

[00:01:11]

**MARTIN DEGE:**

Hello and welcome everyone to this talk. People are still coming in, but I think it's at the hour so let's get started. I hope that you can hear me. This is our second keynote of the day here virtually in Paris at the American University. And it's my pleasure and honor to introduce to you, Mollie Andrews, our second keynote speaker.

[00:01:45]

Mollie Andrews is professor of political psychology and also the coordinator of the Center of Narrative Research at the University of East London. She's currently, though, a visiting professor at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies at the University of Helsinki, Mollie is the author of several papers and books, one among them which I mean, they're all very much recommended for reading, but I recommend this one in particular is *Shaping History: Narratives of Political Change*, which also received the Outstanding Book Award of the American Education Research Association.

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And yeah, so I know Molly for a long time. I've been one of her students, and so I'm very excited to have her here at our conference, and I would like to give her the floor. Molly, if you want to come on.

[00:02:47]

**MOLLY ANDREWS:**

Okay.

[00:02:48]

**MARTIN DEGE:**

There you are.

[00:02:50]

**MOLLY ANDREWS:**

Hello, everyone. And thank you very much, Martin, for inviting me and introducing me and I really look forward to this discussion. I want to say to the audience that in fact, I had originally pre-recorded this talk, but then I realized that I really need to know there is actually an audience there live. I need my audience. So I'm going to just be speaking to these slides and I look forward to our discussion afterwards. So let's start then.

[00:03:42]

Okay the title of my talk, as you can see, is the COVID-19 pandemic and the failure of narrative imagination. I'm going to take off these headphones for a moment. Okay, so hopefully that is okay. The talk that I'm going to give, actually, is based on a framework that I laid out in my book, *Narrative Imagination and Everyday Life*. And I'm going to be looking at how that framework, which I set out there, relates to our current moment of crisis.

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So what is wrong there? Okay. So in this book, Narrative Imagination in Everyday Life, I argued that bringing narrative and imagination together actually brings three aspects of analysis really into focus. And the first is the dynamic nature of the temporal, the second is the mediation between the real, the not real, and what Sartre calls the not yet real. And the third is the complexity of the construction of the other.

[00:05:04]

And I'm going to be talking about each of these in turn in relation to the crisis. Okay, so the first is the dynamic nature of the temporal, or what I call time traveling. This points us to the fluidity of time, how, in fact we don't really live by clock time. We live by visiting and revisiting past moments in light of the present. We rethink the future in light of things which are currently happening or not happening. And so, we revisit the past in light of what we currently know. We reimagine our present lives and we, in fact, then look to create new futures. Sometimes, we tend to create hope, but also very much feared futures. So let's look at how those map out in the current moment.

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First, the question of revisiting the past. Here, there's been a lot of reimagining the present in terms of what if we had known something earlier, if we had known something earlier as individuals, but also as members of a community or indeed as citizens of a country. What if we, what if what we know now, if we had known it then could go back and do things differently? This demands that we reimagine the present really as only one of many possibilities, the one which happened to come true.

But was there a moment in time when other roads forward seemed possible? And in the current moment, part of this is also a revisiting of past pandemics, past stories that we felt were long ago and far away and certainly had nothing to do with us.

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We all of a sudden realize are not quite as past as we might have thought. In fact, we come to learn, many of us, that the pandemics have happened throughout the ages.

You'll see here, I didn't even include the Spanish flu, which is the one that people are talking about all the time now. Sharing is paused. No, I hope that's not paused. Anyway, hold on a second. Am I getting a message from you? Sorry about this.

[00:07:54]

**MARTIN DEGE:**

Hey Molly, we only see your first slide so far.

[00:07:57]

**MOLLY:**

No.

[00:07:59]

**MARTIN DEGE:**

Yes, I think you have to either maybe you turn off the screen sharing and turn it on again. Maybe that will help.

[00:08:06]

**MOLLY ANDREWS:**

Oh, no!

[00:08:08]

**MARTIN DEGE:**

I'm so sorry about this.

[00:08:10]

**MOLLY ANDREWS:**

So I have, I can't believe that. Okay. So what did you say? Turn off screen sharing?

[00:08:14]

**MARTIN DEGE:**

Turn it off and turn it on again. I recommend.

[00:08:18]

**MOLLY ANDREWS:**

Okay. So I'm so sorry about that.

[00:08:21]

**MARTIN DEGE:**

All is good.

[00:08:23]

**MOLLY ANDREWS:**

All my beautiful PowerPoint slides.

[00:08:25]

**MARTIN DEGE:**

Yeah. We want to see them all. Okay. That looks much better. Yes. That's it. That's what we want to see. But you have to show us the other slides first.

[00:08:32]

**MOLLY ANDREWS:**

Yeah. Okay. So what I'm going to do, actually, I'm going to keep on these headphones because otherwise I can't, I'll just forget it.

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Okay. So that was quite a start. Okay. So as I said these are the three aspects that are called in to view the dynamic nature of the temporal, the mediation between real, not real and the not yet real. And the complexity of the construction of the other. And this was what I was just saying about the time traveling.

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And we're now in the first of these three, this revisiting the past. And as I say, there's been a sort of revisiting of our knowledge of past pandemics. And in fact, there's almost incessant reporting on the Spanish flu of 1918, but indeed there's many others. And we know that pandemics bring with them great changes of all kinds and have done throughout our history.

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Well, what about our present lives? There's a rupture in our everyday lives. Things that we have come to think were every day just going to the office or being at a party or being in a social situation, going to protest, going food shopping.

What was once every day is no longer every day. And we experience this as a crisis, not only of our society, but indeed many of us as a personal kind of crisis, an identity crisis, if we don't do those things which we had thought really defined us, then who are we?

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And there's a sense of discontinuity where we are not living the imagined future that we thought we were moving towards. In fact, we are in a very different kind of future than we had ever really thought was possible for ourselves.

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So there is a-- this is both in our private lives, but also in the cities that we live in and in the states and the countries in which we live and we've seen all of us have seen these incredible moving pictures of cities from the around the world either cities that we've been in or hope one day to visit and we see they are still, they are very still, and when they're not still right now that makes us nervous.

Are they not still enough? So a very different everyday life and it even affects the Rolling Stones. You can't always get what you want.

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I don't know if any of you saw that the concert, which their participation in the concert organized by Lady Gaga, but this was really a really moving moment, I thought and their choice of song was quite wonderful. So, yes, our experience of the current moment is, our new every day is very altered.

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In terms of the temporal, it also brings new hopes for and feared futures. So we ask ourselves, who am I in this new present in relation to who I'd like to be? Rebecca Solnit refers to finding another version of who we are, equipping ourselves for an unanticipated world. We also have to look forward and think, "Well, who is the self that I will want to look back on? How will I want to feel that I acted in this pandemic in this moment? Was I the person that I would have liked to be?"

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And we see in front of us both a world of new possibilities and of impossibilities. For instance, when will any of us ever be in a scene like this again, at a festival, or indeed at a protest, or any kind of public gathering? On the other hand, we know that some of the changes are very good for the climate. Will we be able to sustain them? We don't know.

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The second axis that comes into view when looking at the relationship between narrative and imagination is this mediation between the real, the not real, and the not yet real. And I want to look at these in terms of the pandemic. First, the real. What is the real? Today's news is that we actually, we have more than 5 million cases of the coronavirus.

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More than 300,000 deaths. Yesterday, saw the biggest global daily increase. There's no vaccine. There's a shortage of testing, a shortage of PPE. They're skyrocketing unemployment in the United States. It's said that the unemployment is equal only to that of the time of the Great Depression. And indeed, the United States, with 5% of the world's population, has 33% of the cases of the virus.

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One of its citizens dying every 49 seconds. In fact, it's more than that now, but that was when I made that slide. I'm going to use the United States as my primary example here. One, because it's a very dramatic case, but also because it is the country of my birth. The real also has other aspects to it as Rebecca Solnit has commented, "The impossible has already happened. We've seen an extending of workers rights and benefits, the early release of prisoners, sheltering the homeless. Portugal has extended temporary citizenship for migrants and asylum seekers."

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So some things that we've always been told we could not do, in fact, we've already seen this crisis has produced. But obviously it's not all good news, not at all. People have described this moment as a gift for totalitarian governments. The pandemic has disrupted civil society, compromised our ability to gather and advocate while the world sees increasing authoritarianism, xenophobia, rising rates of police brutality, domestic violence, and other social ills.

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I heard recently that Zimbabwe had passed a law that prohibited the gathering of more than two people in public spaces. And for those people who were seen to undermine the efforts of the government to contain the virus, they would be subject to 20 years of imprisonment. So it's quite a frightening time.

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And we see a quite dangerous threatening to human rights around the world. And if you don't know this particular website, the Civic Freedom Tracker, it makes for very sobering reading. This is also the current moment, the current real. What about the not real? We have in front of us a number of alternate realities as laid out by the President of the United States, Donald Trump.

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He alternately has described coronavirus as a hoax. A political conspiracy. He tells us it's contained. It's unique in history. It's no worse than the seasonal flu. He's told us for some time that we have sufficient PPE and tests for all. And indeed, a number of his followers also articulate those viewpoints.

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You can see from the image on the right there. This tweet from a young man who says, "All the people who are placing themselves under self-quarantine are posers looking for cheap headlines. Stop being a baby. Go to the gym.

Obesity is the real pandemic." Okay, we see here also what John Back has called a resistance to knowing. People fearing a truth so much that it is the implications of what is real are too much for them to take on. And so, they act as if it is not real. This leads to a magical thinking, wishing the virus away. If we act as if it's not true, it will disappear.

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We see a lot of this in the claims made by Donald Trump and I'm going to just look at these briefly, the first, January 22nd, he tells us, "We have it totally under control. It's one person coming in from China, we have it under control, it's going to be just fine." A month later, "We're going to be pretty soon at only five people. We could be at just one or two over the next short period of time. So we've had really good luck." The next day, "It's going to disappear one day. It's like a miracle.

It will disappear." Yeah, that really would have been a miracle. "I just think this is something that you can never really think is going to happen. It's an unforeseen problem." "What a problem, came out of nowhere."

He continued this line in other days, calling the virus that blind-- saying that it had blindsided the world. He also says, "I would view it as something that just surprised the whole world. There's never been anything like this in history. There's never been, and nobody's ever seen anything like this."

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That's not really true, actually. Let's look at some of the facts here. In 2018, Trump disbanded the National Security Council's pandemic response team. Ironically, he did so the day before they were acknowledging the 100th anniversary of the Spanish Civil War.

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Luciana Borio, the Director for Medical and Biodefense Preparedness said at the time, “The threat of the pandemic flu is the number one health security concern. It is not a matter of if, but rather of when we will face it.” From January to August of 2019, there was a simulation exercise by the Department of Health and Human Services, which was called Crimson Contagion.

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The report of the simulation exercise was delivered to the president in October, and this described the federal government as, quote, “underfunded, underprepared, uncoordinated for a life-or-death battle with a virus for which no treatment existed.”

In the end of November, as Americans were celebrating Thanksgiving in our homes, the White House was made aware of the contagion in China's Wuhan region by the National Center for Medical Intelligence.

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He received a report based on wire and computer intercepts coupled with satellite images. And analysts told the White House at the time that this could be a cataclysmic event. Between early January and February, the White House received a dozen intelligence briefings warning of the threat of a pandemic.

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And by February the 27th, the Senate Intelligence Committee was told that the virus is probably more akin to the 1918 pandemic. So really not such a surprise, but for Trump, these things really just aren't true.

We see really quite dramatic examples of this magical thinking. So his own assessment is that the U. S. response has been a, quote, “a great success story.” When asked how would he rate the response, he said, “I'd rate it at a 10.” On May the 1st, “we've done a great job.”

May the 5th, “we're opening up our country again, and this is what we're doing. I'll tell you, the whole world is excited watching us because we're leading the world.”

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We are leading the world, but not in ways that other countries would like to emulate. On May the 6th, “For those people that have lost somebody, nothing can ever happen that's going to replace that, but from an economic standpoint, purely an economic standpoint, I think next year is potentially going to be one of the best years we've ever had.”

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There aren't a lot of other economists that have that viewpoint. Then on May the 11th, he says, “All throughout the country, the numbers are coming down rapidly.” Sadly, that's not true. At the very time he was making that proclamation, we were receiving the predictions of the forecast of deaths to come in the summer months. The numbers aren't coming down rapidly.

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And then for the not yet real, what could happen? This causes us to look at possible and probable futures. And this is both as individuals and as citizens of countries. Countries are seen in relation to each other when they had their first outbreak of the virus.

Country X is two weeks behind Y and from this weekend to do certain things unless particular actions are taken. So this has provided some countries who develop the virus later a look into the future to see what's coming around the bend. But as I say, different possible futures are constructed depending on actions which are taken or not taken.

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And for instance, in today's news, we see in the United Kingdom, the announcement that the UK is running out of time on track and trace. If we don't do this now, it will no longer be a possibility and the consequences will be dramatic, explosive.

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The third component then is the narrative imagination and reconstructing the other. There's been a longstanding challenge for many in the Northern Hemisphere to see ourselves as the vulnerable other. Yes, we know that pandemics happen, but we have never really regarded them as our own. We had SARS, we have Ebola but that didn't really affect us.

Those were someone else's story, not ours. For many, they describe the pandemic as unimaginable, but we know that there are whole populations for whom this is not unimaginable at all. In fact, they've had this drill before.

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So we are asked to actually reconnect with this idea of who are these others. And in this group we also identify ourselves the other who we once were before life changed. The pandemic has brought into view this the global interconnectedness, which does not respect borders. We know that we are only as healthy as the sickest amongst us.

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And we also know that this challenge to reconstruct the other is not only a spatial challenge, but also a historical one. As I already said earlier, we've regarded, we have come to regard this moment in history as one in which many of us thought that pandemics could never happen to us. But all of a sudden, we see that we are these vulnerable others both making connections with earlier pandemics, but also sometimes failing to appreciate how different pandemics really are from each other.

As Adam Kucharski has written in his book that's just come out, *The Rules of Contagion*, he says, "If you've seen one pandemic, you've seen one pandemic." So to what extent do we actually recognize ourselves in others? And to what extent is this comparison also limited and problematic?

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We've heard a lot about the people say that the pandemic has showed that we are all in this together, but we also know very well that we are not equally all in this together.

The fact that Prince Charles and Boris Johnson had the virus notwithstanding, we know that the virus has disproportionately affected marginalized sectors of the population, and indeed that many people have experienced heartbreak like this in the past.

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As Chakraborty writes in The Guardian about his mother fleeing East Bengal, he says, “They were plunged close to poverty and then saw their family land in East Bengal disappear after partition.

Even now, as our world is turned upside down, it's worth remembering that some among us have lived through far worse.”

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So now the challenge before us is that of reimagining a new future. We are at a crossroads of change. The study of previous pandemics shows us that like it or not, change does come.

The question is, what will that change look like? As Rebecca Solnit has written, “One of our main tasks now is to understand this moment, what it might require of us, what it might make possible.

There's no going back to normal and nor should we say, do we want to go back to many aspects of the old normal? The future will not, in crucial ways, be anything like the past.”

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So what is it that we want it to look like? The hope for the future depends, I think, upon a rethinking of our past. What is it that has led us to this current moment? I want to close with an extract by Rebecca Solnit.

Where she says, “This storm clears, when this storm clears, we may, as do people who have survived a serious illness or accident, see where we were and where we should go in a new light.

We may feel free to pursue change in ways that seemed impossible while the ice of the status quo was locked up. We may have a profoundly different sense of ourselves, our communities, our systems of production and our future.” I hope so. And that's it. Thank you very much.

[00:28:49]

**MARTIN DEGE:**

Thank you, Molly. Thank you so much for a very stimulating talk. I can, I would like to invite everyone to use the Q& A feature to post your questions. For the ones among you who've done that before, you know how to use it.

If this is your first time in a Zoom webinar, if you go to the bottom of your screen, you'll get a menu bar where you have a little tool that says Q&A. You can simply open it up and post your questions in there and we will do our best to answer them here.

[00:28:28]

Molly, I take the privilege to ask the first question.

[00:29:34]

**MOLLY ANDREWS:**

Why not?

[00:29:37]

**MARTIN DEGE:**

Thank you for a stimulating talk. I like the way in which you quote Sartre here and bring in the real, the not real, the not yet real. I'm wondering if I look at what's going on right now, how do we know what's going on right now? Because it's going on right now in many ways, and the story is not told. And this is maybe also what produces so much uncertainty as to how we continue. Yet at the same time, and this has been part and partial of your talk, I think also there is already a story.

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We already have a story of a pandemic. We actually have it under control, weirdly. We don't, but yes, we do. We have this narrative of, okay this is how we're going to organize the public realm now. Everyone stays at home. We wait for two weeks because we have somehow figured out two weeks is what we have to wait. And then we somehow start public life again. We maybe wear a mask, maybe not. We don't really know whether this is what we should do, but still we do it and somehow it's going to work out. In other words, what I'm trying to say is, we have a kind of finished narrative that already includes that which is real, where we are right now.