

Case Study

Research Theme: Culture

# Scientific Futures: History Informing Tomorrow's World



## RESEARCHER

Professor Iwan Morus

## THE OVERVIEW

We still imagine the future according to a Victorian rulebook, and this has important consequences for the ways in which we deal with many contemporary concerns.

Professor Iwan Morus worked with key beneficiaries to explore the ways in which narratives about the future were made in different historical settings. His research has succeeded in fostering public awareness of how futures past were constructed and, by doing so, has informed current discussions about new technological futures. His work has had an impact on museum and exhibition strategies, on television and radio programming, and on public understanding.



## THE RESEARCH

Professor Morus has been carrying out research around the history of the future since 2012. A significant proportion of this research was conducted as part of the AHRC-funded project *Unsettling Scientific Stories*, which ran from October 2015 to December 2018.

The Aberystwyth University strand of the research focused on the Victorian and Edwardian periods, representing a continuation of Professor Morus's longstanding research interest in scientific spectacle and its contribution to imagining the future in the past.

His research has examined the ways in which narratives about the future, both factual and fictional, were constructed and circulated in the context of Victorian and Edwardian technological culture. It has focused on key figures (such as William Robert Grove, Sebastian di Ferranti, Nikola Tesla and H. G. Wells) and new technologies both real (like the wireless telegraph) and imagined (like the telectroscope).

Evoking imagined futures was a key aspect of late Victorian and Edwardian technological cultures. Imagining futures in which new technologies would find a place was central to the business of invention. Crucially, many of the assumptions still made about the ways in which futures might be generated – and by whom – have their origins during this period.



An October 2017 essay for *The Conversation* was re-published by several websites, including by the World Economic Forum.

## THE IMPACT

### INFORMING PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING

Adopting the fictional persona of Professor Marmaduke Salt of the Royal Panopticon of Practical Science, Professor Morus has performed his Victorian Scientific Futures show at a number of venues, including the British Science Festival, the National Eisteddfod, the York Festival of Ideas, the Aberystwyth Steampunk Spectacular and at the National Trust's Llanerchaeron estate in Mid Wales. The show recreates a Victorian scientific lecture with spectacular experiments with the aim of both introducing new audiences to Victorian views of their own future (and our present) and developing public awareness about the ways in which we think of our own futures today.

Professor Morus has also delivered public lectures on aspects of the history of the future and its relevance to contemporary debates about pressing cultural and technological concerns such as AI and the climate emergency. He has lectured at the Hay Festival, the National Eisteddfod, the Waterfront Museum Swansea and TEDx Aberystwyth. His talks bring to life key historical figures. Recent collaboration with the Wales Hydrogen Trade Association for example introduced new audiences to 'the Father of the fuel cell' William Robert Grove, and Wales's role in the emerging hydrogen economy.

Professor Morus's research has also reached public audiences through print media. He has published widely in popular publications such as *Aeon* and *The Conversation*.

### ENHANCING THE QUALITY OF MUSEUM AND GALLERY EXHIBITIONS

Professor Morus acted as consultant for the internationally significant *Electricity: The Spark of Life* touring exhibition organised by the Science and Industry Museum, Manchester (part of the Science Museum Group) in collaboration with Wellcome Collection, London and the Teylers Museum, Haarlem. The exhibition was shown in London, Manchester and Haarlem between 2017 and 2019 and attracted over 350,000 visitors. Professor Morus directly informed the exhibition content, and his contribution was described as influential. Reviews featured in the UK press, including *The Telegraph* and *The Guardian*.

### INFLUENCING TV AND RADIO PROGRAMMING

Professor Morus was invited to contribute to a range of media productions on TV and radio. Especially significant was his contribution to BBC4's popular series *Victorian Sensations* in which he provided new frameworks for understanding past futures. The research was described as having had a decisive impact on the series proposal.