

INFORMATION WARS AND GLOBAL CULTURAL CHANGE: A SEGMENTED INTERNET?

Introduction

The development of smart phones has meant that even in countries with very limited electricity supplies, social media and global news sources are accessible almost anywhere. Eight years ago it became clear that cattle rustling operations in remote parts of Kenya were being coordinated using smart phones. Optimistic claims about the democratising effects of this information revolution have had to confront the reality that threats to vested political and economic interests can induce responses that include arbitrary arrest, intimidation, beatings and assassinations. Such human rights violations can be found all over the world and may be occurring on an increased scale, although it may simply be the case that the internet makes us all more aware of it. In addition, computerised language translation has facilitated communication, but also opened up a greater space for contestation and thus provided a motive for cyber 'warfare'.

Such contestation does not only take place between different countries, but can become quite acute within countries. An important example is that of the USA where the development of the internet has greatly exacerbated 'cultural wars' within the country. These have now reached the level that major companies can lose huge amounts of revenue as customers offended by some public stance of that company decide to boycott it. Opinion polls show that the divisions within American society are now greater than they were before the onset of the Civil War of 1860-65. [Even the name of that conflict is now contested, with some calling it the 'War of Northern Aggression'.] Increasingly on the American right, discussions can be found of civil conflict and how to prepare for it.

Such cultural divisions, which were largely ignored by the US mainstream media at least in terms of their serious nature, partly explain the election of President Trump,

who was able to articulate the grievances of those who felt that they had long been marginalised by the US media and political establishment. One result has been that American TV viewing figures have declined dramatically as people turn to the internet for sources of information that they feel that they can trust. A similar trend underlies the Brexit vote in the UK, and there the decline in viewing figures for broadcast TV can be seen in the fact that the average age of BBC TV viewers is now 72, and this figure is rising faster than the passage of chronological time. In other words, it is not only the young who are switching off, but a high and rising proportion of the entire population.

Thus cultural changes associated with the internet and smart phones do not simply manifest themselves as a ‘clash of civilisations’ and hence cannot be resolved entirely by international dialogue, but perhaps need to be addressed by a more sophisticated understanding of cultural influences that are at times spontaneous and at times manipulated. The latter aspect has now become manifest with the allegedly illicit use of users’ data on social media such as Facebook, and by false claims of computer hacking coupled with attempts to suppress leaks of information that are in the public interest. Such phenomena are almost certainly global, although those in the most technologically advanced economies tend to attract most attention.

Angolan Cultural Changes

In commenting on Angola, I must admit that in the past I have simultaneously been an active member of the Mozambique Angola Committee (a British solidarity organisation) and an expert witness in court cases of Angolans seeking asylum in the UK, where I usually supported the asylum seekers’ claims. This apparently paradoxical position arose because I was fully aware of the kinds of human rights abuses that can arise during civil wars. Such wars are themselves frequently disguised forms of foreign destabilisation, and my support for the Angolan government in the face of such strategies did not blind me to the abuses on both sides, as people became brutalised by the experience of long-term conflict. Although

there has now been a period of 16 years in which psychological wounds may have healed somewhat, I am well aware that even domestic violence can increase in the aftermath of such civil conflicts. In that sense, Angolan culture still bears the scars of a long-term traumatic conflict. Many post-war problems remain unresolved, including clearance of landmines and pension payments to those who served in the armed forces.

Nevertheless, it is clear that Angolan culture is developing and changing, partly owing to the impact of the internet. Angola has already implemented plans to link Provincial capital cities by fibre optic cable along the coast, and the more expensive process of linking up inland Provincial capital cities (giving a total of 18) is under way. Unfortunate problems with the launch of Angola's national satellite (Angosat) have delayed the national integration of communications, but a trans-Atlantic cable to Brazil has been completed. Even before this, Brazilian culture was probably the main source of foreign influence on Angolan culture (rather than, say, the influence of other Portuguese-speaking African countries). For this reason, in musical terms, Brazilian music mixed with some elements of Congolese music is important in popular culture. This includes forms of rap music that perhaps inevitably contain elements of satirical political commentary, albeit partially disguised to avoid official complaints. In addition, like all Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa, Brazilian soap operas attract a huge audience.

Despite the 'resource curse' of oil which has tended to focus investment on the industry that has long provided the largest source of government revenue, there are now signs that Angola is developing an economic strategy that encompasses other sectors of industry. Agricultural development is still hampered by the widespread presence of landmines in what was once one of the world's top three mine-affected countries. That is a constraint on growth since Angola has historically been capable of producing a wide range of tropical and temperate agricultural products. Recent political changes since the resignation of José Eduardo dos Santos as President

suggest that economic policy will now be more clearly focussed in specific areas, including participation in the Belt and Road Initiative. The resulting changes in the occupational structure of Angola suggest that major cultural changes could emerge in what has been a very poor largely urban population, as living standards rise. What this suggests is that while Angola is not an especially innovative country influencing world culture, this could change as the social and economic structure changes.

Turbulent Times

One of main areas of contestation in global culture is that between globalists and nationalists. This has arisen owing to growing opposition to the apparent global homogenisation of culture under the hegemony of American mass media. While globalists have welcomed such developments, nationalists have contended that a healthy global culture can only arise from the vitality of lively national and regional cultures. Rather than a melting pot, nationalists argue cultural diversity should be celebrated as enriching the developing global cultural space. Along with such sentiments there are attempts to cherish and nourish declining languages, while accepting that some languages have almost lost all living speakers. It is probable that these attempts will unfortunately have only a limited impact, because there are about 6,000 languages worldwide, and only about 10 or 12 of them have a major impact on global culture. Among the 1,000 languages in Africa only Arabic, Swahili, French, Portuguese, Afrikaans and English have any serious influence.

On the internet, it is acknowledged that the number of speakers affects the influence of some languages, with the 'big five' being Mandarin Chinese, Hindi, Arabic, English and Spanish. Yet other languages continue to have an influence far greater than the number of speakers, owing to their contribution to science, art, music and literature. A notable example is Russian, which contributes about 11 per cent of all scientific publications, and whose art, music and literature remain of global significance. I would expect this to continue because despite an acknowledged

decline in the quality of education in recent years, the Russian population remains among the best educated in the world. In any case, other countries, including the UK and the USA, have also experienced a decline in the quality of their education in recent decades.

The USA has the most expensive educational system in the world, yet has some of the worst educational outcomes, as measured by the PISA and other surveys. Changes in the school curriculum have in some respects resulted in a 'race to the bottom' with declining educational standards, despite very high teacher salaries. In UK 30 years of constant politically-motivated reorganisation has produced no visible improvement: quite the contrary. This has been partly reflected in the PISA results, in the flight of school teachers from the profession, and in schools facing growing financial difficulties to the point where they often cannot afford basic teaching materials. The so-called 'marketisation' of universities, coupled with a strict regime of management targets that do not reflect the real nature of education, has led to organisational instability within the system. It means that some universities could well collapse as students move to those universities with higher measured educational outcomes. This process has been exacerbated by the introduction of a student loan system that, as in the USA, is leading to an incipient, unsustainable crisis of student debt.

Yet in addition to the damage to education done by the globalists, the tension between globalists and nationalists operates at the political as well as the cultural level. That is why cultural divisions within the USA and UK have had a serious political impact recently. The globalists have been in denial about this while also fighting back with mass media campaigns that have a limited impact precisely because large sections of the population no longer trust or even watch the mass media. Such phenomena are accompanied by the decline in family life and a catastrophic demographic crash that is about to cause serious fiscal and wider economic problems for such societies. While policy makers in both China and

Russia are aware of the importance of demographic issues and are each attempting to combat the decline in the birth rate, Russia is extremely rare in the global context in having some notable if limited success.

The Russian birth rate is slowly rising, and an increasing number of young people are getting married, in sharp contrast to most other societies. This seems to be linked to a growing influence of Christianity in Russia, although other ethnic and religious minorities are also experiencing a rising birth rate. An additional factor in Russia is almost certainly the fact the GDP per capita is now a lot higher than it was in 1999, and inflation has come down as Russia has absorbed the negative impact of sanctions through a process of economic reform and increased food production. It is noteworthy too that the rate of murder is declining in Russia, since Professor Vladimir Popov (New Economic School, Moscow) pointed out some years ago that such a decline can be treated as an index of the growing legitimacy of the government. In parts of the UK, most visibly in London, the murder rate is rising rapidly.

A major demographic crash such as is already happening in Japan can be considered as a form of cultural suicide. Yet this global phenomenon, together with the endemic failure of the global economic policies of the hegemonic 'Washington Consensus', are not the only reasons for concern. There are other reasons to expect future cultural and political turbulence. The fact that the hegemony of the West is being challenged from within has led to an intensification of cultural contestation, with competing narratives leading to greater acrimony within public political space in the West. It has also resulted in a series of psychological operations ('psyops') by the Western intelligence services in an attempt to undermine political dissent and divert the attention of the populations in these countries from the growing opposition that is emerging. A major feature of such attempts to maintain the legitimacy of the existing political and economic order has been the demonization of other countries. In the case of most NATO countries, this demonization has focussed on Russia, with

accompanying propaganda that paints a picture that is completely out-of-date and misconceived. One result of this is that politicians can enact measures such as economic sanctions that fail to produce the intended effect, even though they do inflict some limited damage.

Some these attempts at punitive measures against Russia and other countries are in violation of international law, while claiming spurious legal justification such as 'humanitarian intervention'. They produce a greater danger of major war and of a major financial crisis as economic relations are disrupted at a time of very high public debt in the West. While Russia has succeeded in reducing its public debt following the financial crisis of 2007-8, the West has greatly increased it, such that it now faces systemic instability. War may appear attractive to political leaders and the deep state in the West as a way of displacing the blame for this incipient financial crisis. The cultural impact of a major war or economic crisis would be considerable if not catastrophic. For this reason, the Westphalian system of international law must be upheld through the UN and other institutions, despite constant globalist violations.

Cyber warfare and democratic accountability

While it is often Russia or North Korea that is accused in the West of cyber attacks, the Western media ignore such things as the cyber attack that took place during the recent Russian Presidential election. Despite the apparent hysteria in official circles in the West concerning cyber attacks, it is evident that very few measures have been taken to protect such vital but mundane infrastructure as power stations and hospitals. Many American power stations are still controlled by old computers running Windows NT. A recent cyber attack using 'ransomware' that was attributed to non-state actors caused massive disruption to the health service in the UK and to other large organisations, but little has been done to insulate large public and private organisations from such attacks. This is mainly owing to the 'organisational momentum' of existing working practices, and as the American computer security

expert Bruce Schneier has noted, the main limitation on organisational computer security is human complacency and indifference. Even on social media, people have (at least until very recently) been willing to trade personal security for ease and convenience of use.

In the meantime, governments have been building a huge surveillance infrastructure to monitor their citizens' behaviour and opinions. Examples of vast government 'data warehouses' include the fairly new National Security Agency (NSA) facility a few kilometres south of Salt Lake City in the USA. International surveillance has been longstanding in the form of huge signals intelligence (SIGINT) bases such as Menwith Hill in the north of England, only about 10 kilometres from where I live. This is now complemented by huge private databases for 'micromarketing' by political and commercial bodies, using social media data. As I indicated at the Likhachev conference last year, such techniques migrated from the US intelligence services into the commercial arena about 20 years ago. Their recent use by a UK company called Cambridge Analytica has attracted a great deal of media attention in the US and UK, because of their possible impact on both the 2016 US Presidential election and the UK Brexit vote. Yet it seems that no one in the Western media has thought to comment on the fact that such techniques would probably have had a far greater impact than any 'Russian meddling' in US elections.

In the case of Russia, there have been threats from the West to take more drastic action than software cyber attacks, presumably as a consequence of the relative failure of economic and other sanctions. I have noticed a recent threat in the UK press suggesting that the marine fibre optic cable in the Baltic Sea could be physically cut in order to slow down the internet connection from St. Petersburg to the West. That would be easier than might be imagined, since the USA has long had a dedicated submarine called the USS Jimmy Carter that can attach equipment to marine fibre optic cables in order to access the communications traffic. The existence of this submarine was mentioned on the Web about 10 years ago when it

was blamed for the temporary disruption of Middle East internet communications after it apparently accidentally cut such a cable in the Eastern Mediterranean. This ability to ‘listen in’ to massive data flows in marine cables is one of the reasons why former US intelligence officials have debunked claims about Russian interference in US elections. For example, Ray McGovern, a former senior CIA official who co-founded Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS) has consistently criticised such claims about Russian interference. In addition, VIPS has demonstrated conclusively that the alleged leaks from the Democrat National Committee (DNC) servers were in fact a data transfer to a device that was physically connected to the DNC servers. The internet was not involved, and so the Wikileaks claim that the data had been handed personally to an intermediary in New York seems to be vindicated.

The opacity of claims about cyber attacks (since electorates and politicians tend to lack the expertise to evaluate such claims) implies a problem of democratic accountability. It makes demonization of other countries that much easier. Democratic oversight of such actions is inevitably limited, and the problem is compounded by the lack of relevant expertise among politicians. That issue was very clear in the recent US Senate hearing taking evidence from Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg. The questions asked of him demonstrated considerable naivety. In addition, it is evident that UK Parliamentary investigations are severely limited by an inability to use the internet to identify, evaluate and analyze relevant sources of information. For example, the UK Foreign Affairs Select Committee report of 2016 on the overthrow of the Gaddafi government in Libya failed to make use of internet sources, and so failed to identify the role of the USA in ‘leading from behind’ while placing the French President Sarkozy in the lead role publicly, with the UK playing a prominent supporting role. The fact that the ‘humanitarian crisis’ in Libya that was the pretext for the military intervention had been arranged by the

USA in coordination with British intelligence was not discovered. Wikileaks was not registered as a source of information by that Committee.

Such failures are partly a result of information overload, but they can also be attributed to a failure to adapt to the rapid cultural changes induced by the internet and smart phones. Such information can in any case be a threat to governments, and the response can, as indicated above, be violent. To take one example, the assassination in 2015 in Mozambique of the human rights lawyer Giles Cistac was an apparent reaction to a mere proposal that attempted to mediate intractable political differences between the government and the opposition. In the last few weeks another human rights lawyer there was beaten and had both his legs broken. So unchanging authoritarian political cultures can respond violently to dissenting voices. These problems have been exacerbated by the ease of access to information that is the major consequence of the information revolution.

Grand Solar Minimum and Magnetic Pole Reversal

It may seem strange to bring up the potential impact of natural phenomena on human culture, but there are many occasions whereby they can impose serious constraints upon cultural development, forcing a change of direction to adapt to new circumstances. A Grand Solar Minimum occurs roughly every 450 years, and that time has now passed since the last one, known as the Maunder Minimum. This precipitated the Little Ice Age in medieval times, resulting in a major reduction in living standards. While modern technology may make societies in the northern hemisphere more resilient this time, the implications for agriculture are clear. It implies that societies should probably start to make more use of cultivation under glass or indoors, with perhaps full spectrum electric lighting powered by natural gas or other power sources. Wind power will be less relevant away from coastal areas.

A Grand Solar Minimum (as opposed to the normal 11-year solar minimum) implies an even greater reduction in solar electrical activity including sun spots, solar flares

and coronal mass ejection (CME) phenomena. There are other intermediate cycles in solar activity that have been recently discovered and which perhaps give a renewed relevance to Kondrat'iev's economic theory of the long cycle.

The growing signs of a global magnetic pole reversal imply much greater problems for contemporary human culture. The Magnetic North Pole has already moved quite a distance from the geographical North Pole, and is now in Siberia. The southern Magnetic Pole has left Antarctica. It looks as if they will meet at the Equator and for a while the earth's magnetosphere, which is already weakening, could disappear altogether. This means that even though the electrical activity of the Sun is currently weakening as it moves towards a Grand Minimum, the Earth will be more vulnerable to its electrical activity. Not only will electronic equipment be vulnerable, but the electricity supply grid could have major blackouts. World communications could be seriously disrupted. These effects could be much greater than the geomagnetic storm known as the Carrington Event of 1859 when even electrical telegraph wires caught fire in the USA and massive forest fires were caused in South America.

In other words, human society is about to enter a period of increased vulnerability to incoming electrical phenomena that pose dangers to internet and electricity supplies more widely, with probable adverse consequences for human culture and wellbeing. The implications of the incipient Grand Minimum include a possible global cooling over the next 20 years, as predicted by various scientists associated with the Electric Universe movement. Recent research emanating from this group of scientists has also established the importance of solar electrical activity in inducing earthquakes. So these too might become more frequent and severe in these new circumstances.

Conclusion

The fact that some countries feel obliged to defend their internet while preserving as far as possible access to the global internet creates the unintended possibility that the

internet might become increasingly segmented. This possibility will continue as long as the USA tries to retain control of domain name registration and threatens cyber warfare against other countries that do not conform to its ongoing hegemonic agenda.