

4th Street Convention Panel
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Casey Blair: [00:00:03] Hello, I'm Casey Blair, the programming director for 4th Street Fantasy, and you are listening to our special 2020 podcast edition of 4th Street Fantasy. Our topic today is systems of communication with panelists Django Wexler, Arkady Martine, Benjamin C. Kinney, John Appel and phantom panelist Sherwood Smith. We're going to run this as much like a 4th Street panel as we can, so once our panelists have taken it away for a while, I or Scott Lynch will jump in at the end with a couple of audience questions.

[00:00:31] So without further ado, let's turn it over to today's moderator, Django Wexler.

Django Wexler: [00:00:35] Hi everybody, I'm Django Wexler. I'm here doing this panel which is very exciting for me. This is a new and interesting format, so please forgive any small things. The topic today is systems of communication, specifically in the context of fantasy. And as a reminder, by fantasy in the 4th Street setting, we also include science fiction. And... but first, let's do a little bit of an introduction.

[00:01:04] So, I'm Django Wexler. I'm a fantasy author. My new book, *Ashes of the Sun*, comes out July 21st. My YA series, starting with *Ship of Smoke and Steel* is available. Second book came out in January. And I'll let the rest of the panelists introduce themselves. So, you want to start us off, John?

John Appel: [00:01:23] Sure. I'm John Appel. I'm a science fiction writer from Maryland. My debut novel, *Assassin's Orbit* will be coming out from Rebellion Books in the summer of 2021. By day I have been, at various times, a communications technician, radios and computer networks. And by day I'm a [risk it guy 00:01:44], so I deal a lot with communication in that sense.

Django Wexler: [00:01:48] Ben?

Benjamin C. Kinney: [00:01:49] Hello. I'm Benjamin C. Kinney. I'm a science fiction writer, science fiction and fantasy writer. Neuroscientist and assistant editor at Escape Pod. I'm trying very... I'm not sure whether I'm trying very hard to not do my podcasting host voice or trying hard to do my podcasting host

voice. So I'll probably go back and forth and it'll be hilarious. My short stories have appeared in places like Strange Horizons, Beneath Ceaseless Skies, Analog, yeah. And that's me.

Django Wexler: [00:02:26] Arkady?

Arkady Martine: [00:02:26] Hi, I'm Arkady Martine. I'm a speculative fiction writer to fill out the bingo card of ways we can talk about ourselves. My debut novel, A Memory Called Empire came out in 2019 and the sequel to it, A Desolation Called Peace comes out in March of 2021. In my day job, currently, I work as a policy advisor for the New Mexico Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department on climate and energy policy and other duties as assigned, as my boss said this morning. But I spent 10 years as a professional historian and read a whole bunch of dead languages. Still do read them, just worse than before. So communication is pretty much a central part of everything that I've done professionally and, I guess, personally.

Django Wexler: [00:03:33] And on that note, let's get started. So the topic is systems of communication and how they play into fantasy and science fiction novels, social structures and so on. So the first thing we wanted to talk about is to get a better sense of what we actually mean when we're talking about systems of communication. The things that come to mind are fairly obvious, letters, the written word, cell phone networks and everything in between. But systems of communication covers a lot more ground than that, so let's, starting with Arkady, maybe, let's talk about what other things sort of fall into this category of systems of communication that may not be immediately obvious.

Arkady Martine: [00:04:21] It's really interesting, the examples that you gave. Because aside from maybe a telephone network or a cell phone network, absolutely none of them would have been on my list because the... things like letters or even an alphabet are methods or modes of communication in my sense of it. And to think about a system of communication, we start having to conceptualize connections between different modes and different expressions and different communicative acts. So when I think of a system of communication, I think not only of things like the internet, a series of tubes, but also the concept of the war correspondent and all of the ways in which journalism as a function of reporting on atrocity can form a system that talks to itself. You can see where my head is today, wow.

[00:05:36] But the point I'm trying to get at is that by saying systems of communication, we're talking about linkages between different

communicative acts, and I kind of want to throw this at Ben, because Ben has the science bit that goes with my sociology bit, here.

Django Wexler: [00:05:58] Ben, do you want to go ahead with that and then I think we had a hand from John?

Benjamin C. Kinney: [00:06:02] Yeah. It's interesting because as Arkady was speaking and saying, those things weren't communication systems. Okay, so a letter is not a communication system by that definition, but a postal service almost certainly is.

Arkady Martine: [00:06:18] Yes.

Benjamin C. Kinney: [00:06:18] How many letters does it take to become a system?

Django Wexler: [00:06:24] Yeah...

Benjamin C. Kinney: [00:06:25] How formal do these things have to... and these aren't questions that are meant to be answered, because there's no number to how many places can you connect... is two people sending letters back and forth a communication system? Maybe they are. But of course, as Arkady pointed out, I'm bringing in my background as a neuroscientist here and I... there are systems of communication that go on within our own bodies. And that... I'm not going to try to divert this conversation into a discussion of the biology, except for how it informs what it means for us as humans to be communicating with each other. And I'm not going to so much add new systems to our list, as to try to find other ways to look at these systems that we use and how they're driven by who and what we are.

Django Wexler: [00:07:25] John?

John Appel: [00:07:25] Yeah, I've got a couple of thoughts here. first, the idea of using letters as communication and making a system of it actually predates formal postal services. If you look at, for example, letters between traders in the pre-modern world. So the Indian Ocean trade, and there's a great book called, oh, and I'm forgetting the name of it right now. But it features in large part, this exchange of letters between traders on different sides of the Indian Ocean and tracking back and forth with their conversations about all sorts of things going on in addition to the actual business elements that were part of that communication.

[00:08:06] So we had these systems that were growing up for quite a long time before we formalized them and created them as public services. But I think there's also aspects of different organizations and

different kinds of organizations will develop their own systems of communication where you start getting into things like jargon and short hand, which is probably branching a little further afield from maybe where we're headed initially. But you get these systems by which they're communicating things up and down chains of authority and across horizontally. Which also leads to the whole idea of backchannels and the idea that you have the formal lines of communication, both vertically through an organization and sometimes formally horizontally. But you have the whole water cooler network in kind of modern American and modern corporate society that goes on. We have the idea that you can buttonhole somebody and chase them down. And there are whole, many, many organizations both in private and public life where that is a significant way by which things happen. And so there the network becomes, or the system becomes totally relationship-based as opposed to tied to a hierarchy or tied to formal systems.

Django Wexler: [00:09:27] Yeah. One of the things, and this is definitely not a digression, because this is part of what I wanted to talk about. When I talk about less formal systems of communication is the way communication can be behavioral, it can be decorative. It can be non-verbal, it can be any number of things. So you talk about jargon and the purpose of jargon in general is to distinguish between an in-group that knows the jargon and an out-group that doesn't, whether it's thieves' cant or academic, dense, prose.

[00:10:07] But there are many other markers that can serve as the same thing. Everything from bumper stickers to tattoos to clothing styles, hair styles, et cetera, et cetera.

John Appel: [00:10:15] Queen Elizabeth's broaches, I don't know if you saw all that Twitter thread where it was going around last year.

Django Wexler: [00:10:21] All right, I think we had some hands so Ben and then Arkady.

Benjamin C. Kinney: [00:10:27] Yeah, what John was saying made me think that we've been talking here about communication methods... communication systems as conveying information and social relationships between people but there is, and I wanted to add to our understanding of systems of communication, communication of skills. Is a university a communication system? Is a trade school a communication system and I think it is.

Arkady Martine: [00:11:01] I think that's the fundamental question, to briefly digress to another panel and another conference, that is the problem with the university in America at the moment is that the answer to that question

is not clear. Is a university a system of communication or is it something else. But, anyway...

Benjamin C. Kinney: [00:11:21] [Inaudible 00:11:23] questions that are... yeah.

Arkady Martine: [00:11:24] Yeah. So what I was going to say, aside from the language of flowers, loudly, was to actually talk about fashion which is something that Ben just brought up in passing but it's also a non-verbal but extremely powerful signal of communication that relies on a set of inputs and knowledges which are gained by living in a society. And I think, in a way, when I think about communication systems, if fashion is one, that gets me a little closer to what one is. It conveys information. It conveys social knowledge and the ability to use social knowledge and it conveys an awareness of moving between different relationships. And signaling a type of persona or desire or need.

[00:12:45] If we're talking about human to human communication, that's kind of getting close to a deep definition for me. If we start talking about horses, we have another problem entirely.

Django Wexler: [00:12:55] Well, I think we can stick to humans or at sentients in this discussion. I mean, one of the things that prompted this in me was one of the things I read about tattoos and sort of what is the purpose of tattoos, socially. And one of their strong purposes is a permanent, expensive signal that you are part of a particular group, right? Because this was all prompted by a sociologist trying to answer the question of why people get tattoos marking themselves as part of groups that are not well-liked by society and thus presumably disadvantaging themselves in social contexts. And the answer is, by taking that permanent marker, you advantage yourself with that in-group because they know that you are not going to leave or betray the in-group.

[00:13:56] So, I'm aware of time passing, so let's move on a little bit and try and talk about communication systems in the context of fantasy and again, including science fiction novels. There's sort of two directions that I was thinking would be interesting to come at this with. The first one is a sort of worldbuilding direction. So maybe John, you can start us off here. When you are writing in a fantasy context, how do you decide or think about what kinds of systems of communication are available in the society that you're writing in and how that affects the society and how the characters interact with one another?

John Appel: [00:14:44] Sure. So the kind of what is available for me as my fantasy tends to involve space ships is going to be along the slider of how far towards "plausible" real science I want to be.

Django Wexler: [00:15:04] Yeah, I keep mentioning the science fiction thing because I think there are two out of the four of us who are space ship people.

John Appel: [00:15:09] Exactly. And so the idea—

Arkady Martine: [00:15:12] Hi.

John Appel: [00:15:12] Yes. And so the idea there is you kind of have this breakdown which is, do I want things to be... from a story perspective, I tend to like, bring it back to do I want things, or is the world that I'm creating, is it best served by communications that can only travel as fast as a human can? So taking us back towards kind of a pre-17th century. Because that's when we first started to see semaphore and optical telegraphs and things like that. So really kind of 19th century, overall. But taking us back earlier to that period so messages can only travel as fast as a messenger or a thing that is carrying that message, a carrier pigeon or whatnot, can take it. Versus, am I going for the Star Trek kind of universe and then you are getting into that kind of world where you've got the real time communication, or maybe near real time communication because that has a lot of... the organizations and chains of authority and chains of commerce and how all those things work become very different as you move the slider along those scales.

[00:16:29] If you have longer lead times or longer lag times for communication, you're going to need to devolve authority and that is going to result in a different kind of government structure. Or you're going to have different levels of efficiency if you're going to insist on central control but it takes three months for messages to go back and forth. Clearly you're going to be having a situation where you've got people who are sure, I'm obeying the commands of what's back there in the capital system but I'm going to have to do what I need to do here because it's going to take six months for me to get word.

[00:17:06] Versus, the kind of equivalent of Lincoln telegraphing orders to his generals, or today where you have the Pentagon controlling actions of small units deployed halfway around the world, being controlled from other places. That leads to a very different kind of structure for that society, for those organizations, for the people involved in them.

[00:17:26] It also then ties into not just kind of military operations or government operations, but it has a lot of impact on commerce. You start having to think about how that impacts things economically and you start getting into the idea of, well, if I can't just automatically transfer money how am I doing that? You start getting back into, again,

age of sail ideas and letters of credit, things like that. So those are the ways that I will approach the system. What is that feel of that world that I'm trying to evoke.

Django Wexler: [00:17:57] That's great. Arkady, you have your hand up and also this is something that was very clearly on your mind in relation to A Memory Called Empire.

Arkady Martine: [00:18:11] Yes. First, I'm going to gleefully manage to get a trifecta of every single virtual con I have been at, I have managed to bring up this same thing and it's been relevant each time. So, the problem John just described, the communication problem over long distances and how long it takes when you don't have on earth the cell phone or in a world with space ships, the ansible, is the problem that is basically one of the reasons that you end up with the fall of western Rome in the late 3rd century. That kind of centripetal force of generals and other authorities making the decisions despite the amount of communication that they have with central power.

[00:19:09] So, would the Roman Empire have fallen if Rome had discovered the ansible? If someone would like to write this story, I would really like to read it. I know how much research it would take, which is why I'm not doing it.

John Appel: [00:19:22] Don't tempt me because I kind of do.

Arkady Martine: [00:19:26] Really?

John Appel: [00:19:29] No, I mean, I kind of would love to write that story but it would require—

Arkady Martine: [00:19:29] No, I mean, I give it to you, for free.

John Appel: [00:19:33] Oh, well, it'll go on the stack of 700 stories that I want to write, so.

Arkady Martine: [00:19:39] But in a more general sense, yeah, I thought about this a lot when I was putting together the way I wanted communication to work in A Memory Called Empire and it has an even bigger role, though it's the same system in A Desolation Called Peace, which is... I was trying to have the same kind of communication problems that you'd have in the 11th century in Anatolia except with an interstellar empire. So I had to narrow down my mountain passes. Ie, I have FTL but it's FTL only through jump gates and you have to carry messages by hand through

the jump gates. So one way, well two way wormholes, but point A to point B and not anywhere.

[00:20:29] So that was a way of recreating a particular constraint in a science fictional way. And I think there's a lot of, as John said, ways of thinking about constraint in communication, both in fantasy and in science fiction, in sort of fantasy in general in the 4th Street sense.

[00:20:53] What do you want to allow because you can, in this genre, go for complete freedom of anyone can communicate with anyone in anyway. Where is your line of constraint? That creates a lot about your world.

Django Wexler: [00:21:08] I also wanted to ask that in a sort of more personal sense, the stuff about how on the empire born or cultured people use a different set of gestures, for example, to smile and so on is also a system of communication.

Arkady Martine: [00:21:31] Oh, absolutely. I mean, that's not that far off of some of the differences that we see culturally on earth between different cultures. Everyone, every culture has particular gestures, expressions, modes of greeting each other that are specific to that culture. And can feel strange or even alien to people who are not from that culture. So that was what I was playing with, really.

Django Wexler: [00:22:08] And probably most of us have had that experience. Okay, a brief pause because our last panelist has joined us. Sherwood are you here, can you hear us?

Sherwood Smith: [00:22:18] Yes, I can. Can you hear me?

Django Wexler: [00:22:21] I can! Welcome.

Sherwood Smith: [00:22:23] I hope you can't hear the gigantic fan blowing on me from two feet away.

Django Wexler: [00:22:27] No, I think we're okay.

Benjamin C. Kinney: [00:22:30] Nope, sounds good.

Sherwood Smith: [00:22:28] Yes.

Django Wexler: [00:22:31] Sounds good to me. And so we are talking about systems of communication. And as a quick refresher, I think the question that Arkady was just answering and John has already answered is about fantasy worldbuilding and the types and genres of communication

available, be they FTL starships or postal services or Twitter affect what your society looks like and so as an author, what sort of considerations you give to those things as you're doing the worldbuilding.

[00:23:14] So Ben had his hand up, and then we'll come to you, Sherwood?

Sherwood Smith: [00:23:19] Sure thing.

Django Wexler: [00:23:18] Okay. Ben?

Benjamin C. Kinney: [00:23:21] Yeah, gosh. One of the downsides of this podcast format is that I cannot show you these notes that I have been taking while all of you are talking. There's an arrow and another arrow and the arrow leads around and other things are crossed out. Yeah. Being in a conversation like this.

[00:23:37] One of the... so I usually approach this like like what communication systems are available kind of from a plot point of view of like, what constraints do I want to impose on the story. Let's build the world around those. And some uniquely interesting things both on the more science space-shippy side of fantasy versus the more fantasy side of fantasy.

[00:24:05] One thing I like to think about in terms of the space-shippy side is whether or not you have ansible-like or even reliable lightspeed communications, depending on distance affects things like, whether or not you need really good artificial intelligence. Can you have people remote controlling drones or is that not possible? And that can have a big impact on the world of a certain kind of story.

[00:24:38] But I find it even more fun to play with in the sort of magic fantasy kind of setting because the rules of your communication system... the rules of anything don't need to follow strict orderly, strict rules in the sense that an orderly physics dominated universe follows strict rules. You can have a communications system that depends on your personal relationship with this god and only by having this personal relationship can you send messages. So, certain people can and certain people can't. And maybe the god won't pass messages onto anyone else unless it's your message because it's about you, so you can't send somebody else's message. And by controlling things like this, you can give different people different communication abilities and different communication restrictions in ways that can provide, do fun things for the story or even create stakes.

[00:25:44] There's a novel that I wrote that will probably never be published but has that magic that works basically like what I just said there and a large swath of the plot is the big empire trying to get its hands on that magic because boy is ruling a continent-wide empire very different if you can do that versus if you can't.

Django Wexler: [00:26:05] I have a story that I will someday write that... the setting that I want is like, regular medieval England except that they have magic Twitter and how would that change the society. It's like worldwide social networking. But uh...

Benjamin C. Kinney: [00:26:26] Why do we send all day on this hell scrying glass?

Django Wexler: [00:26:30] Sherwood, did you want to chime in, and then I think John has his hand up.

Sherwood Smith: [00:26:32] Yeah. Yeah. This is a subject that's interested me all along. I've been... one set of stories I've been working on since I was a kid and I used to think about how communication happened and how it affects things as I was growing up and reading a lot of history which is where my degrees are. And one of the things, to try to keep it short, is that as I was developing magic coming back into the world and how people would do communication systems, I figured that first of all, probably... oh, first of all it's built around the scribe desk. And then second, there were separate communication devices. So I assumed that those with money and political power, of course, would have access to them first as it's being developed. And my idea was that there were three branches to this as it proliferated. There's obviously the military where you want the inside line of communication. There was the political and of course there's a social. You can't go without that.

[00:27:52] As I watched the internet grow and more and more people get online, I realized that I was definitely onto something. So writing all these stories is great and I have all this and I have it developing and all that. But once I got caught up to kind of like the present where pretty much everybody has access to it now, the next step is what happens when you bring it all down?

Django Wexler: [00:28:24] That's kind of terrifying to contemplate...

Sherwood Smith: [00:28:26] Militarily, politically, and socially.

Django Wexler: [00:28:33] John, you had a hand up?

John Appel:

[00:28:34] Yeah, but I want to say first, Sherwood, as a risk guy in my day job, that's my life is thinking about these horrible, horrible things, what would happen. So, especially times like now...

[00:28:47] One of the things I neglected to mention and we didn't quite touch on it, I think a couple of it alluded, we danced around the idea, is kind of Gibson's, William Gibson's aphorism about the future is here but it's not evenly distributed. And something to contemplate in your worldbuilding is that whether you're talking about magical communication systems or even relatively low-tech things that could have been possible in a medieval or pre-industrial society, or getting into where you've got starships and you've got modern day communications. Expanse-level type stuff or Star Trek level things. Not everybody's going to have that because that's true today and that's true in the real world.

[00:29:34] The best real world example that really hit me about this is back when I was a radio technician back in the late '80s and early '90s, I would go to training at Motorola's big training center in Chicago. And there were people from Caribbean nations who were there visiting and who were training. And what I discovered is that in the late '80s, a number of Caribbean and Latin American nations had these really sophisticated, very well-developed cell phone networks that were much better, had much better coverage than you found here in the United States, putatively the technology-leading nation on earth, and it's because of other factors there. Because they didn't have a physical infrastructure with an entrenched economic monopoly behind it. So for there, and you didn't have all the, miles and miles of copper cable that were really difficult to maintain. It was actually a lot easier for them and you found this in other parts of the developing world, to throw up cell towers. Bury the lines between the cell towers and then suddenly you have a populace that's connected by mobile communications.

[00:30:38] At a time when cell phones for those of us that are of an age that can remember this, were not ubiquitous and not everyone had them. Not even pre-smart phones, just basic flip phone kind of technology. So that's a thing to contemplate as you're doing your worldbuilding is that not everyone may have all the latest bells and whistles, and those lines of demarcation where those different groups come together. Those create some interesting points of friction that can lead to interesting storytelling opportunities.

Django Wexler:

[00:31:08] Yeah, I've heard that called the, it's the first mover disadvantage. Famously, New York state, for a long, probably still has for all I know, really terrible phone system because it was the first state to

really have a phone system and so there were horrible bottlenecks in the infrastructure that had been installed in the late 1800s.

[00:31:35] So, another way that we can think about how communication works in fiction and in fantasy specifically is how it affects plot. It is somewhat of a saying that cell phones have ruined every horror plot—

Sherwood Smith: [00:32:00] Oh, no.

Django Wexler: [00:32:00] Because it's too easy to call for help. And yeah, I agree with Sherwood that that's not actually true, but it is true that communication systems do affect the kinds of plots that we can do or how those plots sort of adapt. So as fantasy writers, having settled on what sorts of communications systems are available, how does that affect the plot that you use? Or the other way around, if you want to do a particular plot, how do you make a particular type of communication available?

[00:32:42] Let's start with Ben.

Benjamin C. Kinney: [00:32:42] Huh, I am trying to think of something good to say here because my first instinct is that a lot of... it's so case specific. There is no general how-to because what you want to do is going to depend on each of these things. On what constraints you want or what constraints you're trying to avoid.

Django Wexler: [00:33:05] Arkady has her hand up, so, maybe...

Benjamin C. Kinney: [00:33:06] Yeah, let somebody else go, I'll raise my hand if I have more to say.

Arkady Martine: [00:33:10] Okay, what I keep thinking about is information control in the sense of revealing to the reader at a specific rate what is actually going on inside of a story. And also the second layer of information control which is characters learning information within the scope of the story. And this is where I think that some of the big chases about systems of communication, ranging from do you have an ansible right down to does everyone here speak the same dialect? And getting even smaller, to do we have a deaf person who speaks with a sign language? Going from as large as possible to intercommunication between two people. The question, as an author that I keep returning to is what do I want to reveal and when? To whom?

[00:34:27] And is there a... can I string the thread of information across the story? And what do my constraints allow me to do, how do they allow me to hide certain bits of information until I want to reveal them?

How do they allow my characters to do the same work? The two things are sometimes the same and sometimes different. But that sense of who knows what, when, is kind of what I come to as an author trying to think about the structure of communications in things I write.

Django Wexler: [00:35:05] John, and then Sherwood?

John Appel: [00:35:08] Yeah, my first thought is that I'm going to side-skip and rather than... a, I'm going to assume yes, all these people have these communications. But who's going to pick up the phone and what is my relationship, or what is the relationship between those characters and the people they might call? I just did a rewatch of Wu Assassins which is really fantastic and it's set in modern day San Francisco so of course everybody's got cell phones. You've got ubiquitous communications but at various points, some of the characters are at odds with each other or on outs. This one group is really close friends but rather than, as a natural outcome of the way the story has been structured, at various points, some of them are just kind of pissed at each other. And so, you have this very natural response of, oh, hm. Kai's calling me, yeah, I don't feel like talking to him right now. So the phone can roll over. And it can let you sidestep out of those kind of very artificial oh, I don't have any bars, I'm stuck in wherever I am. So there's other tools that you can play with and character is a great one and the relationships between character give you some additional ways to attack how you're going to throw those kinds of monkey wrenches into their plans.

Django Wexler: [00:36:33] Interesting. Although you do have to be careful not to be too convenient with it, which I suppose is also true for any other evasion—

John Appel: [00:36:41] Oh, sure.

Django Wexler: [00:36:41] Like running out of bars. There have been occasions when I've sworn at a TV show because some character who really should know better is not picking up their phone.

John Appel: [00:36:51] Yeah, it's very much a case where if it's done well, it's a natural outcome of the things as opposed to, you know, season 8, Game of Thrones where the plot says this and it must happen that way.

Django Wexler: [00:37:04] Yeah.

John Appel: [00:37:03] It's all in the execution.

Django Wexler: [00:37:07] Sherwood?

Sherwood Smith: [00:37:07] Yeah. I was just going to add a quick remark. My thinking is very much along the lines of what Arkady was talking about and John, too. But I just wanted to add, I think it's also interesting to see how information changes when communication is not ubiquitous, and why.

Arkady Martine: [00:37:31] Ooh.

John Appel: [00:37:31] Oh yeah.

Arkady Martine: [00:37:31] Yeah.

Django Wexler: [00:37:32] Can you give an example?

Sherwood Smith: [00:37:34] Well, yeah. Take, let's see. Instead of being general, have any of you seen the series called The Longest Day in Chang'an?

Django Wexler: [00:37:44] I have not.

Arkady Martine: [00:37:45] Sadly, I have not.

Sherwood Smith: [00:37:46] It's brilliant, oh God. And it's a visual treat. What... we're in the city of Chang'an, I think around the year 1000 or maybe 1100, something like that. And the entire series takes place in one day and they actually did the historical research on how the imperial guards and so forth actually communicated. They had a system in watchtowers where they were flipping these colored boards, you could say. And they memorized codes. But they also had runners running through the street. So but then there were the gangland people who were running opposite to them, and then of course there were the plotters. I'm not going to go into the whole story. Super complicated. But who changed information and why when they were handing it off to other people added a layer to the storytelling that I thought infused character with complexity as well as ramped up the pacing and the intensity.

Django Wexler: [00:38:57] Interesting. That sounds like something I should watch.

John Appel: [00:39:00] Absolutely.

Django Wexler: [00:39:01] Ben?

Benjamin C. Kinney: [00:39:01] Yeah, the, thank you for coming back to me. [Inaudible 00:39:07] and Arkady's thought in particular about thinking about who knows what when made me think about the other side of the coin of the sort of who tells what when. Not only how the reader learns things and how the character learns things, but how organizations do and don't

share information. When do... how does information get from the... information control in terms of public relations and propaganda.

[00:39:39] Those are very different depending on what kinds of technologies and techniques you have available to communicate. We've seen social media has allowed both communication and miscommunication, intentional and otherwise at a scale vastly different from what was possible 10 years ago. And everything down from missives, messengers from the emperor to a factory workplace, industrial age is going to have a different way of getting, pushing information that you want people to know.

Django Wexler: [00:40:24] That actually brings us to the next question and probably the last before we go to some audience questions, which is about control of communication. And how that can affect either your plots or your stories because historically one of the things that has always been true is that powerful organizations, governments, churches, whatever is the thing at any given time, have attempted to and to various degrees succeeded in, controlling whatever communications medium was the done thing at the time. And so how does that work in with what we've been talking about in terms of the effect on society and the sort of plots of fiction?

[00:41:13] Do you want to start us off, John?

John Appel: [00:41:18] Yeah, my first thought is that somehow that immediately made me think, just because I've been looking at some WWI stuff lately and the idea of censorship of letters back from soldiers that you saw in, I want to say WWI was really the first time we saw it here in the United States. I don't think it occurred in our earlier conflicts. And then you see it in other times, and it's the idea that they wanted to make sure... there's part of it, it's done ostensibly for an operational security reason. You don't want to say, oh yeah, this unit was here at this time because if the letter falls into the wrong hands, people can then make, reverse engineer, figure out what was going on.

[00:41:57] But there was absolutely an element of making sure that certain narratives were making it back to the home front. And it was left, of course, down to very junior officers at the time, so it was a very subjective thing. They had guidelines. So it's a thing that's been with us in lots of different aspects. One of the things that I think is really interesting right now in our current day is we're seeing that there is both a strengthening and weakening depending on what area that you're seeing it in.

[00:42:33] Governments or places of authority, organizations of authority because I would include corporations and other entities, have varying levels of success in certain avenues, but what they're being kind of sidelined by at the moment, in certain areas, is because we have these paths to get direct communications out and people are able to bypass it.

[00:43:02] There's the old saying, the old hacker saying, information wants to be free. And if you look at the thermodynamics, you're trying to impose order on things and systems want to tend towards entropy, so there's always ways for information to get out and leak. I think what you're going to see is that no circumstances you're going to see this control being perfect. There's always going to be a crack somewhere, whether that's through an individual who's enforcing the rules differently or just the system itself has some cracks in it. And so those give you opportunities to... who has stakes in getting different stories out is a case where you can play with that as an author, and it can set up interesting conflicts between characters.

Django Wexler: [00:43:49] Yeah. I heard an update of that, of the information wants to be free; but you can't make people pay attention.

John Appel: [00:44:01] That's 100% correct, yeah.

Django Wexler: [00:44:01] Because the world we live in now, right? Where all the information is out there but what's really important is whether it goes viral or not. Sherwood, do you have...?

Sherwood Smith: [00:44:10] Yeah, a couple... one thing that I've learned in reading history and encountering people is that when people want to communicate, they find a way. I traced the development of print in particularly revolutionary France, where street printing outstripped the professional because people were so desperate to communicate.

[00:44:41] Oh, and here's a personal example. An old friend of mine, she was elderly, died a couple of years ago, was a child, a German child during WWII. She was living in Germany as a kid. She was away at music camp when Hamburg was bombed. Got back at age 13, find her mother and her sister dead in the rubble, so she had to kind of exist and ended up getting married to a soldier mostly to survive. Anyway, this soldier, her husband, was a foot soldier in the army and he was fighting on the Russian front. And when Germany fell, he was taken prisoner. And so he was kept a prisoner in a gulag for 10 years after the war ended. And the way he communicated with her, she showed me these letters. The Russians did not want to let anybody communicate but they, for whatever reason, Stalin let the Red Cross in there. But of course the

letters were heavily censored. So what he did was he wrote the letter, the actual letter part, in big block letters. And he said very simple things. Whatever was allowed. But he was an artist. And he decorated the edges of this onion skin paper with these elaborate curlicues and flowers and all that. And within the petals and the leaves of these tiny flowers, he wrote miniscule words. And so he was able to communicate to her what the hell was like living as a prisoner, as his friends died one by one so she could let their families know.

[00:46:29] And so yeah, communication when you have to. She showed me these, they were amazing. But unfortunately, after she died they went to her kids and disappeared.

Arkady Martine: [00:46:41] Wow.

Django Wexler: [00:46:43] Did anyone, Ben, Arkady? Anything you want to say about control of communication?

Benjamin C. Kinney: [00:46:49] Yeah, briefly. To put what you and John were talking about before, information wants to be free but nobody can make people read it. To me, I think that puts the agency in the wrong place. Information doesn't want to be free. People want to free information. Every one of those leaks is happening by somebody who has a motive. And you can think of all... any time there's a big news event, there'll be things on Twitter that are, people will be like, I saw this, and they'll be completely wrong. Bad information gets everywhere because people want to know things and want to be in the know and want to feel like they have some understanding of the situation.

[00:47:31] For reasons as simple as that, bad information can get spread. And of course, always I think it's useful to think about why these people are spreading information. What people want to believe, not only accomplish, believe and who they want to be.

Django Wexler: [00:47:54] All right. Arkady, did you want to say something?

Arkady Martine: [00:47:57] Yeah, just briefly to jump off of what Ben was saying about information is not capable of having desires. This presents a very interesting counter question. In the field of science fiction and fantasy, which is, is there a point at which we can information that does have wants and might want things, including freedom, but also other things? And in that sense, is it still information? And what might it look like? This is not necessarily an idea about artificial intelligence, but almost more about infectious ideas. Memetics in the old sense.

John Appel: [00:48:53] I could rant on that for half a panel.

Arkady Martine: [00:48:54] Oh, I'm sure you could, and I'd be interested. But yeah, that just struck me as—

John Appel: [00:48:59] That's another panel.

Arkady Martine: [00:49:00] Yes, information does not have desires, but what if it did?

John Appel: [00:49:06] I exactly went to the same place you went to there, Arkady, which is the concept of memes in its original sense. The memetic ideas that, that system of thought that is engineered to self-replicate. One that is frequently cited are religious texts that say, copy me and disseminate me, because it's a way to get... your job is to promote me. And if you're a believer. That's not the only instance, but it's one of the more easy to understand ones.

Django Wexler: [00:49:40] Very interesting. All right. I think we had... we're getting to the point where we should take a couple of questions from the "audience," which in this case will be provided by Casey, who is serving in that role as intermediary.

[00:50:01] Casey, are you there?

John Appel: [00:50:13] Communication.

Django Wexler: [00:50:12] Communication systems are failing? Hello?

John Appel: [00:50:19] The jammers are being utilized.

Django Wexler: [00:50:21] Casey, we cannot hear you.

John Appel: [00:50:30] Subspace channel isn't open, captain.

Django Wexler: [00:50:34] Microphone is not open.

Benjamin C. Kinney: [00:50:35] This happened to me before, I had to replug my microphone and reload the window.

Django Wexler: [00:50:41] This is another great example, of hey, sometimes tech doesn't work, so.

Sherwood Smith: [00:50:46] Yeah.

Benjamin C. Kinney: [00:50:47] Complex systems.

John Appel: [00:50:50] As someone who used to get paid to fix it, you would find all sorts of interesting ways in which it could fail.

Django Wexler: [00:50:59] Yeah. I feel we've all been experiencing a lot of that lately.

Casey Blair: [00:51:03] Hi, can you hear me now?

Django Wexler: [00:51:04] If you're like me, there's been...

Arkady Martine: [00:51:04] Yes, Casey.

Sherwood Smith: [00:51:06] Yes.

Casey Blair: [00:51:06] Hello again.

John Appel: [00:51:09] Welcome back.

Django Wexler: [00:51:09] Good, all right.

Casey Blair: [00:51:10] Now, I'm the audience.

Django Wexler: [00:51:11] Back on track. Casey, you are filling in for the audience. Provide us with some questions for the panel.

Casey Blair: [00:51:16] All right, I've got a couple for you. And the first one is, largely adapting a question from William Henry Morris and going back to what we were talking about, control. And he wanted to talk about ways to be subversive with communication systems, particularly because a lot of systems... particularly that rely on long-distance communications rely on a certain level of political stability and/or widespread cooperation. But when you have a system that is itself the problem, I'm going to throw this in and say Facebook, which is curating what it wants you to see. So if you're trying to criticize Facebook, it's not going to show those posts. What are some ways that, in fantasy, you can play with actually subverting these systems of communications that you have set up?

Sherwood Smith: [00:52:27] I think about that, but the problem is it's all in the story so, either I yak on for two hours or just say, yeah, I think about that a lot.

Arkady Martine: [00:52:40] I guess—

Casey Blair: [00:52:39] Fair enough.

Arkady Martine: [00:52:40] —for me, when we think about subverting information and subverting communication, there's kind of two big buckets that falls in for me and one of them is providing false, misleading, or contradictory

information that drowns out or changes the information that was originally meant to be communicated. And the other one is providing secret, hidden, or double-meaning-ness in communication, which is something that I think the genre that we work in. And I'm thinking not exactly of fantasy at the moment, but of the written word, is especially good at. Hiding things like, oh, acrostics or code words or ciphers. And I mean, these are all very basic tradecraft ideas but they're enormously useful in creating plot and also kind of interrogating what information does in the story that you're writing if your characters are working with that kind of subversion.

Django Wexler: [00:54:13] John?

John Appel: [00:54:14] Yeah, one of the things that came to mind as Arkady was speaking, there are some relatively famous, possibly apocryphal stories of POWs in WWII, or I'm sorry, Vietnam era, that were brought up and filmed, that had been captured by the Vietnamese and they were being forced to read statements and things but that some of them were making particular hand gestures, and I'm drawing a blank now on what it was, that was essentially indicating to a western or at least an American audience that was watching this, it was basically the idea of like, I've got my fingers crossed so I'm not really saying true things here, I don't really believe this.

Sherwood Smith: [00:54:57] Go and tell it to the Marines.

John Appel: [00:55:00] But because of the cultural difference between the two was that they, between the Vietnamese and Americans, it was lost to the Vietnamese. They didn't understand the significance of it. There also was a great example, and I can't describe it without giving away spoilers, but Code Name Verity for those of you that may have read that has this great example of an interrogation and there's an instance where characters are exchanging information right under the noses of captors in a way that is flying under the radar.

[00:55:42] So essentially what you're looking for partly is that idea of the codes and phrases, but those codes and phrases aren't necessarily in traditional, I've got military code book, or something like that. It could be cultural differences that set up that distinction there.

[00:55:56] African Americans, there's a whole, and other minority groups have ways of exchanging information, code-switching and other aspects that get, will fly, certainly that a lot of us aren't going to be aware of.

- Django Wexler: [00:56:15] Well, and that goes back almost any subgroup that is oppressed will have its own communications methods for the oppressors.
- John Appel: [00:56:32] Exactly, yeah.
- Benjamin C. Kinney: [00:56:35] One thing I want to add to this is just taking that idea and kind of abstracting it a little bit and thinking about signal versus noise. What in the communication is supposed to be communicating and what isn't? And a way to subvert this is to put information in the parts that people aren't expecting to have information in. Obviously the hand gestures of these prisoners being forced to record these videos is one example, but you can imagine it as the music in the background of a recording or somebody who has aspect to the technical side of the situation just playing with the static, or things like that. Which could be in a magical or physical setting. But that abstract idea of signal versus noise might help you think about where the empty spaces are in this communication method. What are the places where people aren't looking? Do we have a code established where you know something about my letters today because of which stamp I'm using?
- John Appel: [00:57:46] Yeah, you're touching a little bit on the concept of steganography which is the idea of embedding information... yeah. And it's a big thing in security circles, that you can embed a lot of information in images or [Inaudible 00:57:59] audio files or other things. So that whole idea of that under layer of communications.
- Django Wexler: [00:58:05] Is there a secret message in this podcast? You'll have to find out.
- John Appel: [00:58:09] Play it backwards.
- Casey Blair: [00:58:15] That is actually a great segue into my next question unless anybody has any more thoughts there.
- Django Wexler: [00:58:20] This will probably be the last question because we are coming up on time.
- Casey Blair: [00:58:24] So, we've talked a lot about systems of communication as worldbuilding in fantasy, but we've also more recently started talking about it as code. And since this is 4th Street and we talk about fantasy, I was wondering if the panel could talk a little bit about spells and magic as system of communication? Feel free to interpret magic and spells as numinously or science fictionally as you would prefer.

Arkady Martine: [00:58:59] So there's a lot—sorry Sherwood, you can go ahead.

Sherwood Smith: [00:59:03] I was just going to say, that's something I work with a lot and there are different. To make it interesting, you have to have limitations, but you can create levels within that and once you get your readership used to that, you can change it all up.

Arkady Martine: [00:59:26] So there's a repeated trope which is one that I love in a lot of fantasy that uses magic and that is the idea of the true name. The language that describes something, whether it's a person, a concept, a moment, an event so completely accurately that to speak it wrong changes what it is. And it's the speech from Diane Duane's *So You Want to be a Wizard*, but it's everywhere. The true name concept, also controlling magical or numinous beings by the uses of their true names.

Django Wexler: [01:00:10] That goes back to at least Egypt.

Arkady Martine: [01:00:12] Longer. I can think of Akkadian examples. So, yeah. As long as we've been talking to things beyond human ken, we seem to think if we know what to call them, they'll have to listen. Which is an interesting sort of pan-human concept. But I think that is a kind of encoding of communication into magic or magic into communication. The idea of some kind of deep speech that lets you speak for true and therefore change things.

John Appel: [01:00:54] It's the idea that, in a sense, magic is communication at a sort of ultimate level. Communication that enforces obedience or whatever. So you can, if you can communicate in the right way, you can get results from inanimate objects or make animals do your bidding, or plants, or whatever.

Benjamin C. Kinney: [01:01:22] The assembly language of the universe.

John Appel: [01:01:24] Yeah.

Django Wexler: [01:01:26] Yes, I'm not the first person to note, as I've said before, but the interesting thing about science fiction is, of course, the computers actually work this way and the computer code is the true language and it does change the objective reality.

John Appel: [01:01:44] Well, and Neal Stephenson played with that idea, kind of, in *Snow Crash*. The idea that you were able to, and Ben, I'm sure, has a critique of this, but the idea that you could hack people neuro-linguistically. The idea that you could directly attack the neural structures through an auditory path. Although I'd be interested to hear

Ben talk, and we'll have to catch up at the bar some time, and hear to what extent that might be plausible.

Benjamin C. Kinney: [01:02:12] Oh yes, indeed.

Django Wexler: [01:02:14] That is definitely another panel. But I want to take this idea that we've been batting around here and take it in a slightly different direction. Because all this is really cool about the spells and magic as communication. My first reaction to that is thinking about in terms of cultural practices. What do you know about somebody from the way they use magic? Is there things about their... maybe there's three different ways, maybe there's an infinite number of ways to cast fireball and if I watch you do it, I can see, it's like, oh, you were trained by this school or this guy or whatever, oh, you come from the place that has access to the sulfur so you do this stuff. What can you, what are you incidentally and necessarily conveying through performing these acts of magic?

John Appel: [01:03:09] Like in the [inaudible 01:03:11], the idea of the asignari that I could tell who trained you by the way that you execute your spells. I can tell—

Benjamin C. Kinney: [01:03:18] There's a word... shibboleth. I love the word shibboleth, but it basically means exactly this. Something about... it's... I believe it's an old biblical Hebrew term, but it's—

Arkady Martine: [01:03:32] It's biblical, yeah.

Benjamin C. Kinney: [01:03:32] But it's—

Arkady Martine: [01:03:34] I will admit that the reason I know this is that one West Wing episode.

[Crosstalk: 01:03:39]

Django Wexler: [01:03:42] West Wing...

John Appel: [01:03:42] So those of you in the audience who don't know it, it's a distinctive pronunciation that lets you tell, oh you said it this way, you must be from this place, and this group. That distinctive thing is a shibboleth. It's such a wonderful word.

Django Wexler: [01:04:01] All right. I think we're about out of time. So let me—go ahead, Casey.

Casey Blair: [01:04:09] Did you want to do any final thoughts or should I close this out here.

Django Wexler: [01:04:15] Let me go through each of our panelists and I guess I'll start us off and just tell us where we can find you on the internet to get more information and buy your books or read your stories. For me, I'm Django Wexler. You can go to DjangoWexler.com, that's Django with a D. Or @DjangoWexler on Twitter and I will be there. John?

John Appel: [01:04:39] Yeah, I am at @oldscout on Twitter and, which... Twitter handles as a form of communication and signaling, hm, we didn't even get there.

Django Wexler: [01:04:47] Oh God, we didn't get into that.

John Appel: [01:04:49] Let alone the whole Halloween names.

Arkady Martine: [01:04:52] Oh God.

John Appel: [01:04:53] My website is aetherwatch.com. My debut novel, Assassin's Orbit comes out from Rebellion Publishing, hopefully, summer of 2021.

Django Wexler: [01:05:06] Ben?

Benjamin C. Kinney: [01:05:07] Yeah. I'm Benjamin C. Kinney. I have a website at BenjaminCKinney.com, all one word. I'm on Twitter at @BenCKinney, K-I-N-N-E-Y.

Django Wexler: [01:05:21] Arkady?

Arkady Martine: [01:05:23] I'm Arkady Martine. I can be found on Twitter at @ArkadyMartine and I have a website at ArkadyMartine.net because I wasn't clever enough to think of the .com idea. And I have an Instagram at @byzantienne, but I never use it so you don't really have to go find me there.

Django Wexler: [01:05:46] Sherwood?

Sherwood Smith: [01:05:48] My website is SherwoodSmith.net because there was another Sherwood Smith who got the .com. I'm @SherwoodSmith on Twitter although I only do it about 15 minutes a week, if that. I'm more often on Dreamwidth for blogging as sartorias, S-A-R-T-O-R-I-A-S, and I review a lot at Goodreads.

Django Wexler: [01:06:16] And Casey, you want to tell us who you are and then close us out?

Casey Blair:

[01:06:19] All right. Yeah, I think that's all we've got for you today. Thank you panelists, everyone for joining us and sharing your thoughts. And thank you to everyone who tuned in to listen to our podcast edition of 4th Street Fantasy 2020. Take care, and we hope to see you folks at the con next year.