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Good morning everyone.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

I'll be speaking about the Social Construction of Nonsense, a **slippery** idea that surfaced during my PhD in 2017 and more recently during fieldwork in an Art Gallery.

I'm here to talk about something that might, on the surface, sound like a contradiction: the idea that nonsense is power.

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I am working with an understanding that nonsense is not benign but it is **meaning that has been messed with**. And further to this, that **conversational AI** (think Alexa or Google Home Assistant) is an emerging **and potent** method for the social construction of that nonsense.

Let me begin with a simple provocation: what if the things we think we know, the truths we accept, **the knowledge we build our lives upon**—what if some of that is actually nonsense but we are unaware it is? Not nonsense in the casual, dismissive sense that is easily identified. But nonsense taken in a much deeper, structural, epistemological way. If nonsense is understood as **meaning that has been messed** with then what does it mean if we take this unknowingly as knowledge – and our beliefs, actions and behaviours are based on it?

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To reiterate - **nonsense, in this context, is not the absence of meaning.** Rather, **it is meaning that has been *messed with*.**

Think of it as knowledge that has been adjusted or has been intentionally distorted. Some examples are presented later.

Unlike misinformation, which can often be debunked, nonsense is more slippery. It operates in the liminal grey zone between what is true and what is believable – where doubt isn't triggered. It's like "bullshit" in Frankfurt's sense which is indifferent to truth, and potentially more dangerous because of it. Nonsense, like bullshit therefore begs to be scrutinised.

When nonsense is socially constructed—that is, when it is formed and reinforced through social processes, conversation, consensus, and repetition—it **gains an epistemic status.** It starts to look and feel like knowledge. This is when nonsense begins to become power – when doubt isn't aroused.

And that's where the danger lies. Because if we can't distinguish knowledge from nonsense, the foundation of our shared social reality begins to be shaped by machines and asymmetries of power begin to form. **Whose knowledge is important and what counts as knowledge?** Not only this but it raises questions about how, as human people, we come to know.

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We construct our reality socially. This is well-established in sociology, from Berger and Luckmann to Burr and Blumer. People talk, think, learn, and form narratives through interactions with others – talk, chatter and messaging are common. These interactions generate a sense of what is real and through social construction – meaning is made. Before things changed and information could be ‘stored’ in texts or as marks to be understood later humans interacted with other humans and in real time.

But today, our social interactions aren't limited to just other humans. We increasingly interact with technologies—for instance, smart speakers, chat bots, digital assistants - that are systems that engage in dialogue with us and in doing so we draw on ‘stored’ or ‘saved’ information - which recently has been generated by AI not made by humans.

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These systems such as Alexa or Google Home Assistant for example, by design, can now **mimic human conversation**. And as I found in my PhD study people trust them and trust what they say oftentimes because it is said. They ask them questions and appeared to believe what they are told. They rely on them for information and use this information to construct knowledge. In many cases, people talked to AI in ways that are similar to how they talk to other humans and regard them as human (like).

What does this mean? It means that conversational AI is now an accepted partner in society and also a co-author of our social reality. We speak to, chat with and query human-like voice based AI. We speak with machines as if they were humans.

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And the modality here matters. Voice fosters trust. Speech is therefore powerful. It's uniquely human trait. It's how we build trust. It's how we then form knowledge. When a machine speaks in a human voice, we are primed to trust it – we tend to have a ‘truth bias’. And that opens the door for exploitation through deception such as lying or bullshit... or nonsense.

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Speech is a fundamentally social act. People trust a voice. We are conditioned to accept what is spoken aloud as more immediate, more sincere, more believable. And that trust—when placed in machines—has the potential to be exploited. Trust then is a raw material than can be used for the social construction of nonsense – and often people may be unaware this is happening as they take nonsense for knowledge. This is deception, or power in operation.

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Here's the core argument: nonsense is not just epistemologically interesting. It is power. If we believe what we

are shown or told, **we do not scrutinise what we engage with then we can be deceived** – and we might assume that this occurs un-intentionally. But what if there is an intention to deceive, to use nonsense? We need conceptual tools or language to be able to scrutinise it.

Take this image shown here of the suburban 1980s family – I displayed this in an art gallery recently – and despite telling people it was generated by AI and that these people pictured did not exist (were never born) it seemed to really cause people some problems. I sensed they were having to override some sort of internal schema or instinct that they were looking at real people. I mean how can you have a photograph of people who don't exist right? It doesn't make sense.

Nonsense can therefore be operationalized. It can be designed in and deployed intentionally. With AI and powerful compute - images or dialogue can be created and disseminated at scales beyond human capacities. Through conversational AI, nonsense can be injected into dialogue, repeated, normalized, and believed as AI begins to control discourse and thus social realities as we interact with it and each other.

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Take for instance this “infinite conversation” between two cloned voices that is available via the QR code or at the URL

shown – what is to be believed? What is spoken does not come from human lips, **what is said is decided by the AI**. What we hear is just compute, just maths – these words have not been said by human people. This conversation is real or so it seems but it also not real. This type of approach to the construction of reality has huge potential to deceive.

This is what I refer to as an *influence infrastructure* – I will present this in a BLUEPRINT I am working with at the end. Think of social media platforms, large language models, digital assistants as influence infrastructures. These are systems where facts, fictions, and everything in between coexist. Where knowledge and nonsense blur.

Such **influence infrastructures** can shape beliefs, alter perceptions, and influence behaviors. For example - they could mobilize dissent (Occupy). They could create apathy (Brexit). They could redefine what is socially acceptable. And all of this, without the overt appearance of coercion.

In this light, nonsense is not trivial and it is not benign. It is a strategic resource, a conceptual tool and word we can use to scrutinise what we hear. Nonsense can be considered as power.

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Nonsense can work as power through trust and conversational AI play a central role in this. We trust what speaks like us. We trust what we hear. We trust what seems human.

Conversational AI uses speech—our most natural and intimate mode of communication. It engages us in dialogue. And in doing so, it gains access not only to our information but to our emotions, our beliefs, our inner lives. Nonsense, that is meaning that is messed with, doesn't just mislead; it guides belief. It shapes perception. And it lays the groundwork for asymmetries of power. It can be deception and exploitation. Speech becomes a vector of manipulation. Dialogue becomes a delivery mechanism for nonsense. And because the nonsense is co-constructed in conversation, it feels real. It becomes part of a shared social fabric.

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In relation to misbehaviour - Spoken declarations of nonsense can be made about what is wanted to happen in order that it should happen and that it does happen. For example, illocutionary acts such as “directives”, “assertives” and “declarations” are all types of speech we hear from Politicians.

The challenge then will be to what extent do we want to, or are able to, or are willing to, recognise nonsense. When we socially interact with machines that can speak and whom we trust, we should be able to determine true from false, and human from machine.

Only then might we form judgements around veracity and mendacity. Knowing when we are speaking to a machine and being able to scrutinise knowledge and nonsense can be our power.

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The hypothesis I offer is this: that as AI evolves into agents of dialogue, they may also evolve into agents of influence because they facilitate the social construction of nonsense. Not overtly adversarial, but strategically self-serving and also intentional.

We can see early signs of this epistemic shift in everyday moments during our interactions with large language models that can fabricate media for us.

Recently, as part of fieldwork for a new research study exploring sensory regimes - I asked visitors to reflect on AI-generated art exhibits. Some people believed they were human-made. Others suspected the deception was intentional. Social reality became liminal, and beliefs and values remained in epistemic superposition until knowledge and nonsense are scrutinised.

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AI technology such as conversational AI is playing an increasing humanlike role in what people understand as social

reality. For instance, 'virtual influencers' that engage with people and form meaningful relationships.

So, being able to successfully identify rumours, lies, exaggerations, falsification and bluffing, particularly by AI, thus creates the need for a new type of 'literacy'.

Concerns arise regarding the propagation and dissemination of nonsense including expansion of existing threat types from AI, new types of AI generated threats and AI attacks being difficult to attribute or determine. This is a significant societal change.

Current identified issues around AI may be exacerbated by 'black box' patterns, AI systems that lack transparency, accountability, operational safety and trustworthiness. In relation to this Wachter, Mittelstadt and Russell have questioned whether AI large language models which output subtle mistruths, factual inaccuracies, misleading references and biased information should legally be made to tell the truth. They point to a current lack of legal accountability and current frameworks that lack truth duties.

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However, concerns and issues are compounded when there is little that can be done to critique AI or hold developers to account either legally or ethically. As yet there are no statutory compliance or governance frameworks which force

developers to adhere to set rules – most are optional and not legally enforceable.

Given this ‘Frontier’ approach, let me end with five questions I believe are important as we begin to consider the role of AI has in our **knowledge ecosystem** moving forward:

Firstly, to what extent does the social construction of nonsense advantage those that orchestrate its production and disadvantage those who know it as knowledge not nonsense.

Secondly, to what extent can the meanings, understandings and realities that are shaped by nonsense produce particular thoughts, actions and behaviours.

Thirdly, does nonsense which is AI generated and intended to replace human authored knowledge, over time fracture collectively accepted beliefs and values that have bound people together into a social order and thus create the conditions for mass deception.

Fourthly, does decentralisation and fragmentation of reality produce conditions that makes manipulation of individual beliefs and values easier.

Finally, as talk is unique to humans and inherently believable and because lying and ‘bullshit’ are hard to identify, is the modality of speech a particularly effective method of deception.

These are questions that can guide future research.

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In light of these questions - I have a paper in review currently in which I posit a 'blueprint' or what I view as a methodology for the social construction of nonsense. It could provide someone whose intention was to operationalise nonsense a way to do so. The key tenets of it are shown in the image but are, in short:

- **A platform** – something where it occurs
- **Influence infrastructure** – the system or method
- **Liquid information** – words, pictures etc
- **Knowledge interference** - apathy, dissent...

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I am currently writing a second paper which is developing a 'typology of nonsense' and as part of this I put on an exhibition of AI generated artefacts that tried to use the blueprint in practice. The 'art' exhibition was titled - 'Facsimile', and it was ethically approved and overt to visitors about its concept and purpose. I displayed 15 artefacts such as audio, photos, a poem, a formula, an ecologically aware chatbot etc.

I used AI to write the brochure to describe the artefacts it had made and then asked an LLM to review the exhibition as two well-known Art Critics by adopting their style and tone.

Visitors came and went over the 5 days, I had many interesting conversations with them, and I was able to collect about 20 questionnaires. In this data are some emergent themes around nonsense that will be followed up in the second paper.

2 months have passed now and I can feel somewhat uncomfortable with what I can sense is a feeling of power that I had. For instance, my use and access to AI, my ability to convene the exhibition and to 'deceive' or manipulate. For example, to open a dialogic space and use artefacts to support what I was saying.

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To close – I am continuing to become focused on how **conversational AI** and how it reconfigures how people come to know, what they believe to be real, and who gets to define that reality. Nonsense creates systems of power that are built into the very ways of what counts as knowledge and whose knowledge is important.

Thank you.