populations were mobilized to confront crises, opportunities, and risks both at home and abroad. It has been hard enough at certain times, often for understandable reasons, to persuade a national majority to care about and work to prevent or reverse the provocative or threatening actions of another nation. It could become almost impossible to do this, however, in a truly comprehensive virtual environment, where the supposed machinations of another nation seem less "real" and consequential than the distractions under one's own bespoke hood.

The risk of Virtual Retreat might perhaps be worth taking, as long as the condition were universal. A world in which *everyone* lives their lives and resolves their disagreements online could be physically safer than one still beset by what latter-day analysts have already taken

to calling "kinetic war." Even authoritarian regimes may struggle to inform and encourage citizens to support conflicts that have no clear connection to their online pursuits. And it will be even more difficult to persuade younger people disproportionately seduced by online worlds to put on uniforms and risk their actual lives in tangible conflicts. Metaverse off-switches are likely to remain within the purview of national authorities, however, along with strategies to bring real-world conflicts to the attention of at least some online residents. A more likely situation is one in which physical threats emerge in one nation, even as they fail to be taken seriously in a *target* nation.

The second general risk to international relations in the Virtual Retreat scenario is that malign human adversaries either remain outside the Metaverse entirely or exploit its pervasiveness to their ends. The former variation would amount to a parallel track in which an attack in physical reality disrupts or destroys a society consumed by online life. Often, it takes considerable effort to dislodge someone from online distraction, but a missile attack or assault on essential infrastructure would likely accomplish the task. The surviving denizens of a Metaverse would stumble out into an altered physical reality that they may have lost the ability to understand and operate inside in the first place. The second variation would entail an attack inside the digital realm that manages to weaken the physical health and/or economic well-being of a targeted group. One could imagine malicious, AI-hijacked suggestions by online influencers that encourage people to consume dangerous substances or make investment decisions that doom an economy, for example.

Finally, consideration of the Virtual Retreat scenario must not ignore the possibility that the underlying technology itself could pose an "international" or societal threat. Already, the prospect of AI tools that cannot be turned off or dissuaded has moved from science fiction to actual experience. The chief executive of an influential software company noted recently that in nearly 80 percent of trials involving a common OpenAI model, the model edited a "shutdown" script to prevent the script from functioning as an off-switch; in seven percent

of cases, the model explicitly disobeyed the instruction to "allow yourself to be shut down."[31]

If indeed the off-switch to an AI-powered Metaverse were to be eliminated by the underlying "intelligence" itself – or even if certain "beliefs," biases, and components of these systems were to escape human control and the AI's self-perceived "interests" to become greatly misaligned with those of humans – the possibility of an AI-designed catastrophe could not be ruled out. It does not take the mind of a science-fiction author to imagine the possibilities: an AI able to manipulate our digital information inputs could persuade large numbers of us to take actions harmful to our survival, damage the infrastructure required to sustain modern life, engage existing weapons systems against us, or simply persuade us to attack each other in the digital and/or physical domains.

Conclusions

This is a preliminary assessment, and the most generic conclusion may be the most important one: that further work is needed. In this case:

1) Scenarios are, by nature, tools of thought provocation. Exploring and challenging their premises, blind spots, and implications is more useful than assuming any of them will prove wholly accurate.

2) Exploring additional insights from other fields will be essential. The focus here is on scenarios with the potential to disrupt international relations, but early lessons from the rise of online business, the impact of AI-enabled technologies on education, and experiences with cultural diffusion, for example, could also produce significant leads.

3) The three scenarios offered here are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, the most consistent conclusion

one draws from reviewing predictions about the effects of earlier technologies can be summed up as, "all of the above, but to varying degrees." Competing Realities may swamp the progress of truthful knowledge, for example, or it may prove to be a more virulent version of humankind's standard proclivities for fantasy and gossip. Catastrophic Disconnect may turn us all into blithering copies of a sub-par AI, or it may serve to strengthen the role of an ever-smaller cognitive elite that resists the easy paths of spoon-fed information. Virtual Retreat may be a dangerous conceit that risks extinction in a hopeless quest to escape banality and physical pain, or it may usher in a vast new domain of human creativity, competition, and conflict.

4) And of course, not everyone or every human society will respond in the same way. The human future, as it must be, will remain an endless series of experiments rather than the fulfillment of a prophecy. We have certain common, innate, and powerful tendencies that must not be ignored. But one of them is an endless ability to improvise in the quest for survival. Chances are, at least one culture and set of experiences will get it right when it comes to AI and international (read: inter-human) relations. If so, let is hope it is our own.

Meanwhile, it is time to start thinking about, debating, and planning against these possibilities in earnest.

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About the Author

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Notes

1 *See, in particular,* Gary L. Geipel, "Reality Matters: National Security in a Post-Truth World," *Occasional Paper*, vol. 3, no. 6 (National Institute Press, June 2023), https://nipp.org/papers/reality-matters-national-security-in-a-post-truth-world/.

2 *See* Jennifer Kavanagh & Michael D. Rich, "Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Rose of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life," RAND Corporate Research Report RR-2314-RC (2018).

3 Jon Askonas, "How Stewart Made Tucker," *The New Atlantis*, Summer 2022, https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/how-stewart-made-tucker.

4 Geipel, "Reality Matters," 16-18 & 43-44.

5 *See, e.g.*, Martin Gurri, "Journalism Betrayed," *City Journal*, Winter 2021, 12-19.

6 Geipel, "Reality Matters," 34-51.

7 Renée DiResta, *Invisible Rulers: The People Who Turn Lies into Reality* (PublicAffairs, 2024).

8 Bruno Maçães, *World Builders: Technology and the New Geopolitics* (Cambridge University Press, 2025), 10-11.

9 Recent examples include claims by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), echoed by prominent media outlets, that nearly 800 Palestinian civilians were killed by Israeli troops at or near food-aid facilities in Gaza from late May through early July 2025. Though OHCHR released no evidence of any kind to support its claims, the statement resulted in dozens of "news" stories and wire-service reports globally (for example, Olivia Le Poidevin, "UN reports 798 deaths near Gaza aid hubs in six weeks," *Reuters*, July 11, 2025, further establishing what is likely a gross exaggeration or a fabrication as a "fact" for millions of information consumers).

10 *See, e.g.*, EdgeTheory Lab, "The War inside the Iran-Israel War: Foreign Malign Influence and the Battle of Narratives," Narrative Intelligence Report (June 30, 2025), available at https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/7ja47s4uasc35yvp52zbo/The-War-inside-the-Israel-Iran-War.pdf?rlkey=0ozpasltnehuit1k3optjksc2&e=1&st=n8orpyab&dl=0.

11 Jack Shanahan, "Artificial Intelligence and Perception in Crisis and Conflict: Mating Twenty-First-Century Technologies with Eighteenth-Century Minds," in Nicholas Wright, Michael Miklaucic, & Todd Veazie (eds.), *Human, Machine, War How the Mind-Tech Nexus Will Win Future Wars* (Air University Press, 2025), 131.

12 "The New Paradigm: How AI is Shaping Narratives and Conversation," *EdgeTheory*, March 4, 2025, https://edgetheory.com/resources/ai-narratives-and-conversation.

13 For example, the *New York Times* used a short "editor's note" buried six days later on page 15 of its print edition to correct a false online headline and story that dominated its website for hours, claiming that Israel had destroyed a Gaza hospital in October 2023. *See* "Editors' Note: Gaza Hospital Coverage," *New York Times*, October 23, 2023. Similarly, the *Washington Post* took more than 48 hours to delete and acknowledge that its "standards of fairness" had been disregarded in a story falsely suggesting that Israeli troops had opened fire on and killed 30 people in "crowds making their way to collect aid;" the acknowledgement is available at https://x.com/washingtonpost/status/1929961283593367559.

[14] *See, e.g.*, Annie Newport and Nina Jankowicz, "Russian networks flood the Internet with propaganda, aiming to corrupt AI chatbots," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, March 26, 2025, https://thebulletin-org.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/thebulletin.org/2025/03/russian-networks-flood-the-internet-with-propaganda-aiming-to-corrupt-ai-chatbots/amp/.

[15] Esteban Ponce de León & Ali Chenrose, "Grok struggles with fact-checking amid Israel-Iran war," *DFR Lab* June 24, 2025, available at: https://dfrlab.org/2025/06/24/grok-struggles-with-fact-checking-amid-israel-iran-war/.

[16] On Google's Gemini AI, *see* Toadworrier, "Google and the Gemini Debacle," *Quillette*, March 18, 2024, https://quillette.com/2024/03/18/google-and-the-gemini-debacle/; and on Elon Musk's Grok, *see* Matteo Wong, "Elon Musk Updated Grok. Guess What It Said?" *The Atlantic*, July 11, 2025, https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2025/07/new-grok-racism-elon-musk/683515/.

[17] Mao Weihao & Qin Dongyang, "Narrative Battle: Cognitive warfare in the 'post-truth era'," *PLA Daily*, July 5, 2022, http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2022-07/05/content_319117.htm.

[18] Nicole Fallert, "Gen Z, Iran, and the mass panic happening on TikTok," *USA Today*, June 23, 2025, https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/health-wellness/2025/06/23/tiktok-iran-israel-war-nuclear-panic-anxiety/84315248007/.

[19] For examples, see Geipel, "Reality Matters," 56-60; and Gary Geipel, "Information Warfare: Why America Needs a Deterrence Strategy," *Quillette.com*, February 11, 2025, https://quillette.com/2025/02/11/sticking-to-reality-misinformation/.

[20] Whatever their limitations, search engines at least have the virtue of offering the user a list of what other sources have said on a topic in a way that makes clear that *this is what others have said*, and which – by juxtaposing different alternative versions of an answer – implies at least the possibility that some of these accounts are likely to be better (*i.e.*, more accurate) than others. (Search result ranking is admittedly a problem here, of course, because it could be taken to imply that higher-ranked answers are "better" than lower-ranked ones, whereas this is by no means necessarily true; the rankings generally represent closer statistical matches to the keywords used in the search query.) AI-generated answers from an LLM, however, are in their form and format singular and oracular ones, which look and feel like an authoritative "right answer" and are likely to be taken as such without any suggestion of the need for further examination or evaluation. In reality, they are merely projections of the response that is statistically most likely to be given to the query – completely irrespective of any idea of actual truth – based upon whatever inputs happen to have been fed into the LLM's training set.

[21] Andrey Mir, "The Viral Inquisitor," *City Journal*, Spring 2023, https://www.city-journal.org/article/the-viral-inquisitor.

[22] Mir, "The Viral Inquisitor."

[23] On China, *see e.g.*, Kai Strittmatter, *We Have Been Harmonized: Life in China's Surveillance State* (Custom House, 2020).

[24] Musa al-Gharbi, *We Have Never Been Woke* (Princeton University Press, 2024).

[25] Barak Richman & Francis Fukuyama, "How to Quiet the Megaphones of Facebook, Google, and Twitter," *Wall Street Journal*, February 12, 2021.

[26] Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (Viking Penguin, 1985),155-156.

[27] Kate Epstein, "We, Robots," *Persuasion*, Substack.com (May 7, 2025).

[28] *See, e.g.*, Rebecca Messina, "The Explainer: Nuclear Near Misses," *The Week UK*, April 25, 2024, https://theweek.com/defence/nuclear-near-misses.

[29] Maçães, *World Builders*, 37.

[30] Sean A. Guillory & John T. Carrola, "What Online-Offline Convergence Means for the Future of Conflict," Information Professionals Association, August 3, 2023, https://information-professionals.org/what-online-offline-convergence-means-for-the-future-of-conflict/.

[31] Judd Rosenblatt, "AI Is Learning to Escape Human Control," *Wall Street Journal*, June 2, 2025.