

# On the generation of content\*

Sandro Zucchi  
Università degli Studi di Milano

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## Abstract

This chapter explores the view that the contents of fictions and non-fictions are generated in the same way. It advocates a general principle of content generation which extends the account of fictional truths proposed by David Lewis. It is argued that, in generating the contents of fictions and non-fictions, the same issues arise and they may be dealt with in the same way. The proposal rests on Stalnaker's view that the assumptions shared by the participants in a conversational exchange provide the material out of which propositions are constructed. The idea underlying the account is that the communicative exchange involved in an author's producing a work for an audience, whether the work is fictive or non-fictive, is no different in principle from communicative exchanges in conversations. Differences in content related to fictional vs. non-fictional status are argued to depend on the role that conventions play in generating implicit truths in both fictive and non-fictive works.

**Keywords:** fiction, non-fiction, content, truth, possible worlds, conventions, unreliable narrators

## 1 The zero option

*Robinson Crusoe* was anonymously published in 1719 as a real life memoir.<sup>1</sup> However, it was soon discovered that Daniel Defoe was the real author, and

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<sup>1</sup>In the editor's Preface it is declared: "The Editor believes the thing to be a just *History of Fact; neither is there any Appearance of Fiction in it...*" (from the *Preface* to the first edition of *The life and strange surprising adventures of Robinson Crusoe of York,*

in 1720 it was conceded that the story was made up, although it alluded to real events.<sup>2</sup> So, when *Robinson Crusoe* was originally published, Defoe was pretending to narrate events he had knowledge of, but he was trying to deceive the audience, his intention was that the audience reading the text would *believe* that the events narrated in the story occurred. By anybody's definition of fiction, this means that *Robinson Crusoe*, originally, was not fiction. When in 1720 Defoe finally admitted that the story was a product of his imagination, his intention was then that the audience reading the text would *make-believe* that the narrated events occurred. By then, *Robinson Crusoe* was a work of fiction.

Depending on your ontological views about fiction, you might describe what happened in different ways. You might say that *Robinson Crusoe* changed its status: from non-fiction it became fiction; or, if you don't think that a work can change its status in time with respect to being fictive, you might say that there are two *Robinson Crusoes*, one published by the author with the intention of inviting the audience to *believe* that its content is true and another one published by the author with the intention of inviting the audience to *make-believe* that its content is true. Whatever your position on this issue is, one thing is clear: many of the things that were true in the story of the non-fictive *Robinson Crusoe* stay true in the story of the fictive *Robinson Crusoe*. It stays true that, according to *Robinson Crusoe*, a mariner called "Robinson Crusoe" is born in the English city of York in the year 1632, gets shipwrecked on an island, has a companion called "Friday", and so on. Maybe something does change in what is true in the story when the change to fiction from non-fiction occurs. But what? The content of *Robinson Crusoe* seems to be largely unaffected by its change of status.

Of course, there is an obvious reason for this and it is that fictive and non-fictive *Robinson Crusoe* share the same text, they are constituted by

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*mariner*, 1719, London: W. Taylor, emphasis mine). Mahon (2019) contends, however, that this claim only meant that the work should be taken as conveying ethically legitimate and serious truths. This is in contrast with Minto's (1879) portrayal of Defoe as "perhaps the greatest liar that ever lived". For the purpose of my discussion, I will assume that that the claim in the Preface of the first edition was meant to be taken literally.

<sup>2</sup>The admission was somewhat oblique. In *Serious Reflections During the Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, published in 1720 as a collection of essays written by Crusoe himself, Crusoe is still credited as the author of the 1719 volume. However, in Crusoe's Preface it is claimed: "In a word, there is not a circumstance in the *imaginary story* but has its just allusion to a real story, and chimes part for part and step for step with the inimitable Life of Robinson Crusoe." (emphasis mine). Furthermore, in the publisher's Introduction, the story of Robinson Crusoe is referred to as a "parable" and a "fable" whose moral is agreeable and most instructive.

the same sentences. Notice, however, that the fact that York is an English city is not explicitly said in the text, and yet it stays true in *Robinson Crusoe* that York is an English city. Thus, the fact that both explicit and implicit content tend to be unaffected by change of status is still in need of an explanation. The general question I'll explore in this paper is how the content of fictive and non-fictive works is generated. When we say that it's true in *Robinson Crusoe* that York is an English city, which principle(s) do we use in order to determine what is true in it? How do the means by which we generate the content of fictive works differ, if at all, from the means by which we generate the content of non-fictive works?

Several proposals have been made about how the contents of fictions are generated.<sup>3</sup> What the *Robinson Crusoe* case suggests is that the principle(s) for generating fictive and non-fictive content must be sufficiently close to guarantee that much of what is true in the non-fictive *Robinson Crusoe* stays true in the fictive *Robinson Crusoe*. Yet, as far as I know, no attempt has been made to extend the proposals concerning fictive content to account for the way non-fictive content is generated. In exploring how this extension could be obtained, it may be useful to start from the radical position expressed by Matravers (2014):

Walton has rightly claimed that principles of generation [of fictive content] have grown up in an unsystematic and ad hoc manner: “The machinery of generation is devised of rubber bands and paper clips and powered by everything from unicorns in traces to baking soda mixed with vinegar” (Walton 1990, p. 183). My point is only that these principles are not characteristic of fiction but characteristic of representations (whether fictions or non-fictions). [Matravers 2014: 88-89].

Matraver's position is a sort of “zero option”: the contents of fictions and non-fictions are generated by the same principle(s). Even if, ultimately, the zero option turns out to be false, it may be worth investigating how far it can be defended. This is what I am going to do.

## 2 Implicit content

Following Ross (1997), I'll use the term *media* as a general term to refer to both fictive and non-fictive works. Before I propose a principle of content generation for fictive and non-fictive media, I need to elaborate on the notion

<sup>3</sup>By Lewis (1978), Currie (1990), Walton (1990), among others.

of implicit content of media. As the case of *Robinson Crusoe* shows, implicit content is no exclusive property of fictive media. If we are inclined to accept that in fictive *Robinson Crusoe* it is true that York is an English city, we should be inclined to do the same for non-fictive *Robinson Crusoe*.

The implicit content of non-fictive media is clearly dependent on which assumptions are shared by the author of the medium and the addressee. Consider the following case. On February 21 1952, Lillian Hellman was subpoenaed to appear in front of the House Committee on Un-American Activities. She decided she would not answer questions about other people she had been involved with in her political activities, but she did not want to take the Fifth Amendment (by which she could decline to answer questions where the answers might incriminate her), because she thought she did nothing wrong. Her companion, Dashiell Hammett, was against this choice, since he thought it would land her in jail. Suppose Hammett wrote a letter to Hellman saying:

- (1) Either you will take the Fifth Amendment or you will go to jail for contempt of the court.

In reporting the content of the letter, we may truthfully assert (2):

- (2) According to the letter, given that Hellman will not answer questions about others, either she will take the Fifth Amendment or she will go to jail for contempt of the court.

The letter does not explicitly say that Hellman will not answer questions about others. However, given the shared background of the communicative exchange, we may report its content as in (2).

According to Stalnaker (1988, p. 156), the assumptions shared by the participants in a conversational exchange, or *common ground*, provide “the material out of which propositions are constructed”. Formally, the set of assumptions shared by the participants in a communicative exchange is modelled by Stalnaker through the *context set*, the set of worlds compatible with the shared assumptions.<sup>4</sup> The context set provides the domain of possible worlds from which propositions (functions from possible worlds into truth-values) take their arguments.<sup>5</sup> So, the same sentence uttered against different conversational backgrounds may express different propositions, as different backgrounds provide different context sets, namely different domains of possible worlds out of which the proposition expressed by the sentence is

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<sup>4</sup>Stalnaker (1978, p. 321).

<sup>5</sup>Stalnaker (1988, p. 156)

built. In the case of Hammett’s letter, (1) is produced against a context set which consists of worlds in which Hellman will not answer questions about others. And this is why we may report the content of the letter as we do in (2). In the next section, I’ll suggest that the common ground also plays a role when we generate the contents of fictions.

### 3 The proposal

#### 3.1 A semi-informal statement

In my discussion, I’ll focus on the content of *verbal* media (newspaper articles, essays, letters, novels, plays, tales told while gathered around the campfire, and so on).

I assume that the *context of origin* of a medium, whether fictive or not, is a context in which the author plays the speaker role to an audience. The common ground of the context of origin consists in the assumptions shared by the audience and the author. Following Currie (1990), I assume that a medium is fictive iff, roughly, the text of the medium is uttered by the author with the intention that the audience *make-believe* that the utterance is true.<sup>6</sup> In the case of non-fictive media like newspaper articles, essays, letters, etc., on the other hand, the text is uttered by the author with the intention that the audience *believe* that the utterance is true. If the audience engages properly with a non-fictive medium of this sort, that is it engages with the non-fictive medium by complying with the author’s intentions, it will *believe* that the text of the medium is asserted by the author. On the other hand, if the audience engages properly with a fictive medium, that is it engages with the fictive medium by complying with the author’s intentions, it will *make-believe* that the text of the medium is asserted by the author. I take it that for both fictive and non-fictive media the new common ground resulting from the engagement is one in which the text of the medium is asserted by the author, although the reasons for accepting this assumption are different for fictive and non-fictive media (make-believe for the former and belief for the latter). I call this new common ground *the context of engagement*.

Following Stalnaker (1978, p. 321), I assume that the common ground is modelled through a set of possible worlds, *the context set*, the set of worlds compatible with the assumptions shared by the conversational participants. I suggest that *the content of a (verbal) medium m*, whether *m* is fiction or

<sup>6</sup>See Chapter 1 of Currie (1990) for a more precise formulation.

not, be modelled as the set of worlds obtained by supposing that the text of  $m$  is true against the background provided by the context of engagement for  $m$ .<sup>7</sup> In other words, in order to build the content of a medium, one must do this:

1. minimally revise the common ground of the context of origin of the medium by introducing the assumption that the text is asserted;
2. for each  $k$  in the set of worlds compatible with the revised common ground, get the  $k'$  minimally different from  $k$  in which the text of the medium is true.

The set of worlds  $k'$  obtained by doing 1-2 is the content of the medium.

## 3.2 A more formal statement

### 3.2.1 Truth in context

More formally, I'll model common ground and media content as sets of *centered worlds*.<sup>8</sup> One advantage of using centered worlds is that it allows us to deal with indexical expressions possibly contained in verbal media.

A (*multi-*)*centered world*  $k$  consists of a world and a center, where the center is an  $n$ -tuple consisting of a time, a place, and a sequence of individuals:

$$k = \langle \langle t_k, p_k, a_{1k}, \dots, a_{nk} \rangle, w_k \rangle$$

Let  $\langle k, i \rangle$  be a pair consisting of  $k$ -world and an index (a world-time pair, for purpose of illustration). A model  $M$  for the language will include a function  $F$  (the interpretation function) which assigns

- a. to every pair  $\langle i, P^n \rangle$ , where  $P^n$  is an  $n$ -place predicate, a set of  $n$ -tuples of individuals, and
- b. to every pair  $\langle i, c_i \rangle$ , where  $c_i$  is an individual constant, a member of the domain of individuals.

Denotation relative to a  $k$ -world and an index may now be defined thus:

- (3) a.  $\llbracket P^n(c_i, \dots, c_n) \rrbracket_{k,i} = 1$  iff  $\langle F(i, c_i), \dots, F(i, c_n) \rangle \in F(i, P^n)$ .  
 b.  $\llbracket I \rrbracket_{k,i} = a_{1k}$ .

<sup>7</sup>In the formal statement of the proposal presented in the next section, common ground and medium content are modelled by using *centered* worlds.

<sup>8</sup>In assuming that the context set is a set of centered worlds, I follow Stalnaker (2014).

- c.  $\llbracket \text{you} \rrbracket_{k,i} = a_{2k} + \dots + a_{nk}$ .
- d.  $\llbracket \text{now} \rrbracket_{k,i} = t_k$ .
- e.  $\llbracket \text{here} \rrbracket_{k,i} = p_k$ .
- f.  $\llbracket \text{Actually } \varphi \rrbracket_{k,i} = 1$  iff  $\llbracket \varphi \rrbracket_{k,i'} = 1$ , where  $i'$  is identical to  $i$  except for the fact that  $w_{i'} = w_k$ .
- g.  $\llbracket \text{FUT} \varphi \rrbracket_{k,i} = 1$  iff there is a time  $t > t_k$  such that  $\llbracket \varphi \rrbracket_{k,i'} = 1$ , where  $i'$  is identical to  $i$  except for the fact that  $t_{i'} = t$ .
- h.  $\llbracket \text{the } P \rrbracket_{k,i} = a$  if  $\llbracket P \rrbracket_{k,i} = \{a\}$ , undefined otherwise.

A *context* is a  $k = \langle \langle t_k, p_k, a_{1k}, \dots, a_{nk} \rangle, w_k \rangle$  such that  $a_{1k}$  is the agent and  $\langle a_{2k}, \dots, a_{nk} \rangle$  the audience in the world  $w_k$  at the time  $t_k$  in the place  $p_k$ .

A sentence  $\varphi$  is true (in a model) relative to a context  $k$  iff  $\varphi$  is true relative to  $\langle k, \langle w_k, t_k \rangle \rangle$ .

### 3.2.2 Context of engagement

Given a context  $k$ , the *common ground* (context set) of  $k$  (for short,  $c_k$ ) is the set of  $k'$  such that, for all  $a_{1k}, \dots, a_{nk}$  assume (and assume that they assume, and so on) at  $t_k, p_k$  in  $w_k$ , it might be that  $a_{1k'}, \langle a_{2k'}, \dots, a_{nk'} \rangle, t_{k'}, p_{k'}, w_{k'}$  are, respectively, the agent, audience, time, place and world of  $k$ . Intuitively, given a context  $k$ , the common ground of  $k$  is the set  $X$  of contexts that, for all the participants in the conversation assume in  $k$ , each member of  $X$  might be the context in which they are in.

Let  $m$  be a medium that originates in a context  $k$ . The *context of engagement* for  $m$  relative to  $k$  is the set  $c'$  obtained from  $c_k$  by minimally revising  $c_k$  to satisfy this condition:

- for every  $k' \in c'$ ,  $a_{1k'}$  is the author of  $m$  who asserts the text of  $m$  in world  $w_{k'}$ , at time  $t_{k'}$ , in place  $p_{k'}$ .

Notice that, in the context  $k$  in which a fictive medium originates, the medium is not asserted by the author. Thus, the context of engagement  $c'$  of a fictive medium will exclude the context  $k$  in which the fictive medium is originally produced (i.e.,  $k \notin c'$ ).

### 3.2.3 The content of media

The content of the (verbal) media, fictive or not, is now defined as follows. Given a (verbal) medium  $m$ , “ $\wedge m$ ” is short for “the text of  $m$ ” and  $C(m, k)$  is short for “the content of medium  $m$  relative to the context  $k$ ”. For any

(multi-)centered world  $k$ ,  $f(\wedge m, k)$  is the  $k'$  in which the text of  $m$  is true which differs minimally from  $k$ .<sup>9</sup>

Given a (verbal) medium  $m$ ,  $C(m, k)$  is the set  $X = \{k'' \in K : \exists k' \in c' \text{ such that } k'' = f(\wedge m, k')\}$ , where  $c'$  is the context of engagement for  $m$  relative to the context in which  $m$  is originally produced.

In short, according to this definition, the content of a medium  $m$  is the set of  $k$ -worlds obtained by supposing that the text of  $m$  is true against the background provided by the context of engagement for  $m$ .

### 3.2.4 Semantics for *according to*

One way we talk about the content of media is by means of prepositions like “according to”. For example, we may say that according to *The Sherlock Holmes Canon*, Holmes lives in Baker Street and we may also say that according to the newspaper article, Trump spends his holidays in Mar-a-Lago.<sup>10</sup> A natural way of stating the semantics for “according to” in my proposal is the following:

$$(3) \quad \text{i.} \quad \llbracket \text{According to } m, \varphi \rrbracket_{k,i} = 1 \text{ iff for every } k' \in C(m, k), \\ \llbracket \varphi \rrbracket_{k, \langle w_{k'}, t_{k'} \rangle} = 1.$$

<sup>9</sup>There might be more than one centered world  $k'$  in which the text of  $m$  is true which differs minimally from  $k$ . So, a more adequate formulation should allow for this possibility. I ignore this issue for sake of simplicity.

<sup>10</sup>The use of “according to” to describe the content of fictive and non-fictive media is attested both in the philosophical literature (see Sainsbury 2014, for example) and in non-philosophical corpora, as the following examples show:

- (i) “According to the novel, the West is apparently awash with predatory homosexuals” (from *History Today*, Feb 2015, Vol. 65 Issue 2, p. 28-35).
- (ii) “the grail also represents the womb of Mary Magdalene, who according to the novel bore Jesus’ child and whose descendants live on in France today” (from *Christian Century*, Vol. 121, Issue 11, p. 20).
- (iii) “According to the article, the Predator drones flying out of Niger are currently being used to feed surveillance footage to French and African troops on the ground in Mali” (from *Atlantic*, Oct 2013, Vol. 312, Issue 3, p. 60-70).

Notice that other prepositions used to describe media contents are less flexible in this respect. For example, it seems appropriate to say that in the novel, Mary Magdalene bears Jesus a child, but it seems odd to say that in the article Predator drones are currently being used to feed surveillance footage (while it is acceptable to say that in the article it is claimed that Predator drones are used that way). For a discussion of the “in” and “according to” operators, see Semeijn (2020).



The predictions of the proposal about the contents of media may now be tested by checking the predictions it makes about the truth-value of sentences of the form  $\ulcorner$ According to medium  $m$ ,  $\varphi$  $\urcorner$ . Notice that, by the above truth-conditions, the denotation of indexicals in  $\varphi$  is determined by the context of utterance of  $\ulcorner$ According to  $m$ ,  $\varphi$  $\urcorner$ . The reason for this assumption is that, although *Robinson Crusoe* is narrated in first person, one cannot report on its content by saying (4):

(4) According to *Robinson Crusoe*, I was born in the city of York in 1632.

The indexical “I” in (4) can only be understood as referring to the speaker of (4).<sup>11</sup> This is predicted by the above semantics.

### 3.2.5 Back to *Robinson Crusoe*

Let’s now illustrate how the proposal works by considering the incipit of *Robinson Crusoe*:

(5) I was born in the year 1632, in the city of York . . .

According to the definition of content, the content of *Robinson Crusoe* is the set of k-worlds in which the text of Robinson Crusoe is true which differ minimally from some world in the context of engagement of *Robinson Crusoe*. Since the text contains sentence (5), in each of the k-worlds in the content of *Robinson Crusoe* the narrator is born in York in 1632. Moreover, since in the common ground of the context in which *Robinson Crusoe* was originally produced York is an English city, and the k-worlds of the context of engagement are obtained by minimally revising the common ground to make it true that the text of *Robinson Crusoe* is asserted, it is also true in the k-worlds of the context of engagement that York is an English city. Since the text of *Robinson Crusoe* is compatible with this assumption, it follows that York is an English city in the k-worlds of the content of *Robinson Crusoe*. Given our semantics for *according to*-sentences, it thus follows that (6) is true:

(6) According to *Robinson Crusoe*, the narrator is born in the English city of York in 1632.

Notice that this consequence does not depend on the assumption that the medium to which *Robinson Crusoe* refers in (6) is fiction (or non-fiction),

<sup>11</sup>See Zucchi (2017) for discussion of this point.

namely it does not depend on whether in the real world *Robinson Crusoe* is uttered with the intention that the audience believe that what is uttered is true or with the intention that the audience make-believe that what is uttered is true. So, the truth of (6) is not affected by the change of status. And the same goes for other truths in the story.

## 4 Probing the proposal

### 4.1 Accidental reference

With regard to fictive media, the proposal I make is largely derivative on Lewis’s (1978) account<sup>12</sup> and it inherits some of the problems that arise for it.<sup>13</sup> One major problem for Lewis is posed by contradictory fictions in which the contradiction, so to speak, takes center stage in the story. By his account, anything is predicted to be true in fictions of this kind, and the same prediction is made by the semantics for “according to” I sketched above.<sup>14</sup> A version of Lewis’s theory that avoids this problem was recently proposed by Badura and Berto (2018). I take it that this is the way to go, if one wants to solve the problem posed by contradictory fictions for Lewis’s approach, and that the account I propose should be modified along similar lines in order to deal with this problem. I shall not try to do it here. In the next sections, I’ll examine other problems for Lewis’s theory, and I’ll discuss how they can be dealt with on the basis of the principle of generation proposed in section 3.2.3.

First, however, let’s point out a desirable feature that my account shares with Lewis’s. One problem Lewis’s theory is designed to avoid is the so-called *problem of accidental reference*.<sup>15</sup> Sentence (7) is true:

- (7) According to *The Sherlock Holmes Canon*, the name “Sherlock Holmes” refers to someone.

However, the name “Sherlock Holmes”, as used in the *Canon*, does not refer to any real world individual (even if in the real world someone called “Sherlock Holmes” in Victorian times happened to perform all the deeds at-

<sup>12</sup>More precisely, on Lewis’s Analysis 2, since Lewis also sketches alternative analyses.

<sup>13</sup>For a critique of Lewis’s proposal, see Currie (1990), Byrne (1993), Proudfoot (2006), among others. For a defense, see Hanley (2004).

<sup>14</sup>The reason is that, if a fiction is contradictory, there is no  $k$  in which the text is true, so the fiction content is the empty set. By my semantics for “according to”, it follows that, for any  $\varphi$ , for every  $k'$ , if  $k' \in C(m, k)$ , then  $\llbracket \varphi \rrbracket_{k, \langle w_{k'}, t_{k'} \rangle} = 1$ .

<sup>15</sup>Kripke (1972), Lewis (1978).

tributed to Sherlock Holmes in the *Canon*, still the name “Sherlock Holmes”, as used in the *Canon*, would not refer to him). Thus, if we want to secure the truth of (7), the real world should not belong to the content of *The Sherlock Holmes Canon*.

In Lewis’s theory, the desired result is obtained by assuming that the worlds in the content of a fictive medium are worlds in which the medium is a report based on knowledge. Since fictive media are not reports based on knowledge in the worlds in which they are fictive, it follows that the world in which a fictive medium is produced never belongs to the content of the medium. In my account, as I pointed out in section 3.2.2, if  $m$  is fictive in the context  $k$  in which it originates, the context of engagement  $c'$  will not include  $k$  as a member, since it only includes centered worlds in which  $m$  is asserted. Given that the centered worlds in the content of  $m$  are worlds in which the text of  $m$  is true that minimally differ from some world in the context of engagement, the worlds in the content of  $m$ , presumably, are also worlds in which  $m$  is asserted. If so,  $k$  does not belong to the content of  $m$ .

Notice that, if this is correct, the content of fictive media differs systematically from that of non-fictive media. If a fictive medium  $m$  is produced in a world  $k$ ,  $k$  does not belong to the content of  $m$ , while if a non-fictive medium  $m$  is produced in a world  $k$ ,  $k$  may or may not belong to the content of  $m$ . But this does not show that the contents of fictive and non-fictive media are generated by different principles. This difference in content, as we have just seen, may result from the same principle of content generation, given the definitional properties of fictive and non-fictive media.

## 4.2 The unorthodox author

One aspect by which my definition of content differs from Lewis’s is that, while for Lewis the content of a fiction is obtained by revising the *overt beliefs* in the community of origin of the fiction, for me the content is obtained by revising the common ground of the context in which the fiction is produced.<sup>16</sup> An overt belief in a community is one that more or less everyone in the community shares, more or less everyone thinks that more or less everyone else shares, and so on. The common ground of the context in which the fiction is produced, on the other hand, consists in the assumptions shared by the author and its audience in the context of origin of the fiction.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup>The idea of modeling the content of fictional discourse by revising the common ground is also adopted by Semeijn (2017), and Maier and Semeijn (this volume).

<sup>17</sup>Before introducing the official definition of *overt belief*, Lewis suggests that the proper background that should be revised “consists of the beliefs that generally prevailed in

Bonomi and Zucchi (2003) raise the following problem for Lewis’s analysis. Suppose that K is a novelist living in a society in which everyone except him believes that cyclists are unworthy human beings. K, on the other hand, believes that cyclists are worthier human beings. Moreover, it is known to everyone that K has that belief and K knows that everyone knows that he has that belief. Now, suppose K writes a novel in which a minor character is a cyclist. In the novel, nothing is said about the character’s worth. Intuitively, (8) is false:

(8) In K’s novel, the cyclist is an unworthy human being.

According to Lewis’s analysis, the content of a fiction is the set of worlds in which the medium is a report based on knowledge that are closest to the overt belief worlds of the community of origin of the fiction. The problem is that this analysis predicts that (8) is true, since the worlds in which K’s novel is a report based on knowledge which are closest to the overt belief worlds of the community of origin of the novel are worlds in which cyclists are unworthy.

One way out suggested by Bonomi and Zucchi, and adopted by Badura and Berto (2018), is to modify Lewis’s analysis by giving more authority to the author. Roughly: the worlds of the fiction are the worlds in which the story is realized that are closest to the worlds compatible the beliefs that the author is widely known to have in the community of origin of the fiction. Yet, this move has a drawback. It predicts that (9) below is true. K might rightly complain that, although he believes that cyclists are superior human beings, he did not write a novel that should be understood as endorsing this view of the cyclist.

(9) In K’s novel, the cyclist is a worthier human being.

Moreover, letting the author’s beliefs determine the fiction’s implicit truths predicts that we should be much more reluctant to appreciate fiction by authors whose ideas we find repulsive. This is a good poem, I think:

And the days are not full enough  
 And the nights are not full enough  
 And life slips by like a field mouse

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the community where the fiction originated: the beliefs of the author and his intended audience.” But Lewis’s definition of overt belief does not require that it be shared by the author, it only makes reference to the prevailing character of the belief. Lewis’s unofficial characterization is closer to what I am assuming. The case described by Bonomi and Zucchi (2003) shows that these two characterizations may give rise to different predictions.

Not shaking the grass.  
(From *Lustra*, 1917)

Yet, the author is Ezra Pound, a fascist and a racist. I think it would be much harder for us to appreciate the poem if we assumed Pound's beliefs as the background from which implicit truths are generated.<sup>18</sup>

It is important to notice that the problem we are considering cuts across the fictive/non-fictive distinction. Suppose that K writes a newspaper article that reports on a minor accident in which a cyclist is involved and in the article nothing is said about the merits or demerits of the cyclist. Like (8) and (9), both (10) and (11) seem false:

- (10) According to K's article, the cyclist is an unworthy human being.
- (11) According to K's article, the cyclist is a worthier human being.

If the above observations are correct, we should not try to respond to the problem posed by the case of K by giving more weight to the beliefs of the author than to the beliefs of the audience. Moreover, an appropriate solution should work for both fictive and non-fictive media, since, as we saw, the same problem arises for both.

By my proposal, a natural solution is at hand: it is not true according to the (fictive or non-fictive) medium that the cyclist is an unworthy human being and it is not true according to the same medium that the cyclist is a worthier human being, because neither the belief that cyclists are unworthy human beings nor the belief that cyclists are worthier human beings is common ground in the context in which the medium is originally produced. Since these beliefs are not common ground, by the definition of medium content, it follows that it is false that according to K's medium the cyclist is a worthier human being and it is also false that according to K's medium the cyclist is an unworthy human being.

Notice that, while the same move (give priority to the beliefs shared by the audience and the author) may also be implemented in other accounts

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<sup>18</sup>The problem of letting the author's beliefs intrude into the work's content may be mitigated if beliefs that are irrelevant to the subject matter of the work are expunged from its content (see section 5 on this). However, the problem of authorial intrusion should not be conflated with the problem of the intrusion of truths extraneous to the subject matter, since the first may arise even if the second is avoided. Suppose that the subject matter of K's novel is about moral worth. It may still be false that in K's novel the cyclist is a worthier human being. And would we still appreciate the poetry of Pound's injunction "Learn of the green world what can be thy place" (Canto LXXXI), if we took our place in the green world to be the place assigned to us in the kind of world order Pound was wishing for?

of fictional content, the move follows naturally from the idea, underlying the proposed account of medium content, that the communicative exchange involved in an author's producing a medium for an audience, whether the medium is fictive or non-fictive, is no different in principle from communicative exchanges in conversations. If this idea is correct, the fact that the content of media is built from the beliefs shared by the audience and the author is simply an instance of the more general fact that in communicative exchanges what is communicated is built out of the domain of possible worlds representing the shared assumptions of the participants to the exchange.

### 4.3 Conventions

One known source of implicit truths in fiction is convention. Roughly, the governing principle seems to be this:

if it is a convention of the genre to which a fiction  $m$  belongs that 'if A, then B', then if A is true in  $m$ , B is true in  $m$ , unless the text of  $m$  explicitly states that not-B.

For example, it is a convention of fairy tales that, if a woman wears a black cape and rides a broom stick, she is a witch (the example is from Walton 1990). Suppose it is true in fairy tale  $m$  that a certain character is a woman wearing a black cape and riding a broom stick. Unless the text says otherwise, it follows that it is also true in the fairy tale that the woman is a witch, even if this is not explicitly stated in the tale.

Surely, the convention that, if a woman wears a black cape and rides a broom stick, she is a witch is restricted to (a genre of) fiction. We would not expect the content of non-fictive media to contain implicit truths generated by conventions of the same sort: if we read in the newspaper that a woman in a black cape was seen riding a broomstick, we do not infer that according to the article, the woman is a witch. So, different truths are generated depending on whether a text constitutes a fiction or a non-fiction. Does this show that the zero option is false?

It is important to notice that, while conventions for fictive media may not hold for non-fictive ones, different genres of non-fictive media may also be subject to conventions and they may play a role in determining what is true in the medium. Here is how Matravers illustrates the role of convention as a source of truth in fictive and non-fictive media:

Walton points out that any nearly naked man pierced by arrows in medieval or Renaissance Christian art will be Saint Sebastian

(Walton 1990: 163). This will be the case whether the narrative is (taken to be) non-fiction or fiction; the principle of generation works in either case. It is true that there are certain principles of generation that have grown up within the institution of fiction—even fiction which obeys the reality principle—which cannot be found in non-fictive narratives. To take an example from Panofsky cited by Walton, it might be that even in a realist fiction a chequered tablecloth means ‘a poor but honest milieu’ (Walton 1990: 163). Once again, that is nothing special about fiction. There are similar conventions in non-fiction which enables, for example, editors of news reports to use an opening in which a family is taking tea around the dining-room table to establish at least the presumption that the family is ‘normal’. (Matravers 2014, p. 89).

If conventions play a role in generating implicit truths in both fictive and non-fictive media, their contribution to content generation should be taken into account in stating the principle by which content is generated. In the current proposal, the natural move is to assume (12):

- (12) for any medium  $m$  the conventions of the genre  $m$  belongs to hold in the context of engagement.

Given the way media content is defined, this leads us to expect that conventions should contribute to what is true in a medium, unless the text of the medium indicates otherwise. So, the role of conventions in generating content does not mean that the zero option is false, that fictional content and non-fictional content are generated by different principles. It shows instead that the principle governing the generation of media content, whether they be fictional or not, should be parameterized to the conventions of the genre to which the medium belongs, as in (12). This has nothing to do with the fictive/non-fictive distinction. Fictive media belonging to different genres may be subject to different conventions (fairy tales and realistic novels, for example) and some of the same conventions may hold both for fictive media and non-fictive ones (historical novels and popular history books, for example).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Appeal to the conventions of the medium’s genre also provides a way of dealing with the case of Julio Cortázar’s *A continuity of parks* discussed by García-Carpintero (2007). In Cortázar’s story, a man is reading a novel that narrates a course of events leading up to the murder of a husband by his wife’s lover. By end of the story, it becomes obvious, without being stated explicitly, that the very same course of events is happening to the

#### 4.4 Unreliable narrators

Consider the following passage from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*:

... This is the speech—I learned it, easy enough, while he was learning it to the king:  
 To be, or not to be; that is the bare bodkin  
 That makes calamity of so long life. . .

As Byrne (1993) points out, despite what the narrator asserts, (13) is false and (14) is true:

- (13) According to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the first line of Hamlet’s monologue is “To be, or not to be; that is the bare bodkin”.
- (14) According to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck gets the first line of Hamlet’s monologue wrong.

At first blush, the generation principle I assume does not account for these facts. It doesn’t, because it requires that the text of the medium be true in the worlds of the medium. So, if the narrator says that the first line of Hamlet’s monologue is “To be, or not to be; that is the bare bodkin”, the principle appears to predict that according to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* the first line of the monologue is how the narrator says. Notice that sentences (13)-(14) pose the same problem for Lewis’s analysis (I inherited it from it), since according to his analysis the worlds of a fiction are worlds in which the fiction is told as a report based in knowledge.

What is worse, the case of *Huckleberry Finn* described above seems to bring out a difference between fictive and non-fictive media. Suppose that *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* were a non-fictive chronicle of the travels of a fourteen year old boy. In this case, while we would be inclined to

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reader in the story. One point García-Carpintero makes here is that, if we took *A continuity of parks* to be a chronicle of real world events, no appeal to common knowledge or to what is the case in the real world could elicit the conclusion that the reader in the story is about to be murdered. According to García-Carpintero, this indicates that the way fictive content is generated is essentially different from the way non-fictive content is generated. My contention is that getting the implication that the reader in the story is about to be murdered requires accepting the conventions, common to Cortázar’s stories and more generally to postmodernist fiction, by which one might expect paradoxical conclusions, by which unlikely coincidences may be taken as clues to what the denouement is, however improbable it may be. These conventions, however, are not a general feature of fiction, thus cannot be taken to set fiction apart from non-fiction. A naive reader who mistook Cortázar’s story for a historical fiction would be as puzzled by the story as someone who read it as a chronicle of real events.



regard someone who speaks like Huck as unreliable, we would judge (13) true and (14) false. How is this difference between fictive and non-fictive media explained if the principle which generates their contents is the same?

Lewis's move to deal with the problem raised by unreliable narrators for his account is to generalize the account by suggesting that *in the worlds of the fiction the author does what in the real world he pretends to be doing*:

Sometimes the storyteller purports to be uttering a mixture of truth and lies about matters whereof he has knowledge, or ravings giving a distorted reflection of the events, or the like... In these exceptional cases also, the thing to do is to consider those worlds where the act of storytelling really is whatever it purports to be—ravings, reliable translation of a reliable source, or whatever—here at our world. (Lewis 1978, p. 40)

According to Lewis's suggestion, in the case of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, in the real world the author *pretends* to be someone called Huck Finn who gives an account of his travels which is a mixture of truth and distorted reflection of events, so in the worlds of the novel the author *is* someone called Huck Finn who gives an account of his travels which is a mixture of truth and distorted reflection of events. Lewis's suggestion could also be developed to account for the apparent difference between fictive and non-fictive media by supposing that, while in the worlds of a fictive medium the author does what in the real world he pretends to be doing, in the worlds of a non-fictive medium the text of the medium is true. Notice that, while this suggestion might get the facts right, in effect it amounts to giving up the zero option. Does this mean that, in the case of unreliable narrators, the hypothesis that the contents of fictions and non-fictions are generated by the same principle has finally proved untenable?

In fact, it seems to me that this conclusion may be avoided. Before I give my reason, let me discuss some alternative threads one might follow to challenge the conclusion. How general is the difference between fictive and non-fictive media brought out by the Huck Finn case? Is it really true that with non-fictive media it never occurs that (a) the text explicitly says that *p*, and yet (b) *p* is false according to the medium? If I write a newspaper article detailing the calamitous effects of a politician's action and then I conclude with the sentence "he is a true statesman", then one might say that in the article I have explicitly stated that he is a true statesman, although it is false that according to the article he is a true statesman. So, cases of irony might be used to argue that Huck Finn-type phenomena also occur with non-fictive media. Of course, the question of how exactly cases of irony should be dealt

with in stating a principle of content generation for fictive and non-fictive media remains open, but if Huck Finn-type phenomena occur both in fictive and non-fictive media, it is unclear that they provide evidence against the zero option. Parodies might also be regarded as media which instantiate (a)-(b). If I say, in a slightly nasal voice, “Our press secretary, Sean Spicer, gave alternative facts”, it is true that in my parody of presidential counselor K. Conway, I explicitly stated that Spicer gave alternative facts, though it is false that according to my parody, Spicer gave alternative facts. Again, if parodies are instances of non-fictive media with unreliable narrators, there is hope to salvage the zero option.

I think both these ways of defending the zero option are wrong. As regards parodies, I think it is wrong to claim that they are instances of non-fictive media with unreliable narrators. In parodies, the narrator *pretends* to be someone who speaks and acts in a certain way. Thus, parodies, unlike newspaper articles, essays, letters, etc., are cases in which the narrator pretends to assert. As they involve pretence, they should not be assimilated to non-fictive media.<sup>20</sup>

For different reasons, I think it is wrong to claim that non-fictive media with ironic content are instances of non-fictive media with unreliable narrators. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck believes that the first line of Hamlet’s monologue says “To be or not to be, this is the bare bodkin”, though it is false in the fiction that the monologue begins in that way. According to my newspaper article about the calamitous deeds of the politician, it is false that the politician is a true statesman. However, according to the article I don’t believe he is a true statesman either. So, I am not an unreliable narrator at all. Moreover, according to some authors,<sup>21</sup> irony is really a form of pretence. If this is correct, ironic utterances are not appropriately regarded as non-fictive.

So, we are back to square one: if the contents of fictive and non-fictive media are generated in the same way, why don’t we find cases comparable to that of Huck Finn with non-fictive media? I think we do. The TLS, like other magazines, has a column titled *Letters to the editor*. The issue of August 24 and 31, 2018 contains the following text:

<sup>20</sup>Currie (1990) claims that parodies should not be conflated with fictions, since the author of a parody, unlike the author of a novel, does not have the intention that the audience make-believe that his utterances are true. In any case, parodies, as they involve pretence, should also not be assimilated to non-fictive media like articles, essays, letters, etc.

<sup>21</sup>Clark and Gerrig (1984), Kumon-Nakamura et al. (1995), Clark (1996), Currie (1996).

- (15) Sir, – Your Irish readers will have been puzzled by the label “The Christian Brotherhood” in Kate Webb’s review of the *Collected letters of Flann O’ Brien* (August 3). It suggests that the Christian Brothers, renowned for their “physical force” approach to education, bear some comparison with the Mafia. This is a possible slur on the Mafia. Yours sincerely, Iggy McGovern, 40 Gledswood Avenue, Dublin

Is it true, according to the TLS’s *Letters to the editor*, that comparing the Christian Brothers to the Mafia is a possible slur on the Mafia? Clearly, the answer is no. What *is* true, according to the TLS’s *Letters to the editor*, is that Mr. McGovern claims that comparing the Christian Brothers to the Mafia is a possible slur on the Mafia. Although there are no quotation marks around the text of the letter, the text *is* quoted, and we are supposed to understand that the quotation marks are there. Accordingly, the proper way for the reader to engage with the TLS’s *Letters to the editor* is to assume that the editor is asserting that (15) was uttered by Mr. McGovern, and the worlds in the content of the TLS’s *Letters to the editor* are worlds in which it is true that (15) was uttered by Mr. McGovern. If this is correct, the TLS’s *Letters to the editor* poses no real challenge for my definition of medium content, all is required is a proper understanding of a medium whose text is quoted.

I claim that *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is the fictive equivalent of the TLS’s *Letters to the editor*. The novel ends with “Yours truly, Huck Finn”, this indicates that we are supposed to understand that the text of the novel is quoted. The author make-believes that he is asserting that the quoted text was uttered by Huck Finn. Accordingly, the proper way for the reader to engage with the *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is to accept, for make-believe purposes, that the author is asserting that the quoted text was uttered by Huck Finn, and the worlds in the content of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are worlds in which it is true that the text of the novel was uttered by Huck Finn. If this is correct, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* does not call into question my (or Lewis’s) definition of medium content, since the text of the novel does not say that the first line of Hamlet’s monologue is “To be, or not to be; that is the bare bodkin”, rather it says that *Huck says* that that is the first line of Hamlet’s monologue. The prediction of the account is not that (13) is true, but that (16) is true:

- (16) According to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck says that the first line of Hamlet’s monologue is “To be, or not to be; that is

the bare bodkin”.

Since the worlds of the context of engagement are, presumably, worlds in which the first line of Hamlet’s monologue is “To be, or not to be; that is the problem”, and that is not contradicted by the text of the novel, it also follows that, according to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck gets the first line of Hamlet’s monologue wrong.<sup>22</sup>

Of course, we may be willing to make-believe that some parts of Huck’s narration are more reliable than other parts: we may be inclined to make-believe that Huck is reliable when he tells us that he takes a raft down the Mississippi River with the runaway slave Jim. In a parallel way, we may be inclined to believe that Mr. McGovern is reliable when he says that Kate Webb reviewed the *Collected letters of Flann O’ Brien* on the issue of August 3. Yet, strictly speaking, what is true according to the TLS’s *Letters to the editor* is that Mr. McGovern *says* that Kate Webb reviewed the *Collected letters of Flann O’ Brien* on the issue of August 3. If this is correct, one may also concede that, strictly speaking, what is true according to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is that Huck *says* that he took a raft down the Mississippi River with the runaway slave Jim.

Let me elaborate on this point. One may object that we commonly report on the content of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by saying that, according to the novel, Huck takes a raft down the Mississippi River with the runaway slave Jim. If Huck were being quoted, we should not be disposed to accept reports of this kind. Notice, however, that we commonly accept the same kind of reports also in cases in which it is made explicit in the novel that the text narrating the story is quoted. For example, one may report on the content of *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa* by Jan Potocki by saying that, according to the novel, Alphonse is an officer of the Walloon Guards. Yet, according to the novel, the story of Alphonse is told in a manuscript found by an officer of the French army at the siege of Saragossa. The topos of the found manuscript is a common literary ploy to tell a story, and the character who finds the manuscript is often encountered at the beginning of the novel and then quickly disposed of. It is no wonder that we allow ourselves some slack in reporting the content of the novel by ignoring the story is being quoted. This is what we do when we say that, according to *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa*, Alphonse is an officer of the Walloon Guards. In the case of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, we are not told explicitly that Huck is being quoted. But some clues suggest that in the

<sup>22</sup>For different approaches to unreliable narrators, see Currie (1990), Byrne (1993), Maier and Semeijn (this volume), Eckardt (this volume), Franzén (this volume).

story Huck may not be reliable in some respects,<sup>23</sup> and this indicates that we should make-believe that someone is reporting his words.<sup>24</sup> However, when we report on parts of the story for which we have no reason to doubt Huck's reliability, we can afford to be loose and say that, according to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck rafts along the Mississippi River with the slave Jim.<sup>25</sup>

## 5 Extraneous truths

Before concluding, I'll make some remarks concerning the problem of extraneous truths, a version of which also arises for the proposal I presented here. Suppose that in the context of origin of Conan Doyle's stories it is common knowledge that Timbuktu is in Africa. Then, given that nothing in the text of the stories indicates that Timbuktu is somewhere else, the proposal predicts that (17) is true, which is obviously incorrect:

(17) According to *The Sherlock Holmes Canon*, Timbuktu is in Africa.

The issue also arises for non fictive texts, if we accept that they also have implicit content. For example, one needs to explain why (2) is true, but (18) is not:

(2) According to the letter, given that Hellman will not answer questions about others, either she will take the Fifth Amendment or she will go to jail for contempt of the court.

(18) According to the letter, Timbuktu is in Africa.

Again, the proposal I presented predicts that (18) is true, since that Timbuktu is in Africa was presumably common ground for Hammett and Hellman, and nothing in the text of the letter indicates otherwise. Again, this is an undesirable consequence.

<sup>23</sup>According to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck only goes to school for three or four months, and can barely spell, read or write. This makes it likely that he might misquote Shakespeare.

<sup>24</sup>In narrations in which the story gives us no reason doubt the narrator's reliability, we need not assume that the narrator is being quoted, unless we are explicitly told so.

<sup>25</sup>Here, I should stress that I am not suggesting that all instances of unreliable narrators should be treated as involving quotation. Sometimes the narrator reveals that she or he lied halfway through the story. This is a case in which we are invited to revise our make-believe and correct some assumptions we made earlier on while reading the story. I take it that cases of this sort require a different treatment. I owe this point to D. Altschuhler.

The problem of extraneous truths also arises for major accounts of truth in fiction. Lewis's Analysis 2 makes the same prediction concerning (17), since in Conan Doyle's community it was presumably an overt belief that Timbuktu is in Africa and nothing in the text of the *Canon* indicates otherwise. But other accounts of truth in fiction that do not assume Lewis's possible world apparatus also run into similar problems. According to Currie (1990), what is true in a fiction is what it is reasonable for the informed reader to infer that the fictional author believes. What is relevant to determine the beliefs of the fictional author for Currie is what the fictional author says and what beliefs are prevalent and acknowledged to be prevalent in the community to which the fictional author belongs. The fictional author of the Sherlock Holmes stories is a Victorian (Watson), moreover the belief that Timbuktu is in Africa was presumably prevalent and acknowledged to be such in the Victorian era, and nothing in the story leads one to think otherwise. Thus, it follows that (17) is true by Currie's proposal.<sup>26</sup>

Intuitively, what's wrong with (17)-(18) is that, although it may be common ground that Timbuktu is in Africa, neither the *Canon* nor Hammett's letter to Hellman are about Timbuktu: Timbuktu's being in Africa is not part of the *subject matter* of the *Canon* or of letter. If this is correct, the picture given here of how the common ground contributes to determine what is true according to a medium needs to be amended: we need to exclude that propositions in the common ground that are extraneous to the subject

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<sup>26</sup>Strictly speaking, Lewis and Currie do not provide truth-conditions for "according to fiction  $f$ ,  $p$ ", but for "in fiction  $f$ ,  $p$ ". While both prefixes may be used to report on the content of media, they seem to differ semantically, as the facts in footnote 10 indicate. They might also differ in the degree they tolerate truths that are not directly relevant to the story. Yet, the problem of extraneous truths also arises for sentences of the form "in fiction  $f$ ,  $p$ ". For one thing, (i) still sounds odd:

- (i) In *The Sherlock Holmes Canon*, Timbuktu is in Africa.

If you are not convinced, another instance of the problem of extraneous truths for Lewis's Analysis 2 of "in fiction  $f$ ,  $p$ " is described in Proudfoot (2006, p. 25). Suppose there is a short fiction in which foreign forces invade Cambridge with tanks. The fiction gives a detailed description of the streets of Cambridge where enemy tanks are stationed, but makes no mention of Grantchester and makes no allusion as to whether foreign tanks occupy it. Suppose, moreover, that it is an overt belief in the community of origin of the fiction that there neither are nor were enemy tanks in Grantchester. As Proudfoot points out, Analysis 2 incorrectly predicts that (ii) is true:

- (ii) In the fiction, there are no enemy tanks in Grantchester at 0800 hours on 10th March 2005.

matter of the medium contribute to its content.<sup>27</sup>

One way to take on this problem in a possible world setting is to exploit a recent account of sentential subject matter proposed by Plebani and Spolaore (2020). In this account, which elaborates on Lewis (1988a,b), the subject matter of a sentence is recovered from its focus profile. For example, the subject matter of sentence (19) below, under the default focus profile on the predicate, is the location of Timbutku, which corresponds to a partition of the set of possible worlds (the logical space) into cells such that all the worlds in a cell agree on the location of Timbuktu (alternatively, one may represent the subject matter as the equivalence relation induced by such a partition, i.e. the relation of belonging to the same cell of the partition).

(19) Timbuktu is in Africa.

The subject matter of a concatenation of sentences in a text, like the subject matter of a conjunction in Plebani and Spolaore's proposal, may be constructed as the smallest subject matter which contains as parts the subject matters of the concatenated sentences. Thus, for instance, the subject matter of (20) (assuming the default focus profile on the predicate for the concatenated sentences) is the partition such that, for each cell, all the worlds in the cell agree on the location of Lea and also agree on the mood of Leo.

(20) Lea is at home. Leo is sad.

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<sup>27</sup>The proposition that Hellman will not answer questions about others is clearly relevant to the subject matter of Hammett's letter, since taking the Fifth Amendment means that one refuses to answer questions and gives as a reason that answering them might be self-incriminating. This account for the truth of (2):

(2) According to the letter, given that Hellman will not answer questions about others, either she will take the Fifth Amendment or she will go to jail for contempt of the court.

Yet, one might wonder why we are hesitant to accept (a):

(a) According to the letter, Hellman will not answer questions about others.

Since (2) is true, the proposition that Hellman will not answer questions about others should make it into the letter's content. It seems to me that the problem with (a) is that it gives the misleading impression that one goal of the letter is to communicate the information that Hellman will not answer questions about others, which is clearly not the case. Although this information is part of the letter's content, it is not *new* information with respect to the common ground shared by Hammett and Hellman. If this information is backgrounded in the report, as in (2), the impression disappears and the report becomes acceptable.

Plebani and Spolaore follow Lewis (1988a) by requiring that a sentential subject matter  $s$  is part of a sentential subject matter  $s'$  iff  $s'$  is a refinement of  $s$ . For example, the subject matter of “Lea is at home” is part of the subject matter of (20), since all the worlds that agree on the location of Lea and the mood of Leo agree on the location of Lea (thus, all the worlds in any cell of the subject matter of (20) agree on the location of Lea). On the other hand, the subject matter of (19) is not part of the subject matter of (20), since it is not the case that all the worlds that agree on the location of Lea and the mood of Leo also agree on the location for Timbuktu (thus, some of the worlds in a cell of the subject matter of (20) that agree on the location of Lea and on Leo’s mood may disagree on the location of Timbuktu).

In the set up I assume, a solution to the problem of extraneous truths may now be pursued along the following lines. The idea is that the relation between the common ground and what is implicitly true according to a medium is less direct than I have assumed so far. The common ground is a set of propositions. The first step in building the type of content to which sentences of the form  $\ulcorner$ According to medium  $m$ ,  $\varphi$  $\urcorner$  are sensitive is to revise the common ground by eliminating from it those propositions that are not part of the subject matter of the text of the medium. We now take the context set as the intersection of the set of propositions so obtained. Thus, in the case of *The Sherlock Holmes Canon*, the proposition that Timbuktu is in Africa will be expunged from the common ground, since it is not part of the subject matter of the text of the *Canon*, and the corresponding context set will contain both worlds in which Timbuktu is in Africa and worlds in which Tumbuktu is not. The result, by the semantics for “according to” in (3)i, is that it is no longer true that according to the *Canon* Timbuktu is in Africa. By a similar reasoning, we may also conclude that (18) is not true.

Clearly, in order for this approach to be viable, the subject matter of a text must be recoverable from the text’s structure prior to determining what is implicitly true in the medium. Plebani and Spolaore’s proposal suggests a way in which this goal can be pursued. Whether it can be pursued successfully, I must leave to further research.

## 6 Final remarks

In this paper, I explored a way of pursuing the zero option, the view that the contents of fictions and non-fictions are generated by the same principle. We have seen that, in generating the contents of fictions and non-fictions, the same issues arise. This suggests they should be dealt with in the same



way. My proposal is an attempt to do that.

My way of engaging with the zero option is largely based on the account of fictional truths proposed by David Lewis. In principle, the same option might be pursued by adopting different accounts of truth in fiction. According to Currie (1990), as we have seen, what is true in a fiction is what an informed audience may reasonably infer about the beliefs of the fictional author. Could one pursue the zero option by starting from this characterization of fictional truth? This is a project for a different paper. One thing that Currie makes clear in his work is that the fictional author is not necessarily the person who says “I” in the text. In the case of unreliable narrators, the fictional author is “an unobtrusive narrator who, by putting words in the mouth of the explicit narrator in a certain way, signals his skepticism about what the explicit narrator says.” Perhaps, non-fictions may also have unobtrusive “narrators” (the editor of the TLS’s *Letters to the editor*, for example) who tell us what someone else is saying. Perhaps that’s a start.

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Sandro Zucchi  
Dipartimento di Filosofia  
Università degli Studi di Milano  
via Festa del Perdono 7  
20122 Milano  
Italy  
alessandro.zucchi@unimi.it