

Utopian and Dystopian climate communication (a naïve reflection on climate and utopia)

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Climate science presents a challenge for communicating the importance and immediacy of action to cut greenhouse gases while presenting a positive future vision involving an active choice of a utopian future over a fatalistic slide into dystopia.

In the 1980s, as a child growing up with reports of acid rain and holes in the ozone layer as well as murmurings about the greenhouse effect and global warming, I received my first weighty glimpse of dystopia, in the form of an early docudrama, [Threads](#), grimly and plainly casting the effects of nuclear annihilation through the normality of people living their lives in Sheffield as the effects of the blast, the radiation and the nuclear winter reduced civilization to savage remnants, as the tenuous threads of society rapidly unravelled. And the comparative utopia of normality perhaps feeds the appetite for the growth in dystopian escapism of zombie-apocalypse centred and “Cli-fi” fiction that proliferates today, as the horror imagined reconciles the comparative benefits of a perceived destabilising present. But there is increasing recognition that a vision of a utopian future is essential in encouraging positive societal change.

My personal journey has led to an indirect study of the future through my career in climate science that involves teaching and researching about climate change, touching upon the last glacial climate 20,000 years ago when ice sheets covered northern Britain and sea levels lower by 120m rewrite our perceived geography, while also discussing the Viking colonies of Greenland as they ended diseased and decaying following combinations of natural climate change and socio-economic factors over 1000 years ago. Collapse of past societies highlights their precarious nature, as outlined in the book of the same name by [Jared Diamond](#). And I find this fragility and incongruity with the present sparks fascination and engagement, so important in drawing in a receptive audience. Teaching and researching climate change also involves science-based imaginings of the future as inexorably rising greenhouse gas levels stifle our atmosphere’s ability to lose excess heat and equally transform our planet. Communicating about a future, more dangerous climate risks instilling a sense of impending doom and an unwanted fatalistic response of inaction, so it is vital to emphasise the opportunity to react positively, to take ownership of our future and collaborate meaningfully and thoughtfully to avoid a dystopian future and aim for a utopian vision.

Contributing to the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#), the world leading United Nations body for assessing the science of climate change, I find a necessary focus on a more clinically imagined future, taking the shape of a number of plausible futures of fossil fuel domination: inequality and regional rivalry in which social cohesion fragments or nationalism and protectionism thrives, counterbalanced by a stoic, slow “middle of the road” progress up to more sustainability pathways of increased inclusion, equality and well-being ([IPCC, 2021](#)). These latter utopian pathways require positive, innovative, and collaborative action across all sectors of society and thoughtful nature-based initiatives that as well as tackling the climate warming growth in our carbon dioxide emissions also point towards a more equitable, thoughtful, inclusive and balanced form of utopia, at least in comparison our current trajectory.

While collaboration is essential in cutting our greenhouse gas emissions, the trajectory can seem to inevitably pit the individual against the state as exemplified by the need to transition from combustion engines to electric vehicles, such that where personal choice is seen to be infringed, inertia and push back can in some cases follow, both at an individual level but also

fed by big business with a vested interest in the status quo. And the post-fact world, with amplifying echo chambers is seemingly accelerating and polarising society, along the lines of the imagined regional rivalry storyline.

Considering the choice of future pathways and the possibility of a dystopian trajectory is made more tangible through an emerging climate fiction (“Cli-Fi”) such as [The End We Start From](#) which imagines a flooded Britain, or [Families Like Ours](#) which depicts encroaching sea levels destroying economies and leading to the pre-emptive evacuation of Denmark; both examples unrealistic scientifically yet apt at exploring the conjunction of normality with the abnormal, a way of comparing the lived today with the intangible tomorrow that offers some hope but also harking back to the fatalism epitomised in *Threads* and in Nevil Shute’s classic “[On the beach](#)” as a cloud of radiation from the nuclear annihilation of the north silently engulfs the south. And the dystopia envisioned creates a future modelled on a more savage past as depicted in [The Walking Dead](#) and [The Last of Us](#) in which it becomes difficult to separate the living and the dead. And the comparative utopia in the present world contrasts the horrors of an imagined dystopian future, or through a common thread interlinking past to future and back again as explored in [Cloud Atlas by David Mitchell](#). Previous attempts at “pocket” utopia through frugal community living seem to hark to the past, lacking the imagination to envision a new future and without the capability to scale up to the societal level which needs to account for equity across diversity. However, these more ascetic visions of utopia could include the sense of euphoria experienced after a period of suffering is overcome and normality returns. This flux I think is essential to the notion of Utopia which cannot exist as a finality but necessitates a journey and constant challenge such that the notion of utopia creates a distinct but more realistic happiness in the present. As well as including a retro-fit utopia to our present society that addresses existing inequalities, this can only get so far and an imagined shift to a new techno utopia requires a shared, community vision and a journey toward something seemingly perfect yet equally unattainable.