AHP new vistas NEWSLETTER
AHPB Newsletter for *Self & Society* | **No. 1 - Summer 2018**

Through Murky Climate-change Clouds:

Are Digital Technologies Making Politics Impossible? Or Can Humanist Psychotherapy Assist?

Nick Duffell

Against the backdrop of our collective shock at the dirt just under the surface of respectable Anglosphere politics and the respect for the heroic work of Carole Cadwalladr, I hardly dare claim my place in the hesitant sunlight streaming to get through murky climate-change clouds. However, in 2016 I did read about associates of the Old-Etonian partying fund, Cambridge Analytica, influencing our politics. My 'facts' – can you use that word any more? – were in part freely gleaned from the voluminous blog[1] of perhaps the most Machiavellian of all recent British political manipulators, Dominic Cummings, architect of the Brexit victory.

Fearing to use too many specific names in my January 2017 submission to the Nine Dots Essay Prize competition on the question: 'Are Digital Technologies Making Politics Impossible?', I wrote about this in pretty general terms. Needless to say, I didn't win the $100,000 prize, nor receive the promised book contract (with Cambridge University Press!) – or even get told whether I had been shortlisted or not; but that's how it seems to work.

If a week is a lot in politics, what is a year? In the mean time, regular mainstream news has become as dark and as fast-moving as *Homeland and House of Cards*, while we marvel at having a sophisticated robot, without a t-shirt, chatting with Congress. On 7 April 2018, Roger Boaden, the UK Conservative Party's first 'Direct Mail Manager' (Eighties technology), published a document[2] highlighting his '43 facts' on the Cambridge Analytica affair. It's well worth a read.

Despite Cummings', Nix's and others recent fervent denials, we know that Cambridge Analytica had a 'relationship' with the Leave campaign. They boasted at the time: 'Cambridge Analytica are world leaders in target voter messaging. They will be helping us map the British electorate and what they believe in, enabling us to better engage with voters.' We know that the UK's mini-Mercer, Arron Banks, bragged in his attractive-sounding memoir, *The Bad Boys of Brexit*:[3] 'We've hired Cambridge Analytica, an American company that uses "big data and advanced psychographic" to influence people."

The question to my mind is whether these facts represent an anomaly we can correct and pedal back from, or whether it's the shape of things to come. My essay was all about that and it hasn't resurfaced till now; so here it is, very slightly edited.

The Question: Are Digital Technologies Making Politics Impossible?

The revolution in communication brought about by digital technology and the World Wide Web has utterly altered everything – for ever. It's a total game-changer.

Like politics, digital technologies are here to stay. Yet as we struggle to adapt to their impact – particularly on politics – it's hard to make predictions. This article explores some ideas to make this technological revolution work politically for the common good.

Context

Communications, including not only messaging and news but also financial transactions, are now instant and global. As a result, the power of our current institutions and our ability to manage our new world lag way behind. Multinationals and the rich are thriving, but millions of those losing out under neoliberal global financialization have only just become electorally vocal. Politics has become crudely reactive, to the benefit of the fear-mongers of the far Right.

Alarming as this process is, from a historical perspective it is not without precedent. Throughout history, game-changing technologies have always given some people enormous

advantages to the cost of others and altered the way the world functioned. The printing press and magnetic compass utterly changed the late medieval world – for example, the former freeing information from the control of church authorities, and the latter facilitating the European exploitation of the so-called New World.

Technological revolutions allow us to utterly transform how we relate to our environment and the other. But they also exhibit their compelling influence on our minds, our cultures and our habits, and this takes some integrating. They force us to see the world with completely new eyes, and we have to reorganize our world accordingly.

Politically, we have entered what may be called 'a new context for governance': we are required to organize and govern ourselves entirely differently. And this is bigger than at first it may seem. It represents an existential challenge for the human mind, as predicted by the futurist John Naisbitt: 'The most exciting breakthroughs of the 21st century will not occur because of technology, but because of an expanding concept of what it means to be human.'

Freedom?

It is sometimes hard to remember a world before digital technology. My generation (Baby-Boomers) can still arrange a meeting without updating SMS texts – but only just. In the 1980s I was offered an office job in my psychotherapy-training organization involving working on early Macs; and I had to make the difficult choice of whether or not to get involved with computers. Luckily, I did, and I was earlier than many colleagues in using the web. This meant that I could stay in touch during my millennium sabbatical in remote rural France, and I felt vindicated when it began to become the norm.

Now the proliferation of digital devices is universal. Delightfully, the aged can love their grandchildren via Facetime, Skype and the unpronounceable What'sApp. However, psychologically social media seems to encourage the child in us that craves instant gratification. Terrifyingly, we have a 70-year-old US President knee-jerking foreign policy Tweets.

I resisted mobile technology until my daughter-in-law gave me her old iPhone – of course, she needed to upgrade. It's perplexing how the Generation Xs' and Millennials' antipathy to capitalism can sit side by side with their digital consumerism.

Important questions arise as we begin to reflect on the combination of politics and digital media from a psycho-social perspective:

- While appearing to be political activism, does the obsession with messaging and 'liking' undermine digital natives' energy to vote?
- Is it possible that such instantaneous activities could end up replacing the political process?
- Is the instant-gratification culture underpinning digital media part of a wider societal picture associated with difficulties in self-regulation, including the rise of obesity and binge drinking?
- Were the 'failures' of the Arab Spring and Occupy, the first political events co-ordinated by social media, partly due to the lack of sustained consistency in the culture of the tyranny of the instant?
- With CNN-style news programmes now ubiquitous, how does the dumbing-down of mainstream media contribute to the short attention-span culture?
- As we struggle to manage our messaging overload, are we breeding attention deficit, or training our youth to become the expert digital operators we may need?

Difficult reflections...; but what is clear is that things are moving a bit too quickly: today's humans are struggling to keep up with the rapid pace of change. Evolutionary biologist E.O. Wilson maintains we are subject to more stimulation than our nervous systems were originally equipped for. Now beset with 'godlike technology', he argues, we still possess 'stone-age emotions' and instincts while we are still governed by 'medieval institutions'.

One way of looking at it is that, developmentally, we are in the digital adolescent phase and we'll grow out of it.

Media

Despite the availability of online information, mainstream media is still the chief bridge between citizens and politics. Controlled largely by politically conservative interests, there is a long history of over-politicized media influencing political directions and humiliating individuals or ideas that don't fit vested interests. Digitalized local radio has broadened their influence. Currently, this power base seems unassailable.

The liberal media, meanwhile, inflamed by an obsession with adversarial, time-limited debate masquerading as 'balance', has failed to identify the rising politics of blame, which has encouraged the emergence of divisive personalities riding on this wave. It is hard today to know whether such 'info-tainment' is true or 'fake'; but a naive allegiance to notions of freedom of expression prevents denouncing what is evidently wrong. In the 2010 UK election, for example, liberal TV anchors allowed the notion that Gordon Brown was single-handedly responsible for the 2008 financial crash to go unchallenged. Television remains the most regulated and publicly trusted media, so this is an important omission, and a malign tendency.

I have proposed elsewhere that political commentators might benefit from the interdisciplinary revolution and receive psychological training in recognizing the signs of dissociation and projection to help them identify the politics of blame. Yet while the division in British mainstream media reflects our social-class system, we are no longer just divided into two: there is now a third group. People under 40 don't get their news from traditional

print or big-screen sources; they know their future lies in being connected. These are the Internet generations, and never before has it been possible to reach so many people with so much uncensored news.

The Internet Generation

So far, the Internet generation has not really emerged from their electoral apathy, partly due to the barely distinguishable business-friendly parities on offer. But they are in flux, and ought not to be thought indifferent. In the post-transitional period of our current crisis they will need a new politics – more progressive, future-oriented and related to the global world they inhabit and the world of interconnection they hang out with. That will affect mainstream media: if 'redtop' (tabloid) media continue to spread hate when they should know better, they may run out of readers.

There's clearly a malign side to the new technology. If the Dark Web, Big Data, cyber warfare and foreign interference in elections make headlines, online over-reaction and shaming distort its democratic potential, while online bullying and pornography exploit our future citizens. The critical question is whether Internet use can ever be regulated. It took a vicious attack on a disabled man to be live-streamed on Facebook for one of the few British mainstream investigative news programmes to pose it.

One idea, brainchild of Keith Philpott, a policeman from Durham, is that older children could train younger ones in online dangers. Using peer hierarchy has promise, but regulation is required in both bottom-up and top-down directions. Interviewed on the same programme, social media lawyer Laura Scaiffe originally believed something as vast as the Internet could not be regulated. However, she now thinks regulation is possible and necessary. Editorial control always requires accountability, and large entities like the oceans can and must be regulated, Scaiffe maintained.

After all, the Internet is simply broadcast media, and intellectual property rights are very heavily and successfully regulated, controlled as they are by corporations. Try getting permission to use quotations from newspapers, songs, or published books in a work you are about to have published and see what kind of money you need to invest (the publisher won't contribute) in the plugs for other people's work, and you'll know what I mean.

Corporatization

In his ground-breaking 2004 book, *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man*,[4] former undercover agent John Perkins warned how multinational corporations bully governments – in his experience by forcing over-optimistic growth agendas on developing nations before leaving them in dollar-debt. Since then, digital technologies have opened up vast new corporate frontiers. While a new commons of information has pioneered new freedoms (Wikipedia and WikiLeaks are prime examples), 'the corporatocracy', as Perkins calls global corporate power, has moved in to colonize the Internet rather effectively, even when businesses have romantic start-up histories in somebody's garage.

Capitalism is highly adaptive, but Professor Guy Standing is an academic and popular author who claims it runs on false pretences. We actually have the most un-free market system ever, because owners of assets unassailably dominate freedom of movement and expression, and governments back those entities deemed 'too big to fail'. As labour markets are transformed by outsourcing, automation and the on-demand economy, wages stagnate. Aided by subsidies, tax breaks, lobbying and privatization of public services, the owners of property – financial, residential and intellectual – prosper at the expense of society. What Standing calls 'rentier capitalism' is entrenched by the revolving doors between politics and business, corrupting democracy, generating more rental income while creating an underclass called 'the precariat'.[5]

Neoliberalism supports regulation when the burden falls on workers, as at Amazon or SportsDirect. The rapid growth of online 'platform' businesses, however, has made working conditions more precarious still. Standing reports that 'A combination of the smart phone, cashless payment and the growing precariat have propelled the growth of digital service platforms'.

The expansion of Uber, AirBnB, TaskRabbit etc. is radically weakening workers' rights while delivering enormous profits to operators, inventors and labour brokers. This burgeoning online industry and threats of automation cast doubts on the future of fair work.

And this will impact future politics.

Transition

How should we summarize our response to the digital revolution?

Our world seems to be at a point of profound transition largely brought about by new technology. Technology always develops in a creative rush; changing the 'operating system' of human beings is much harder. My 30 years of experience as a psychotherapist familiarized me with the change process – especially how resistant we are. I have frequently seen regression occur when an old way has become out-dated and a new way yet unclear. We all fear the unknown and react instinctively against it, sometimes choosing a path less good for us than the untravelled road that beckons.

Recent regressive voting trends – Brexit, Trump and arguably Scotland – appear driven by fear of the unknown engendered by globalization and digital technology, and partly due to unaddressed problems amongst the electorate. First, those who got left behind in the new globalized and financialized world have

been politically ignored, and needed to express their protest. Secondly, the young are apathetic about voting, since the dominion of market forces makes every political party the policy-light, business-as-usual party.

Regression is also a product of the early stages of adapting to any new technology. So far, digital technology's fragmenting, trivializing and distracting effects have made us more polarized. Digitally driven free-movement of capital has overwhelmed nations, creating impotence in effective electoral alternatives amounting to 'pseudo-democracy'. While we are still learning to use digital technology *maturely*, politics has been rendered *apparently* impossible.

The over-arching reason for this chaos and regression is that we are on the brink of transitioning to an entirely new operating level. What is asked of us in this transition has been less discussed than the symptoms occurring, but this forms the spine of my argument: we urgently have a mental and organizational leap to make. It is not about waiting for some new technological fix, although brilliant innovations will appear. We have to shift our consciousness to become global along with our technological capability.

And this implies an entirely new politics.

A New Politics

What might such a new politics look like?

Digital technologies will be central, but they must be *in the service of* new consciousness, not driving it. A new politics has to renounce empathy-deficit libertarianism and embrace fair working practices appropriate to the age, evolve new ideas about value-based regulatory governance to tackle climate change, and effect redistribution before widening wealth inequalities lead to chaos. It must be rooted in interdisciplinary co-operation while at the same time being democratically evolutionary, able to include those who would otherwise embrace fear-driven populism.

It will of course be digitally managed with local to global reach. The familiar national focus may diminish, because of a difficult truth at the heart of emergent politics. We really don't want to admit it, but the concept of the sovereign nation state is familiar but, in its utility, is starting to look as dated as the fax machine. Because of the markets, the Internet and climate change, governance is becoming ineffective at national levels. Under globalization, all nation states are beset with excessive pressure to remain internationally competitive and therefore incapable of staying fully sovereign.

It follows that *only* international co-operation at never-before-seen levels, with new forms of governance capable of adopting worldwide regulation, can match the new digital and economic realities, and deliver social justice and rescue our environment. I am afraid we can't just do it through Avaaz – even though it feels like we should be able to and is a lot of fun.

Until now, we have used digital technology in a rather adolescent, instant-gratificatory fashion. But the global scale of our problems now demands that we use it maturely as the key enabler of longer-term collective human goals. Global connectivity is essential for evolving polity capable of implementing solutions on a worldwide scale.

And here is where 'the big ask' comes in: we are now required to *consciously regulate* our powers, something we have never had the opportunity to do before at such a scale.

This is an evolutionary move. In the biological sciences, intentional self-regulation is an advanced property of both organisms (such as the human body) and systems (such as a species) and one that defines maturity. Our challenge consists in being at the point of moving towards – or avoiding – *species maturity*.

No wonder we are baulking.

Voting

Back to Professor Standing, who has some great ideas: heavily regulating rent-owners and establishing a Charter of the Commons; creating sovereign national funds and Basic Income programmes;[6] redistributing into emigration-prone countries. However, just like most other progressive theorists Standing doesn't say *how* such solutions might be implemented. And that is a really big problem.

So far, I have come across only one viable method of harnessing voting-power to drive governments to co-operate and implement legally binding, enforceable policies on climate change, corporate taxation, financial-market re-regulation and social justice. This is entrepreneur and activist John Bunzl's 'Simpol'.[7]

Bunzl argues that all national governments have their hands tied because of 'first-mover competitive disadvantage' – unilaterally implementing regulatory policies would render them immediately internationally uncompetitive. Corporations, banks and other rent-owners would flee to other safer havens, as is ever threatened. Competitiveness, says Bunzl, has reached its useful limit and turned into 'Destructive Global Competition'. We now have to adjust to globalization by moving forwards and taming it, designing implementation tools to achieve regulation on *a win–win* basis. Simpol is one ingenious example of such a tool, and shows how digital technology will be key in making the transition discussed above.

Already operating in several countries, Simpol uses a very simple online process. Supporters who sign up on the campaign website can have their national organization send emails on

their behalf to their MP – and to all candidates standing in their constituency in the run-up to an election. The message is that supporters will give strong voting preference to politicians or parties that sign the 'Simpol Pledge'[8] to the exclusion of those who don't.

The pledge contains a raft of regulatory policies, but signing it represents no risk for politicians because its implementation only occurs once its policies are agreed. This occurs only when sufficient other governments have agreed to a policy package, including subsidiarity programmes to ensure that no nation loses out. Thirty-two UK MPs across the party spectrum and over 50 candidates in the 2016 Australian election, amongst others, signed the Simpol Pledge. All key aspects of Simpol, including policy formation, are conducted online, and signatories appear on the website.

Here, digital technology becomes the key to policy voting; and if recent events have proved anything, it is that – despite minimal turnout – *voting matters*. Anglosphere politics seems in retreat towards fear-driven, hyper-competitive isolationism rather than co-operation. But with elections around the world often turning on very few votes, Bunzl proposes that the number of campaign supporters needed to force co-operation could be surprisingly small. Entire parties might sign up, engendering healthy competition. Such a low-tech digital solution, based on innovative political ideas using existing structures, could help citizens realise the disproportionate power they already possess for ensuring governments co-operate on implementing a global-justice agenda.

Revolution

Aided by the Internet, revolutionary reconnection is occurring across different disciplines for the first time since the Enlightenment, when specialization became the norm. Despite tight-fisted intellectual property control by corporations publishing scholarly journals, the availability of papers, lectures, TED Talks, crowd sourcing and Open Source data is transforming our knowledge base. Scientists, historians, health practitioners, patients and students are in contact as never before, and interdisciplinary initiatives abound.

Nowhere has the interdisciplinary revolution proved more initially useful than in the meeting of neuroscience and psychotherapy, my own field. The work of Stephen Porges, Iain McGilchrist and Olya Khaleelee[9] (explained in my book *Wounded Leaders*)[10] demonstrates how trauma and excessive left-brain rational training affects politicians' ability to be empathic and decisive.

This interdisciplinary revolution has not yet transformed politics, but Big Data might just be close. Secretive Data manipulation contributed to the Trump and Brexit phenomena – to what extent we are not yet sure.[11] But it cannot be ignored: it is going to mean that tech-savvy geeks may well have as much influence as patrician politicians. We do not yet know how penetrative of the democratic process and how far-reaching such interference will be. But it may become a fact, and we may have to get used to it.

Dominic Cummings, who claims to have personally held the warring Brexit factions together before masterminding the knife-edge Brexit referendum victory, explained the thinking behind Vote Leave's dispatch of a billion targeted Facebook adverts.[12] Recommending Charlie Munger's advice regarding interdisciplinary political teams, Cummings subscribed to this modernist philosophy: 'If you want to make big improvements in communication, my advice is – hire physicists, not communications people from normal companies.'

And it seems to work. On the one hand this is very alarming, but above all it is totally new. And with all new technologies, both 'light' and 'dark' implementation potentialities present themselves. As well as the manipulative scenario, many joined-up possibilities arise. With elections universally on a knife-edge and able to be swayed by big campaigns delivering sufficient tiny pushes in one direction, especially in first-past-the-post electoral systems, a cross-party voter-centred initiative like Simpol could be just what is needed to combat the forces of subliminal influence, pioneered nearly a century ago and now coming of age in the digital world.

A creative macro-regulatory initiative like Simpol could go hand in hand with a bottom-up redistribution programme like Basic or Citizens' Income. While Simpol combats destructive competition, the latter might exploit its constructive side. To stimulate Basic Income recipients' potentially low motivation (one of the sceptic's main criticisms), cash prizes for inventiveness, social responsibility or artistic endeavour could be digitally organized. The run-away success of television's 'X Factor', 'Strictly' and 'Bake-Off' demonstrates unfettered public appetite for tournaments of competitive skill.

Dreaming the Future

This is only a beginning, I predict, of a total revolution, as the social and empirical sciences become increasingly connected. Someday, perhaps, when elections are securely digitalized – as is inevitable – neurocardiologists may develop their hand-held biofeedback machines to help us monitor our heart-rate coherence while we vote. The human heart is exquisite biotechnology, and the perfect exemplar of connection and self-regulation.[13] With practice, we can learn to intentionally control the Fight/Flight side of our Autonomic Nervous System and fire Rest/Repose to be in an empathic, reflective state before voting, engaging appreciative values rather than reactivity.

But there again, values also drive anger, which can have its uses: politics not motivated by outrage might be a poor thing!

Nick Duffell is a psychotherapy trainer and author of *The*

Making of Them (2000) and *Wounded Leaders* (2014). He co-authored *Sex, Love and the Dangers of Intimacy (*2002), *Trauma, Abandonment and Privilege* (2016) and *The Simpol Solution* (2017). As a psycho-historian, he promotes a depth-psychology perspective on issues that affect our public life, such as identity and emotions, fear and vulnerability.

Notes and References

1 See https://dominiccummings.com/2016/10/29/on-the-referendum-20-the-campaign-physics-and-data-science-vote-leaves-voter-intention-collection-system-vics-now-available-for-all/.
2 See www.ecreu.com/pdfs/rich-men-brexit.pdf.
3 Arron Banks, *The Bad Boys of Brexit: Tales of Mischief, Mayhem and Guerrilla Warfare in the EU Referendum Campaign*, Biteback Publishing, London, 2017.
4 John Perkins, *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man: The Shocking Story of How America Really Took over the World,* Ebury Press, London, 2006.
5 For example, see Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, Bloomsbury, London, 2016.
6 Guy Standing, *Basic Income: And How We Can Make It Happen*, Pelican, Harmondsworth, 2017; see also https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basic_income.
7 See http://uk.simpol.org/index.php?id=50.
8 See www.simpol.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Articles/ISPO_Forms/MP_PPC_Pledge_Form_-_New.pdf.
9 See www.questia.com/library/journal/1P3-4231982111/speaking-out-boarding-school-brexit-and-our-leaders.
10 Nick Duffell, *Wounded Leaders: British Elitism and the Entitlement Illusion – a Psychohistory*, Lone Arrow Press, London, 2014.
11 https://antidotezine.com/2017/01/22/trump-knows-you/.
12 See note 1.
13 See, for example, Nick Duffell, 'Steps to a politics of heart', in R. House, D. Kalisch and J. Maidman (eds), *Humanistic Psychology: Current Trends and Future Prospects* (pp. 119–30), Routledge, Abingdon, 2018.