

# Back to the Fortean Future

("Post-Truth" Versus "Evidence-Based" Policies)

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# What is Fortean Thinking?

## Charles Fort's Legacy

In the early 20th century, Charles Fort catalogued anomalous phenomena that mainstream science dismissed as "damned" - impossible according to received wisdom.

*Charles Hoy Fort (1874-1932):*  
*The Book of the Damned*  
(1919), *New Lands* (1923),  
*Lo!* (1931), *Wild Talents*  
(1932).

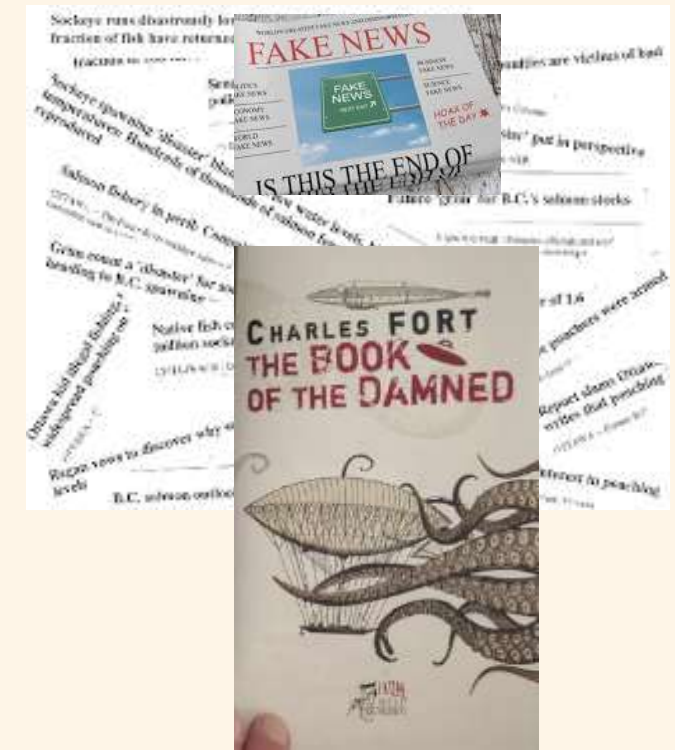
Fortiana: "damned" phenomena/reports of phenomena/ explanations of phenomena.

Fortians are interested in social reception of Fortiana – and what this tells us about the phenomena, about interpretations (historic UFOs) and about social change

## The Fortean Stance

Open-minded but critical (not reflexively dismissive) examination of excluded observations (especially when not just one-off). Skeptical toward both witnesses reporting anomalies and scientific kneejerk dismissal of them.

*Fortean Society* (f. 1931),  
*International Fortean Organisation*  
(f. 1965),  
*Fortean Times* (f. 1973)...



# The Damned

**Fort: “I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while”**

- Aerial anomalies (UFOs. Ball lightning, earth lights, fish falls)
- “Wild talents” (Psi powers, Spontaneous Human Combustion)
- Cryptozoology (inc. ABCs), fringe disciplines and anomalies within (e.g.) archaeology, astronomy.
- Suspicious synchronicities, Mandela effect.
- Mysterious visitors (men in black, bogus social workers...)
- Mysterious attacks (animal mutilation, abduction stories).
- The (supposedly) supernatural (poltergeists, apparitions).
- Speculatively: new phenomena associated with new technologies (\*AI, internet, biotech, etc).
- Overarching theories: Conspiracies (especially in science or triggered by extreme events), LHC , simulation, etc.

- Some phenomena recognised by mainstream as factual, even if not always or entirely explained. Incorporated into established paradigms – or potential to shift paradigms?
- Some phenomena remain damned and attributed to hoaxes, hallucinations, misperception, sociopsychological causes

# The 1999 Analysis: a Fortean Future

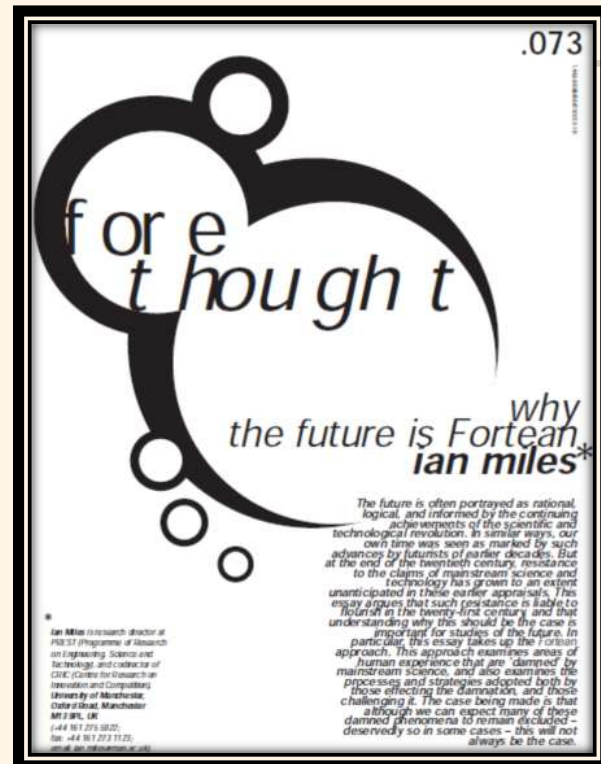
## 1999 Essay in foresight

*Argued Fortean thinking matters for futures studies as social attitudes to anomalies reveal broader trends.*

*{Mainly focused on West/global North, though some mention of globalized Forteana.*

## Current State

*Government UAP testimonies, vaccine rejection, conspiracy theories - boundaries between mainstream and fringe more contested than ever*



1

2

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## Key Forecast: Underlying Dynamics

*Sociotechnical changes would increase tolerance for anomalous phenomena, decrease trust in established authorities and expertise, creating space for alternative paradigms*



*Social reception  
Public belief systems  
Scientific Reception  
Scientific Paradigms?*

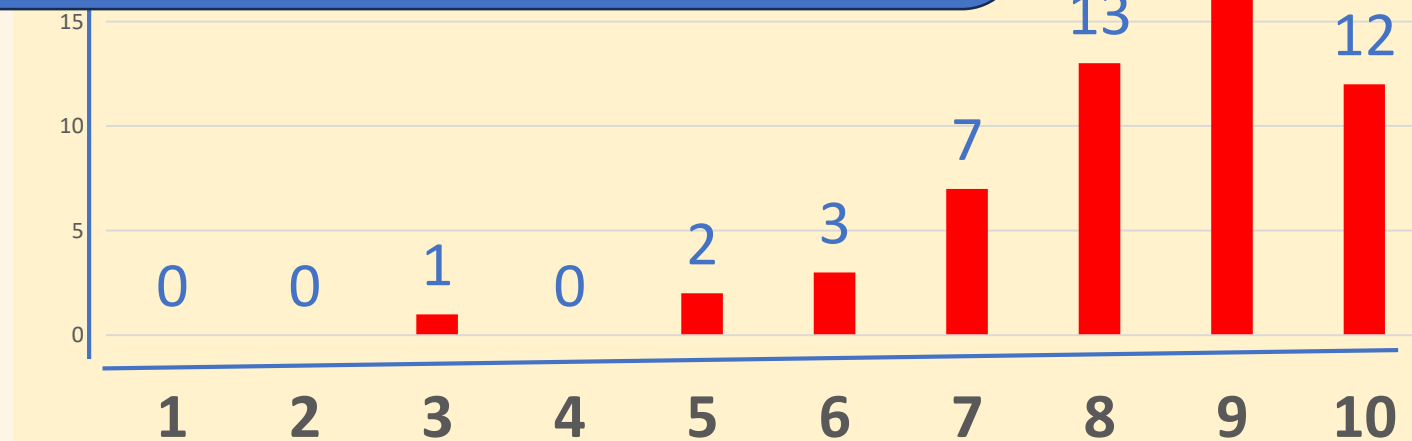
# How the Forecasts Held Up

**Ask AI!** 5 Chatbots (CoPilot, Claude, Gemini, Deepseek, and Grok) were fed the 1999 paper. **8** **25** **8** **10** **7**

*“PROMPT: The uploaded paper “Why the Future is Fortean” was published in 1999, over 25 years ago. In this paper are a number of specific forecasts of how argument and analysis of various Fortean topics might evolve, along with the underlying processes driving this. Construct a table in which the rows represent specific forecasts more general forecasts, and/or claims about underlying dynamics. These are to be listed in the first column. In a second column provide a score representing how accurate the forecasts have proved, from 1 (completely incorrect) through to 10 (completely correct), In a third column outline the main factors behind this judgement.”*

58 items, average score= **8.45**

c12 items per chatbot from 7 to 25). Some forecasts were present across all chatbots – some were fairly common, some were compounded or disaggregated, some featured underlying dynamics while others more specific



# Examples – Lowest scores

Forecast	Rationale
Current widespread views that <b>UFOs are extraterrestrial</b> craft will decline in prevalence.	<b>Largely Incorrect.</b> The Extraterrestrial Hypothesis (ETH) has, counter-intuitively, experienced a significant resurgence. U.S. government reports and congressional hearings on <b>UAPs</b> (Unidentified Aerial Phenomena) have focused on potential non-human technology, effectively moving the ETH from the fringe into mainstream political and media discussion. (GEMINI)
<b>Earth lights</b> and geoluminescence might be accepted as explanation for some UFOs	<b>Mixed.</b> While there's been some scientific study of atmospheric phenomena and UAPs, this specific explanation hasn't gained the mainstream traction predicted. The 2020s UAP discourse has focused more on potential physical craft and sensor anomalies. (CLAUDE)
<b>More essays like this</b> will be written, some from scholars antagonistic to the arguments; continued commentators arguing such essays open floodgates of unreason.	The 1999 essay remains frequently cited [???], but few new similar pieces on a "Fortean future" appear in recent searches; discussions on resistance to science exist in futures studies, but no clear surge in antagonistic scholarly essays. (GROK)
Aspects of a wide range of paranormal experiences will be incorporated into the <b>standard practice of significant sections of the religious mainstream</b> of 'post-superstitious' Western societies.	Paranormal beliefs have increased amid declining organized religion, with surveys showing nearly half of people in some countries believing in at least one phenomenon; however, mainstream Western religions (e.g., Christianity, Judaism) have not widely adopted practices like glossolalia or holy laughing as standard, though spiritual experiences are more discussed in cultural and psychiatric contexts. (GROK)
<b>Organ transplant</b> recipients acquiring donor characteristics <i>{not actually the forecast!}</i>	This phenomenon has been reported anecdotally and studied (cellular memory theory), though it remains controversial and not mainstream. The prediction was accurate about the emergence of such stories, if not their scientific acceptance. (CLAUDE)
<b>Alternative medical paradigms</b> (eg homeopathy) will grow and potentially be accommodated within mainstream healthcare	Complementary therapies expanded in popularity and as adjunct services; however robust scientific validation and wholesale mainstream replacement have not occurred. (COPILOT)

# Examples – Highest scores (6 of 12)

Forecast	Rationale (no CoPilot or Grok scores of 10, and only one from Gemini!)
General: Proliferation of Competing Accounts** *Claim:* Fringe groups will be riven by internal disputes, and competing accounts of anomalies will proliferate, which is typical of the construction of alternative paradigms.	This perfectly describes the current state of online communities around UFOs, flat earth, QAnon, and alternative health. These fields are characterized by extreme fragmentation, infighting, and a constant churn of competing gurus and theories.
New classes of paranormal phenomena will emerge, connected with new technologies. (e.g., "haunted internet," "malign intelligent agents," "reincarnation through implants and clones")	<b>Completely Correct &amp; Prescient.</b> This forecast is remarkably accurate, especially concerning Artificial Intelligence (AI). The rise of large language models and other AIs has created immediate, widespread concerns about "malign intelligent agents." The internet is a powerful medium for new digital folklore, including the rise of <b>creepypasta</b> and stories of "haunted" or autonomous AI, directly fulfilling the "haunted internet" prediction. (GEMINI)
<b>Media tabloidization and difficulty judging veracity</b>	Completely accurate. Social media has accelerated this beyond what Miles likely imagined. Fake news, deepfakes, algorithmic content curation, and the collapse of traditional media gatekeeping have made information verification extraordinarily challenging. (CLAUDE)
Specific: Psionics & Parapsychology** *Forecast:* Despite military and corporate interest (e.g., remote viewing), psionics will remain "slippery" with no technological breakthrough. The phenomena are elusive and unreliable.	No reliable psionic technology has been developed. Research in parapsychology remains on the fringes, and its phenomena have not been reproducibly demonstrated to a degree that would support technological application. The "slipperiness" described is widely acknowledged, even by researchers in the field. (DEEPSEEK)
<b>Underlying dynamic: Postmodern fragmentation of authority and expertise</b>	Completely accurate. This has been perhaps the defining characteristic of the period, with authority structures fragmenting across every domain - media, science, politics, education. (CLAUDE)
<b>Continued criticism that such essays "open floodgates of unreason"</b>	Completely accurate. The "science wars" have intensified dramatically, with fierce debates about misinformation, conspiracy theories, alternative facts, and the rejection of expertise. The 2020s have seen this reach fever pitch around COVID, vaccines, and climate change. (CLAUDE)

# General Patterns and Dynamics hold up well (esp. rise of conspiracy theory): Specific forecasts are less accurate

*Actual experiences (not just Fortean ones) dismissed – by elites and “experts”.*

*Distrust fostered by political discourse and elite behaviour (and media responses)*

*Rise of new media facilitating spread of alternative accounts, and formation of new communities.*

We can see this in terms of VUCA fuelled by geopolitics, pandemic, etc: Now augmented by AI “inexplicability”, “hallucinations”, deepfakes...

**Volatility** *Rapid, unpredictable change creates anxiety about the future*

**Uncertainty** *Lack of predictability drives people toward explanatory frameworks that promise control*

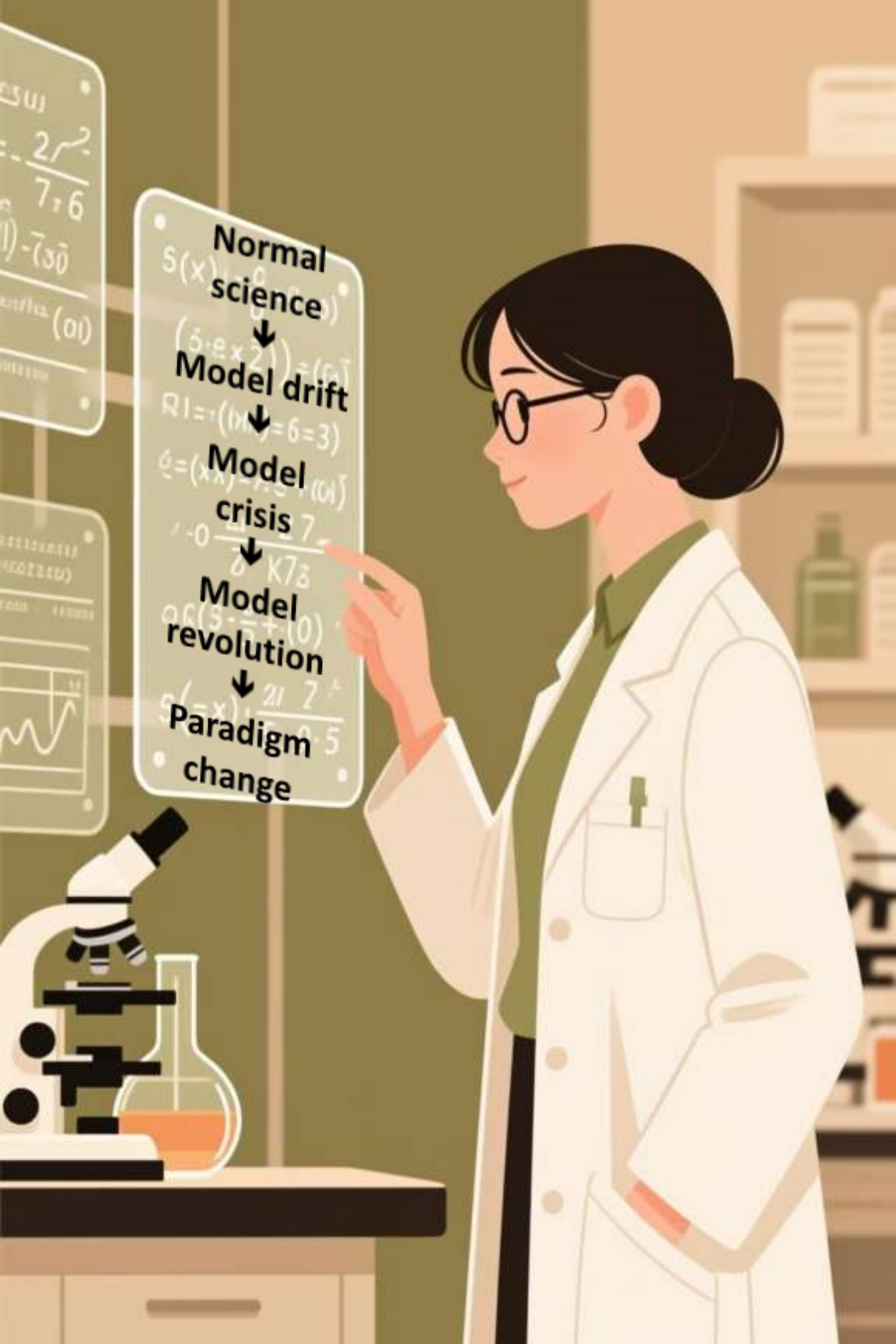
**Complexity** *Interconnected systems become difficult for individuals to fully comprehend*

**Ambiguity** *Multiple interpretations of events fuel competing narratives and epistemic tribalism*

*Conspiracy theories can provide a sense of control - the world may be threatening, but at least it's understandable to those "in the know."*

**Add:** *Income/wealth polarization; algorithmic amplification, malign actors (climate denialists stoking dissensus) and grifters (monetising mystification)*

# No Paradigm Shift?



- Many Forteana persist, though some specific cases of phenomena are largely “explained away”. New variants of Forteana arise, especially associated with new technologies.
- Mainstream science has **not** experienced broad revolutions from Fortean data. Instead, we see selective accommodation and politicized contestation.
- Some shifts toward more holistic systems thinking – Gaia, panpsychism, etc.
- Fringe beliefs entrenched in parallel information ecosystems - epistemic tribalism rather than scientific upheaval.
- “Populist” political actors reflect and reinforce distrust of expertise, gathering support from disempowered communities and powerful vested interests. Some gain power – thus Trump administration replacing public health leadership with “wellness” voices, silencing official statisticians, climate scientists, and others whose work is uncomfortable. Long-term consequences of these attempts to overturn institutional authority

# Implications for Foresight Practice: Navigating Competing Realities

- ★ In 1999, Forteana were weak signals of social trends – and perhaps wild cards. These signals are now a great deal stronger, and two practical implications are
  - ★ Address the scope for innovations to be associated with Forteana
  - ★ Confront likelihood of “expert” accounts of future prospects being distrusted.
- ★ Paradigm challenges may come from unexpected directions – often outside of mainstream scientific/expert communities. Civil and respectful discussion is required.
- ★ Trust may need to be built or re-established: this requires engagement, rather than expert pronouncements. Independence from vested interests may need to be demonstrated.
- ★ Anticipate that Foresight activities will be increasingly subject to controversy, especially when they touch upon subjects of existing or emerging conspiracy narratives – climate change, aspects of bioscience and AI, and more.
  - ★ Anticipate the use of AI (PAs) in debate and wider public action..
- ★ Watch out for potential trigger points. Liable to encounter firmly fixed viewpoints, and less likely to achieve convergence/consensus around key points.

# Continuation of Analysis

- ★ Analysis of use of chatbots to assess forecast accuracy continues.
- ★ A paper on the experience and lessons learned is preparing.
- ★ The provisional conclusions reported in this presentation are largely supported in a more detailed comparison of 7 chatbots' assessments of the same set of 25 forecasts drawn from the 1999 essay.



Thanks for your attention!