THE NEVER ENDING STORY

The Cultural Evolution of Narratives

Part I...
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By

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IT WAS A DARK AND STORMY NIGHT...
No one knows when the first story was told

Who told it

Or what it was
It could have been around a fire

“The nitty-gritty of egalitarianism, food sharing, kinship dues, and land tenure were thus regulated by day… night talk was critical for transmitting the big picture of the workings of marriage, kinship,... exchange, and cosmology”

Weissner (2014)
On the origin of stories

Indirect evidence from stone tools, beads and ochre suggest symbolic expression dates back around 100K years

images from Henshilwood & d’Errico (2011)
On the origin of stories

Australian Dreamtime accounts probably date back 10,000 years
On the origin of stories

The oldest recorded story, the Epic of Gilgamesh, dates from ~5000 years ago
Addiction to Fiction

• Whenever it started, since then we never stopped
• Narratives are a human universal
• No known society lives without stories
Addiction to Fiction

They are consumed around the world as Oral tales
Addiction to Fiction

Music and Drama
Addiction to Fiction

Literature
Addiction to Fiction

Video games
Storytelling (and attending) is automatic and requires very little input

This suggests storytelling is a natural cognitive function: “narrativity”
Narrativity = organising experiences and events into a pattern of meaningful relations – things happen for a reason (usually, goals and motivations of agents)

Narrative aids comprehension and memory, but also excludes and distorts information
Stories Evolve

• We know that narratives evolve

• Shaped by the selection pressures of human minds and societies

• Some stories are products of incredible lineages

Figure from Tehrani (2013)
Cultural Evolution of Narratives

• Cultural evolution proposes – culture evolves in a Darwinian sense
  • Variation
  • Heredity
  • Selection

• Guide through genres of Romance, Soap Opera, Fantasy, Horror, Crime, Conspiracy theories and Fake news

• How they reflect processes of cultural evolution
Cultural Evolution of Narratives

• Each session will consist of a short video lecture like this one
• And an exercise to complete yourself which will give greater insight into research techniques and theories
Cultural Evolution of Narratives

• Show how researchers use techniques to examine and understand these processes
• What can we learn about the evolution of stories?
• What does their evolution tell us about us?
To be continued...