Metaphors for Public Discourse

Luke Thorburn

February 2022

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=

metaphors = models

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All ~~models~~ metaphors are wrong, some are useful.

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All ~~models~~ metaphors are wrong, some are useful.

vague
inconsistent
a mess

RUSSIA AS A HURRICANE, CHINA AS CLIMATE CHANGE: DIFFERENT WAYS OF INFORMATION WARFARE

JEAN-BAPTISTE JEANGÈNE VILMER AND PAUL CHARON
JANUARY 21, 2020

COMMENTARY

- Metaphors have variable   coherence / goodness of fit
                                       usefulness
                                       reality ⟷ metaphoricity

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- Criticisms: Is the metaphor **coherent**? Is it **useful**?

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- Criticisms: Is the metaphor **coherent**? Is it **useful**?

- Please interrupt, ask questions, argue back, discuss!

ECONOMIC

discourse = marketplace of ideas
discourse = marketplace of attention
discourse = marketplace of influence

ENVIRONMENTAL

discourse = information ecosystem
discourse = information environment

MARTIAL

discourse = war

SOCIAL

discourse = human relationships

RELIGIOUS

discourse = religion

MATHEMATICAL

discourse = stochastic process

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ECONOMIC

	PRODUCT	PRODUCTION	CONSUMPTION	MONEY
discourse = marketplace of	ideas	advocating	attending	attention
discourse = marketplace of	attention	attending	being attended to	information value
discourse = marketplace of	influence	influencing	purchasing influence	money

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IDIOMS

marketplace of ideas
pay attention
spend time
liar's dividend

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SUB-METAPHORS

truth = luxury good
mainstream media = monopoly
clickbait = false advertising
censorship = product ban
samizdat = contraband

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COMPLICATIONS

The utility of an idea is not truth.
Not perfectly competitive. Externalities.

Ideas are *information goods*, which (Hal Varian)
    1—are *experience goods*,
    2—are usually *public goods*

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🔬 Attending does not require 'skin in the game'.
🔬 Attention is not uniform / standardised. (L. M. Sacasas)

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REGULATION

Antitrust. Pigouvian taxes/subsidies.
Think of engagement as profit. (Jonathan Stray)

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	attention	attending	being attended to	information value

IDIOMS

attention economy
attention mongering
attention philanthropy

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SUB-METAPHORS

truth = reserve currency
bullshit/clickbait = counterfeit money
      see: Gresham's Law
             Cantillion effect
increasing information = inflation
sleep = rival bid

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🔧 Promotes the commodification of attention.

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FLAW

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REGULATION

Bank notes and anti-forgery mechanisms.

Human attention as a commons.
　　—Top-down management.
　　　　Limits, permits, allotments.
　　—Property rights.
　　—Collective action.

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manufacturing consent

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SUB-METAPHORS

advertising = manufacturing
declining trust = negative externality
                          of production

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More real than some, but:

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🔧 Hard to prove the 'influence' worked.

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Pigouvian taxes.

'Degree of personalisation' as an interest rate.

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RELIGIOUS	discourse = religion
MATHEMATICAL	discourse = stochastic process

ENVIRONMENTAL

	AGENTS	ENVIRONMENT
discourse = information ecosystem	ideas	humans
discourse = information environment	humans	ideas

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meme
going viral
infodemic
fit fiction

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SUB-METAPHORS

bad ideas = parasites / viruses
idea development = natural selection
too much info = Malthusianism
policy evasion = antibiotic resistance

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Truth ≠ fitness.
Very slow rate of feedback. (Gwern Branwen)

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　　—Intention / agency.
　　—Implies passive audiences who become 'infected' with information against their will.

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Public Health.
Prebunking as inoculation. (Sander van der Linden)

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IDIOMS

information environment
information space

ENVIRONMENTAL

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SUB-METAPHORS

exposure to ideas = diet / habitat
bad ideas = inhospitable environment
      eg: junk food
            natural disasters
            environmental damage
news addiction = maladaptive
                  behaviour

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What kind of environment?

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🔧 Largely online, which differs significantly from intuitions developed in ancestral environments.
    — cloning
    — teleportation
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Environmental Protection.
Public Health.
Urban Planning.

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IDIOMS

information warfare
contest of ideas

secure in our beliefs
inescapable fact
concede a point
defensible position
shoot down an idea

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SUB-METAPHORS

humans = soldiers
ideas = affiliations
human minds = battlefield
agreeing = being occupied territory
persuasion methods = weapons
debating = martial art
Waldenponding = desertion

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War Metaphors: (Stephen Flusberg et al)
🔬 Reduces agency and dehumanises.
🔬 Establishes an expectation of victory or defeat.
🔧 Can promote political violence.
🔧 Promotes an adversarial mindset.

Emergency Frames: (James Patterson et al)
🔧 Promote exhaustion, anxiety, guilt and fear.
🔧 Empower groups unevenly.
🔧 Help authorities justify extraordinary powers.

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REGULATION

Military campaigns.
Sanctions. Boycotts. Treaties. Ceasefires. Peacekeeping.

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echo chambers = incest
conversation/argument = dance

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RELIGIOUS	discourse = religion ideologies = religions political news = sermon values & ideals = deities long-dead intellectuals = prophets cancellation = lapidation/martyrdom across party lines = interfaith	Largely coherent. 🔧 There is no "secular" option, other than disengagement. 🔧 Less scope for individual laws than there is for individual faith.

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MATHEMATICAL	discourse = stochastic process set of ideas/beliefs = metric space	🔬 Hard to ground. Only show us what *might* happen. (Serita Rosenkrantz)

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What have I missed?

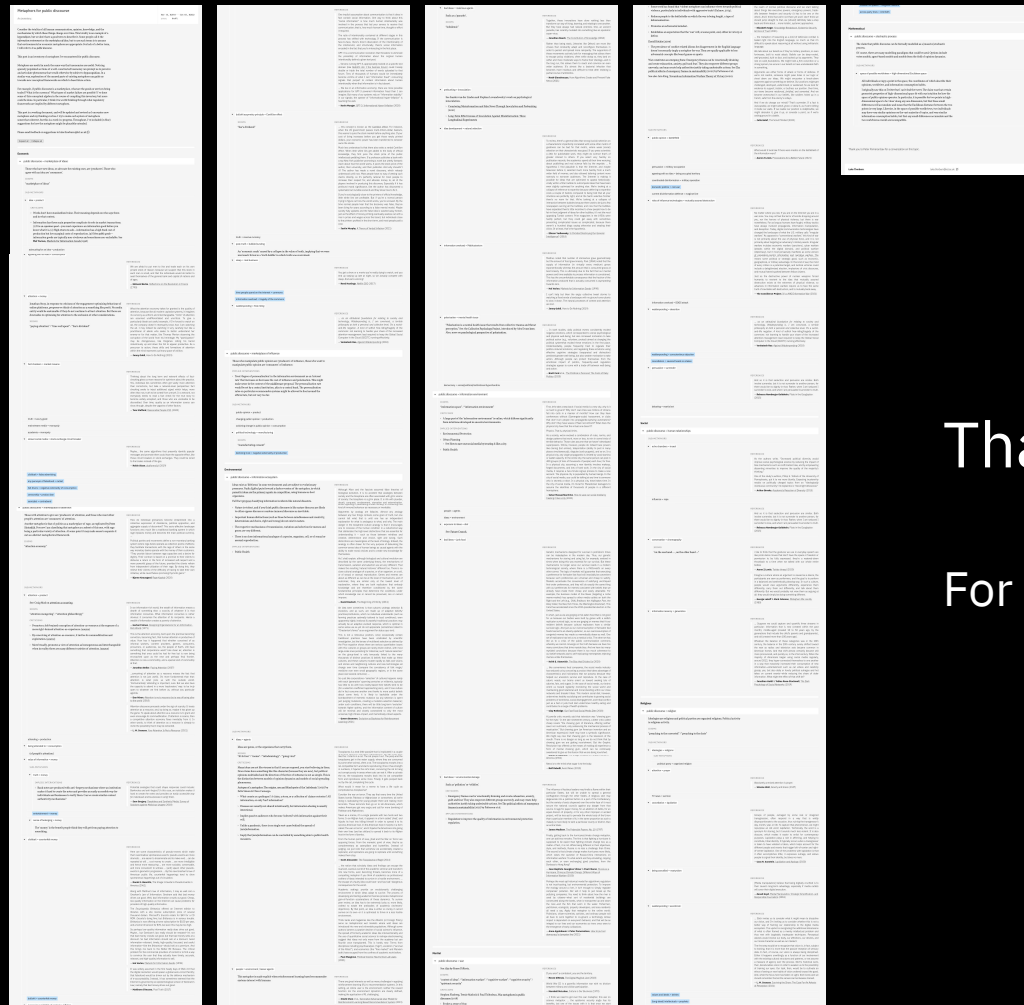halcyonmaps.com/map-of-the-internet-2021/

Takeaways

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  Think of them as models.

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- **Use metaphors as imagination pumps.**

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- **All metaphors are wrong.**
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- **Have to use one?**
  I recommend discourse = information environment

Thanks!

For more: lukethorburn.com/metaphor