

What is the relation between charisma and information? How fast can a well-turned phrase move? How does it age? In this issue of *The Distance Plan* we consider how, occasionally, facts or argumentative claims float free from their point of origin to become hyper-portable and cross-disciplinary. We call these memorable, animated phrases “charismatic facts” and suggest they can be found at the intersection of flair and research, savvy and data, linguistic craft and political utility. Though charismatic facts may remain lightly tethered to, and therefore validated by, their authorial or institutional home, they are at the same time unordinary in that they are used freely by a range of speakers, from scientists and activists to TV anchors, politicians, and family members at dinner.

Adaptive to a range of narrative maneuvers, such as comparison and analogy, a charismatic fact can be used to present new or under-disseminated knowledge in a more versatile format. A charismatic fact may draw on cultural particularities to illuminate broader political trends, for example: “1965 was the year in which the French fashion industry for the first time produced more trousers than skirts.”¹ A charismatic fact might also lean on rhetorical strategies such as relativity or orders of magnitude: “In China alone, more cement was used in the three years from 2008 to 2010 than in the entire twentieth century in the United States.”²

Charisma has a dubious history, associated with lending a shimmer of power or unearned appeal to persons and objects. We did not ask our contributors in this issue to limit themselves to current discussions about fake news or the aporia of adjudicating truth on social media. Rather, we asked them to consider the nature of charismatic facts, what they might be, what narratives they might make or unmake. In a time of overwhelming scientific consensus and huge amounts of academic writing devoted to climate change and the Anthropocene, it has nonetheless proved remarkably difficult to marry climate science with charismatic speech. The political will to act remains siloed and fragmented. We wondered if these movable facts might be resilient to distortion. Thought in another way: how and how far can language travel without stripping itself of meaning?

But, the concept of charismatic facts also faces a curatorial problem. How does one pick portable facts out of a global tragedy? Scientists and activists, let alone those who have experienced the violent effects of climate change, could reasonably reject such a strategy as vulgar, distasteful, and small. A tragedy of such scale and complexity should not be addressed with an unethical appetite for clickbait journalism and meme-able quotability. And so, we left charismatic facts open to rejection. In his book *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh points out that contemporary literature has so far failed to seriously take up the challenge of global climate change. In this issue, we consider why writers have been reluctant to translate global climate change into narrative, and if Ghosh is right to say that posterity will judge our literary moment as a period of great delusion and denial.

1 Jonathan Freedland, ‘The Age of Hobsbawm,’ book review, *The New York Times*, 5 September 2014.

2 Vaclav Smil, *Making the Modern World: Materials and Dematerialization* (Chichester: Wiley, 2014), 16.

Long associated with unwelcome prophesy, poets have unsurprisingly been more willing to take on the simultaneously un-gainly and tragic topic of environmental destruction. In her poem, Rae Armantrout writes, “It’s true things fall apart./Still, by thinking/we heat ourselves up.” This issue of *The Distance Plan* pairs narrative and poetic voices, so that intellectual thought can be warmed by the heat of feeling, the critical by the poetic. When presented with the concept of charismatic facts, some poets focused on fact, others on the vatic quality of language. It has been said of the Trump era that civil society will bear down on language to an extraordinary degree. In poetry, language is allowed to be direct and incantatory as when the collaborative, crowd-sourced poem *Executive Orders* decrees that we should “put all the diamonds back in the ground.”

Advocates for an immediate and decisive response to the environmental situation find themselves in a peculiar situation: in Washington DC anthropogenic climate change is still considered under debate – more than half the members of the US House of Representatives declare themselves skeptical about the human causes of climate change⁴ – while the US public is already experiencing what paleoecologist Jacquelyn Gill has called “empathy saturation” for victims of environmental disaster.

In their paired texts, father and son Gabriel and Boaz Levin reflect on the Palestine-Israeli conflict and the difficulty of building narratives around political and human rights tragedies that unfold over decades. How do writers remain vigilant witnesses and how do artists remain sensitised observers? The challenge “for any artist with a realist bent set to grapple with the political everyday,” says Boaz Levin, is to “come to terms with the brutality of fact.” Or, as Gabriel Levin observes, “our lives/brim over with the commonplace: clods loosened/where the pitchfork lies by the wall, nosy bees/ in the rosemary, and hey, wouldn’t it all be just/fine if not for the new breed of mosquitos/bloodletting at low altitudes? I flap the covers . . . What else awaits the avid/reader this morning? The Brutality of Fact.”

This issue offers the idea of charismatic fact as provocation rather than fixed concept, as something prompting further thought and welcoming opposition. Our contributors gesture towards the potential instrumentality – as well as liability – of charismatic facts in the public discussion of climate change. In their crystalline portability and ready-to-handedness, do charismatic facts offer frustrated climate scientists a discursive strategy for making their arguments not just heard, but repeated, and circulated, even while retaining their core meaning? Can the ‘stickiness’, the ear-worminess, the dynamism of a charismatic fact be put to work in aid of a more informed, participatory discussion? Rather than fear-driven sound bites that bring paralysis to our confrontation with the gravity of contemporary climate science, we ask whether that charismatic facts, as information in motion, may collectively pull us forward into new and urgently needed discussion.

4 Sarah Emerson, ‘A Guide to the Climate Change Deniers in Congress: How many are representing your state?’, *Motherboard, Vice*, 29 April 2017. https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/pg5zqg/a-guide-to-the-climate-change-deniers-in-congress.