

Season 2 - Episode 5

# Crossing Channels

Interdisciplinary answers to today's challenging questions

A Podcast series hosted by **Rory Cellan-Jones**

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With

**Sarah Dillon** (University of Cambridge)

**Manvir Singh** (IAST)

## Why are stories important for society?

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 0:06

Hello and welcome to Crossing Channels. I'm Rory Cellan-Jones. Once upon a time, we decided to make this addition about stories and why they're so important for society. Yes, storytelling is the subject of this latest podcast collaboration between Cambridge University's Bennett Institute for Public Policy, and the Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse. As ever, we're going to use the interdisciplinary strengths of both institutions to explore a complex challenge. How stories can provide new insights to current policy challenges and problems, some of the dangers of endorsing stories and the crucial need to listen to stories to improve political decision-making.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 0:56

To explore these issues we've Sarah Dillon from the Bennett Institute. Sarah, remind us of your main research interests.

**Sarah Dillon** 1:02

Hello there, Rory. I'm based in the Faculty of English here at Cambridge and in academic terms, I'm a scholar of 20th and 21st century literature and film, but of more relevance to today's discussion, I'm also very interested in the way in which stories have and provide knowledge about the world.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 1:19

Excellent. And from the Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse, we have Manvir Singh. Mavir, what does your research focus on?

**Manvir Singh** 1:26

I identify as an evolutionary anthropologist, so a lot of my research is about understanding why it is that human societies everywhere develop strikingly similar cultural practices and traditions. And for the last couple of years, one of my major projects has been building a global database of myths of folktales of legends, to understand commonalities and differences in the world's narratives.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 1:54

Well, let's start by exploring the evidence behind our whole premise. Are story's actually so important in contemporary society? Sarah Dillon, why don't you get us underway?

**Sarah Dillon** 2:03

I think there's been a lot of attention to stories both in the UK in the US, if we focus on a Western area to start with, over the last few years because of the dangers of storytelling, because of the way in which stories can obfuscate the difference between fact and fiction, because the way in which they can be used and wielded, because of their charismatic power. And I think we've become very aware of storytelling in that sense. I'm much more interested in reclaiming stories and listening to stories for what they tell us about the world and for the knowledge that they convey. And we tell stories all the time. We are, as a wonderful scholar called Walter Fisher says, homo narrans, we are constituted by and live within stories and we need to take those stories seriously and we need to develop widespread narrative literacy so we all understand better how stories function and their effects and their power.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 3:00

And is this a new phenomenon, an old phenomenon? I mean, obviously, it's an old phenomenon, we've always told stories. But have they grown more powerful or less powerful over the centuries?

**Sarah Dillon** 3:10

It's a good question. I think we think they've grown more powerful. I think they're definitely more prevailing across a larger area because of the spread of digital technologies. So things like Twitter, things like Facebook, we're much more aware of stories all over the world in a way in which, for instance, maybe when you were living in your cave and painting stories on the wall, you wouldn't necessarily be aware of the stories that were being told 100 miles away. So I don't think we're telling stories necessarily any more. But I think we are much more aware of many, many more stories than we used to be.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 3:45

Manvir Singh, what's your take on that? Are stories more powerful, more important than when we were living in caves? You might have thought that that was the glory days of storytelling in a way.

**Manvir Singh** 3:56

Yeah, so a quick footnote is that caves preserve human remains and art much better than open air environments. But there's no reason to think that humans necessarily favoured caves over other environments historically.

**Sarah Dillon** 4:10

Brilliant, I love being in interdisciplinary environments and being corrected, it's brilliant.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 4:15

So around the campfire, maybe not, not in the cave.

**Manvir Singh** 4:19

Right. But I mean, Sarah's point about stories being really foundational to the human experience: I would go as far as to say like human sociality to human adaptiveness, I think is an important one. Humans are communicative species. We rely on stories in so many ways and I think there's good reason to believe that we have for a very long time. Stories are sources of social information, you know, who is betraying whom, who is having sex with whom. They are also a source of ecological information. They are a source of historical and mythological information. And of course, we cannot look at the societies of the past. But we can look at contemporary societies that continue to live, or into recent times continue to live, in small scale societies that resemble our past. And we know, at least that the vast majority of societies, including these, these foragers and including people in small scale societies, devote an enormous amount of time to storytelling. So there's this great [\*research that was done in the Kalahari with the !Kung\*](#). And Polly Wiessner I think showed that they spent four hours every night sitting around telling stories, and those stories are of mythology, they're of social interactions. Yeah, so I think stories have always been - I don't want to say they always have been because humans have of course evolved and, you know, we have a deep history - but as long as humans have thought as they do, and looked as they do, as long as we have had behaviorally modern humans, I'm sure that stories have been, have been immensely important. And there's been a probably an appreciation of the importance of stories, probably a discourse around storytelling as well, which you find in a lot of societies.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 6:07

And what about the status of the storytellers, who tells them and whether that gives them some kind of power?

**Manvir Singh** 6:13

That's a great question. So there's actually some, systematic research that has been done in certain societies showing that storytellers have higher status. I'm thinking right now about [research done among the Agta in the Philippines](#). They live in the rainforest, they're foragers, they also interact with farmers and they trade. The researchers had found that storytellers have higher status. They're sought out more as bandmates or camp partners. They also interestingly found that the content of stories in this particular society, the ones that were most salient, were very much about morality and normative information. And I mean, more research has to be done, but they found that those camps, those bands that had these revered high status storytellers, actually also had higher cooperation, suggesting that having these vehicles of normative information actually facilitates coordination, facilitates cooperation. You know that's also quite a sexy finding. And it needs to be replicated and studied in other contexts. But it's just an interesting result that I think speaks to the way in which the status of storytellers can actually have social implications.

**Sarah Dillon** 7:29

That might be good, but it's also is it not risky in contemporary society? I remember Hillary Clinton saying that, reflecting on her loss to Trump, she hadn't realised how much politics had become performance, and that she wasn't as good a storyteller as Trump, whatever one thinks about the truth value of his stories. I mean, we transfer that to the modern day, there's what we call elite cues, so people who are particularly prominent or salient and whose narratives therefore become dominant and have a certain amount of power. And that might be for good, but that also might be hugely problematic or detrimental depending on what those stories are.

**Manvir Singh** 8:05

Certainly, certainly.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 8:07

We're gonna get more into the negative side of storytelling in a moment. But can we first of all, look at the positive side, the value, the practical value, perhaps, in providing new insights for current policy challenges? Is it fair to say that they can help us in areas like artificial intelligence, climate change, migration, those kinds of policy issues? Sarah, what are the practical applications of storytelling there?

**Sarah Dillon** 8:34

So one of my most recent books, [Storylistening](#), which was co-authored with Claire Craig, who is currently at Oxford, but was the head of the government office for science for some time. She and I wanted to make the case precisely for that. We wanted to make the case that stories have value as a form of evidence alongside other types of evidence, for instance, scientific and quantitative evidence, and that lots of people already used stories to inform their decision-making about policy issues. Many people were consciously or unconsciously informed by the conversation they'd had

the night before, the television programme that they'd watched, the novel that they'd read. But there was no formal and rigorous way of taking into account that knowledge. So stories were having an influence in a way that would be totally unacceptable with other forms of evidence. So we've created a framework where you can take stories seriously as a form of evidence, and we look at four different ways in which they function. And to give you an example of something like climate change, Kim Stanley Robinson, very famous science fiction author, was invited to COP26. And that sense of inviting an author into a policy environment isn't new. Actually, authors had been involved in policy environments for decades. But I think one of the reasons that Robinson was invited was because of his 2020 book, the [Ministry for the Future](#), which is one of the most phenomenal and I think important stories about climate change and policy that we have. And when I say story, I'm not distinguishing actually between generic distinctions between fact and fiction. So fiction being a novel and fact being a news story or something. And *The Ministry for the Future* goes right through all the kind of minutiae, of wonky policy debate and negotiation that's needed in order to tackle climate change, as well as the techno scientific solutions, as well as the social solutions as well as actually it doesn't shy away from looking at activism, radical activism, violence, and imagines a way through our current crisis to a not perfect but a better future. And to have a work like that, that we can look at and learn from, is so valuable and so important and just because it's a novel, doesn't mean that we can't take it seriously and that we shouldn't take it seriously.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 10:40

Does this not go back quite a long way? You think of authors like H.G. Wells, weren't their works, actually, if not shaping policy, certainly shaping public debate, shaping public perceptions of how the world ought to change?

**Sarah Dillon** 10:55

Absolutely. And H.G. Wells was both an author and involved in policy and politics. He was involved in drafting an early statement, which fed into the new UN Declaration of Human Rights. In fact, I've just finished this morning, [an essay for Radio 3 on a 20<sup>th</sup> century writer called Philip Wylie](#), who wrote a huge amount, about many, many nuclear apocalypse stories. And he became strongly involved in the American Civil Defence Administration, he became involved in the various governance structures that were put in place for nuclear power and energy and weapons post World War Two in America. There's always been this intimate connection between writers and policy.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 11:35

Manvir, what's your take on that? Are we being a bit too kind of literal minded? Or too sort of utilitarian, thinking stories, they're all very well, but what use are they in determining policy on climate change or artificial intelligence or whatever?

**Manvir Singh** 11:50

I think a theme in this conversation is that stories are technologies, they're tools. And like any technologies, they can be wielded for social benefits, and for the kinds of changes that we desire. And they can also be used for maybe more nefarious ends. And I think there are two, or at least two mechanisms by which they are potent social technologies. One is that they provide a simple causal story. A story allows you to latch on to something more easily and allows you to start thinking about how certain agents in the world, certain mechanisms, processes need to be stopped or need to be promoted. You know, we can tell a story and I think science supports this one that our carbon dioxide emissions are endangering the planet. And we can tell that story in a simple compelling way and snap people to start to recognise it and to start thinking about it. The second mechanism that came to mind is that stories are ways to delineate what is right and wrong, and also to attribute status to certain actions. And so what I'm thinking about is in the last third of this book, and I think, in the myths and folklore of many societies, you can present characters, and you can lie to them, you can paint them as virtuous, you can depict their actions in normative lenses, that then I think, have psychological potencies. You know, humans are status seeking organisms. And stories are a way to adjust the arena of status. Of course, they have many, many other mechanisms. But I think these are two important ways by which they can both produce benefits, but also be wielded for more treacherous ends.

**Sarah Dillon** 13:33

Rory, can I come in there? Because I think there's important responses to those two points, which is, it's a kind of "yes, and" in classic impro style. "Yes, and" those are both functions that are very much thinking about the influence of stories on the individual on the reader, their persuasive power, the way in which they can affect me in a moral or psychological change. That's actually not what I am primarily interested in and not why I think they're important in a policy environment. I think we need to look at them in terms of their collective functions. So not what effect does the story have on a particular reader but if we look at these stories about artificial intelligence, for instance, that mainstream media is conveying. What perceptions about artificial intelligence might they be conveying to a general public? And how does that general public then think about AI in a way that might influence its reception to the introduction of certain types of AI driven technologies. The way in which they're crucial to our anticipation of the future. They're the kinds of functions of stories that I think are really important in a more kind of public reasoning context. And it's a "yes, and", as I said, it is not to disavow their personal and their individual and their aesthetic and their emotional power. But it's to just add another argument about why they're important in a different context.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 15:00

Manvir, I think some of your research focuses on supernatural beliefs, mystical narratives. Can they actually end up being harmful?

**Manvir Singh** 15:05

That's a great question. So there are a number of ways in which mystical or supernatural narratives can have detrimental consequences and which connect to the conversation that we're having. One thing that, and there are many domains of supernatural narratives that that I think about, but one that I think is especially relevant or notable are narratives of misfortune. When people are suffering, are in highly uncertain environments, I think there is a predisposition to understand a cause. There is a predisposition often to latch on to narratives that connect misfortune to agents. And so in a lot of societies this manifests as witchcraft beliefs. So I get sick, I'm looking for a cause. There are different agents that might come to mind. It might be ancestors, it might be the government, it might be immigrants, it might in many cases be witches. And I think this is important for a couple of reasons. One, I think it allows for demonisation. It allows for especially charismatic individuals who gain prestige or status or power from fixing people's problems. It motivates them to attribute misfortune to distrusted parties to agents, and then present themselves as powerful, as irrelevant in precisely the ways necessary to vanquish that. So in a lot of societies, this is the interplay between the shaman and the witch, you get sick, I come to you, we co-create a narrative about why you are sick, we might attribute it to an ancestor, to a ghost, to which and then I present myself as powerful in precisely the way that's necessary to vanquish that witch. But then this also takes the form of charismatic leaders who provide very simplistic narratives about the sources of people's misfortune, and then present themselves as special in precisely the ways necessary to vanquish it. Oh, your problems are because of immigrants. Everyone in the establishment is really paralysed and static, they will never fight the immigrant problem. I am an outsider, I have precisely what it means to vanquish that. And so, you know, I think this is a way in which supernatural narratives connect. So yeah, I think there's predisposition on an individual level to latch on to agent based narratives of misfortune then can have large scale collective consequences.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 17:25

Aren't we seeing right now the dangers of powerful stories when they butt up against science. When they are, you know, guilty of the classic error of correlation equals causation. And I'm talking about the debate over vaccines, we're seeing very powerful narratives, very powerful stories of, oh, somebody dropped down dead after having the vaccine, that's what's caused it. That is a powerful narrative, Sarah, and an example surely, of where, you know, stories are powerful and colourful, science is kind of dull and un compelling as a narrative. And therefore we should be cautious of the charm of stories really.

**Sarah Dillon** 18:07

I both agree and disagree with so much of that. Let's unpack it. I do not want to pit stories against science, I do not think that is a useful or helpful way to proceed. The example that you looked at is

an example of what we would call the charismatic power of an anecdote. The way in which a single story which is often located around a specific individual and their suffering or their triumphs can distort public debate around a specific issue. We saw it with the MMR vaccine, you know a couple, a few decades ago now, wasn't it? And the answer to that, again, is not to try and pretend that stories aren't there. They are not going to go away. They are as natural to us as breathing. But it is to understand how that is functioning. And one of the arguments that we make is that people need to get much better at understanding whether an anecdote has, and this is a kind of literary rhetorical term but it's a useful one, metonymic legitimacy. So, this is where Claire was like, we can't put that in the book and I'm like, but it's the right word. So academia came up against policy there. And metonym in classic literary rhetoric is a part that stands for a whole. So you might talk about the crown and it's standing for the royal family. So it's a part standing for a whole. If something is metonymically legitimate that part legitimately stands for that whole and some anecdotes are metonymically legitimate, they do represent a greater whole. And actually in that context, they're a really useful way of understanding it. When they're metonymically legitimate, we often call them case studies. When they're metonymically illegitimate, that's when they start to have that distortive effect. Then actually, science is crucially important as other forms of evidence because really the only way to know whether they have that legitimacy or not, is to put them amongst a wider evidence base. Do they fit with the evidence base? Do they not fit with that evidence base? And that's the kind of attention to stories that needs to be made and decision making, rather than becoming carried away by and subject to that potentially illegitimate power.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 20:20

That is funny that you talk about case studies. I spent many years as a reporter being asked by editors, when I was trying to tell some complex story, have you got a case study? And it was absolutely valid, it was the most powerful way to tell a story.

**Sarah Dillon** 20:30

Basically, they were saying, have you got a metonymically legitimate anecdote?

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 20:35

That's what they said, actually. Everytime.

**Sarah Dillon** 20:38

I'm sure that just tripped off their tongue.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 20:40

Here is a slightly straightforward question. Do stories need to be true? And true in what sense?



**Manvir Singh** 20:45

I mean, it of course raises the question of what true even means.

**Sarah Dillon** 20:50

I'm glad you said that rather than me. It's classic academics isn't it.

**Manvir Singh** 20:55

There's an interesting [paper that just came out by Aaron Lightner and Ed Hagen](#). So they're both anthropologists. So there is a trend in the field of cognitive anthropology and evolutionary anthropology to think about supernatural beliefs as maybe shaped by people's political or strategic incentives and shaped by our psychological biases. And what they are trying to push people to think about is about them being true in a particular way. And true in the sense of allowing you to adaptively predict what will happen in your world. So an example is, you know, people might say that this bird is afraid of that other bird. And that's like a weird example, because it's not supernatural. But let's say there's a society in which people tell this story that bird A is afraid of bird B. And what they would argue is that, yes, we can think about this in all kinds of frameworks. But people might actually encode useful or adaptive knowledge in a cognitively compelling and easy to pass along way. So in this case, they might be saying bird A is afraid of bird B. But what that actually means is that when you are hunting and you see bird B, you should not expect bird A to be around there. You know that there is all kinds of ecologically and socially relevant information that can be encoded in a variety of ways, some of which might be foreign to the kinds of frameworks that are common in kind of like post enlightenment, Western academia scholarship discourse. So that's one way I think, in which stories can be true.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 22:22

Sarah?

**Sarah Dillon** 22:23

I totally agree. And I'd sort of give the same answer but using slightly different framework and language, which is, the question of truth is a red herring. You can't say that out of context, in a post truth environment. You know, the word truth is so loaded now. So of course, there are things that are true about the world and things that aren't. There are facts, and there are, there are lies.. And it's absolutely imperative that we don't lose sight of that distinction. When it comes to stories, when it comes to models that's not the right terminology to be using. We say, have they got value? Are they based on useful data? And do they extract from a world in a way that helps us think about a complex world? And do they enable us to reason back into that world? So you know, I just take the thing I've watched most recently, the new Avatar film. Is it true that there is a planet called, now I can't remember what it's called. What's the planet called in Avatar? I've forgotten the name of the planet, everyone else will know and they'll be yelling at their computers. You know, is it true

that there's a planet there that has a certain race of beings on it that are blue or green? And no, that's not true. And I work on speculative fiction and science fiction. So I deal with a lot of stories that are in no sense true in that sense. But does it help us reason about the effects that settler colonialism has had in the past on native populations? Does it help us reason about the limits and the extent to which we should be driven by our drive for technological growth? Or as in the new film, our desire for immortality at the expense of our natural environment and other inhabitants of our world, be they human or non-human? Yes, it does do that. So it's about what it helps us think about. And it's about understanding what parts of the world the story is modelling. Because if you get it wrong, then you get yourself in confusion. But if you know which bits it's modelling and why they're useful, and then we're back to narrative literacy, stories can be hugely valuable.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 24:28

I'm trying to work out whether that's a recommendation of the film Avatar. I think we're going to move towards the close by talking about listening to stories, which is something that you've written about Sarah. Your book [Storylistening](#), which you mentioned you co authored with Claire Craig. Why is listening to stories important in public discourse and policymaking?

**Sarah Dillon** 24:55

Well, so we made up the word "storylistening". I mean, obviously didn't make it make it up, other people have used it. But it just struck me that we talk so much about storytelling, but then we don't have a strong or rigorous language to talk about what happens on the other end, and that seemed wrong. So that's where the word storylistening came from. And we use it very specifically to mean the theory and practice of gathering what we call narrative evidence to inform decision-making as part of a pluralistic evidence base. And it's part of the case that many, if not all, of the wicked problems that we now face, we, I think, are beginning to understand cannot be solved by science alone. Science is essential. And it's necessary. But it's not sufficient. And we lose a huge amount of valuable knowledge about the world and about how to act in it, and about the decisions we might make in it, if we disregard other forms of knowledge, other than the scientific. And those other forms often come in narrative form. They come in narrative form through the kinds of objects of study that we find in the humanities be that history, or English or anthropology. And they come in narrative form. If you take climate change, again, in the drive, and the acknowledgement that indigenous knowledges need to be taken into account when we're thinking about climate change, and its effects. And many of those Indigenous knowledges are in narrative form. So we need a way of listening to stories that's rigorous, that can gather that evidence and that can convey it to decision makers so that they can learn from it and make decisions informed by it in the same way that they do informed by other forms of evidence, for instance, from science.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 26:50

Manvir, what's your take on this? Is it not the case that what we need is actually critical listeners,

people who are curious about the stories they're being told, and want to explore them rather than just be a passive audience?

**Manvir Singh** 27:04

Yes, of course. There's no situation in which I would deny that premise. And I think we're also in a promising moment where there is a reflection on the origins of stories on the ways in which the historical distribution of power of storytelling capacity shapes the kinds of stories we tell. And you know, like Sarah had mentioned, the urge to, for instance, pay more attention to indigenous stories, to pay more attention to the stories of the oppressed, I think starts to challenge not just the stories we tell but the understanding we have of broad patterns. So an example that comes to mind is reconsidering the stories told about conquest, where a lot of the stories that we tell about conquest are very much informed by the records that the conquistadors, that the colonisers have left. And that then impacts our theories of human history, our theories of the shape of human fate, of destiny, of social and cultural evolution. But once we actually start to question those stories, and we look at other people who are telling, telling different kinds of stories, you know, we start to look at different stories, for instance of the Spanish conquest of the Americas, then not only do we understand those particular events in a better way, but our understanding of humanity I think, improves. And this is something I've been thinking about a lot. Reconsiderations of the stories of the Spanish conquest of the Americas, both empower in many instances the people who have historically been disempowered but also change our understanding of empire. They show empire to be much more contingent, much more fragile. Yeah, so I definitely think storylistening, critical reflection on the stories we tell is a hugely beneficial and enlightening exercise.

**Sarah Dillon** 28:44

We have critical story imbibers all over the world, in humanities departments, we have them in literature departments, we have them in film departments, we have them in cultural studies departments, we have them in the students that we educate. I mean this is a powerfully strong argument for the importance of the kind of education that students who take arts and humanities subjects that we need to make for these subjects. That that is part of what we are teaching them, that critical literacy, that ability to understand how stories work. To be sceptical about stories, to interrogate them, to take them apart, like an engineer takes apart the engine in order to understand how they work to be able to put them back together again. All of that is what we teach in the humanities. And all of that is what schools should be teaching. And all of that will develop citizens that are more able to understand this sort of narrative saturation of the world in which they move.

**Manvir Singh** 29:39

I completely agree.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 29:42

Yeah. Well, both of you seem to be making a fabulous case for this podcast, what it tries to do, talk about the multidisciplinary approach. Sarah, I mean, I'm sure people outside academia will be quite surprised that somebody in the Cambridge English department was working in this context. But it's important, isn't it?

**Sarah Dillon** 29:58

It's hugely important, and it is still unusual. And it shouldn't be. And I hope it won't be moving forwards. Because I think, and this is more a disciplinary point about my area really, but we have such fantastic expertise in understanding how narratives work that to constrain that expertise just to fiction, if I use that term in the way in which mean it and even just to canonical fiction as we used to it in the past, it's, it's a waste as far as I'm concerned. And we need to take those skills out into other environments, we need to use them to operate on other types of stories. And we need to stop hiding our light under a bushel and show the world the skills and the tools that we have, and teach them and share them and show how they can be used in different contexts.

**Rory Cellan-Jones** 30:52

Well, that's a very positive point on which to wrap up this episode. That's all we've got time for thanks to Sarah Dillon from the University of Cambridge and Manvir Singh from the Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse. Let us know what you think of this latest episode of season two of Crossing Channels. You can contact us via Twitter - the Bennett Institute is @bennettinst - the Institute for Advanced Study is @IASToulouse and I am @ruskin147. If you enjoy this episode, then do listen to our other Crossing Channels episodes, notably our recent addition on the Ukraine war and the role of academics during wartime. And please join us next month for the next edition where we'll be looking at what drives human behaviour.