‘Fictional intelligence’ can blind us to real-world dangers

TECHNOLOGY

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Science fiction writers are often credited with predictive powers. On some subjects, their ability to foresee the future is deserved: on submarines, the internet, mobile phones and driverless cars, for example. On others, they have been mostly wrong (or maybe just too early). Last time I checked, we do not have teleportation or ubiquitous flying cars, still less have we been drawn into existential battles with runaway robots or extraterrestrial aliens. Some may call this premature extrapolation.

But faced with the tech future arriving on fast-forward, policymakers and strategists have increasingly been resorting to science fiction writers to help them imagine what is accelerating towards us. The latest example is Britain’s Ministry of Defence, which commissioned PW Singer and August Cole to write eight short stories about future warfare. The US, Canadian, Australian and French militaries have also conducted similar literary exercises, creating a demand for “fictional intelligence”.

In an introduction to the defence ministry’s collection, published last week, Dame Angela McLean, its chief scientific adviser, argued for the value of science fiction writers. “Defence needs to harness the creativity and vision of this sector to further stimulate foresight and innovation,” she wrote. The stories are certainly a sparkier read than the UK’s official integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy, written in antiseptic Whitehall-ese.

Stories From Tomorrow covers familiar sci-fi territory. Much is made of the development of “edge” computing, enabling sensor-stuffed autonomous convoys to scour and sniff hostile terrain and resupply forward bases. Technologically enhanced high-performance soldiers, known as “perfs”, read instructions off their contact lenses, respond to haptic pulses in their body suits and activate pain buffers when in trouble. Autonomous kamikaze terrorist drones buzz through the skies of London, killing more than 300 people.

But to my mind, the most interesting stories focus on quantum computing and the geopolitical upheavals caused by climate change. There is a chilling account of what happens when a British military unit is attacked by a technologically superior enemy, deploying the power of quantum computing. This breakthrough cracks all the British forces’ electronic communications and gives the enemy “an edge unlike any before seen in history”. The consequences are certainly worth thinking about.

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Others in the collection explore the scramble for control over energy resources. A mercenary force, funded by an oil firm, intervenes in a Nigerian civil war to sustain fossil fuel production. The Chinese back a coup in Indonesia to secure the supply of rare earth minerals. Such are likely to be the “green wars” of the future.

The stories are certainly creative and provocative, but are open to two challenges. The first, best articulated by the late Ursula Le Guin, is that science fiction is descriptive more than predictive. Science fiction writers construct literary “lies” that simply reflect the dreams, fears and experiences of their own times. “All they can tell you is what they have seen and heard, in their time in this world, a third of it spent in sleep and dreaming, another third of it spent telling lies,” she wrote in the introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

The second challenge is that by focusing on remote future scenarios we distract ourselves from the more pressing, and often overlooked, threats of today. The risk of a nuclear confrontation between Russia and the US triggered by the recapture of Crimea by Ukrainian forces is surely one. The present-day havoc caused by climate change in vulnerable parts of the world is another.

In a telephone interview, Singer, one of the authors, partly rejected the first but mostly acknowledged the second charge. Both writers, he told me, spent a lot of time immersing themselves in British military history and talking with serving officers. Their “useful fiction”, as they market it, is really a sub-genre of science fiction, camouflaging informed analysis in narrative form designed to pack an emotional punch. “Stories are the oldest technologies of all,” he says.

But Singer accepts that many military failures, such as the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 and the terrorist attacks on the US in 2001, were predictable, but largely ignored due to a lack of attention. Far from being unimaginable “black swan” events, these were big, obvious and ugly “grey rhino” events. The future does not always have to be imagined in colourful prose. Sometimes, it is staring us in the face.

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