

Time to disrupt the disruptors

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Scanning the macro environment for signals of change can be a daunting experience. But when links that imply a particular pattern keep getting stronger, or more frequently expressed, you know that something is happening that may require closer attention. Over the last few years, for example, evidence that the digital revolution has been compromised has been turning up with increasing frequency. It's not merely wandered off-course, so to speak, but been actively hijacked by a handful of companies. They are not using it for the betterment of humankind, they are using it in pursuit of historically unprecedented levels of wealth and power. The evidence has been visible for at least a decade, if not longer. It was there, for example, when James Moroney, publisher of the *Dallas Morning News* informed Congress that in order for Amazon to publish a digital version of the paper on its Kindle device it 'demanded 70 percent of the subscription revenues, leaving him with 30 percent to cover the cost of creating 100 percent of the content' (Taplin, 2017, p. 84). A few years later, in 2014, *The Observer* published an editorial declaring that 'Tech innovators need to be held to account.' It opened with these words: 'If politicians can be drunk on power, the equivalent for the technology industry is being drunk on your own disruption, when your confidence in knowing better than established industries, regulators and even governments risks tipping into hubris' (Observer, 2014). Three years on and that 'risk' is no longer in doubt - it is reality.

Carol Cadwalladr is one of a small number of journalists that have been paying close attention and has provided detailed accounts of the growing misuse of high tech in social and political contexts. Writing post-Brexit, and in the context of the US election, she declared that:

We have fetishised "disruption". Governments have stood by and watched it take down all industries in its path – the market must do what the market must do. Only now, the wave is breaking on its shore. Because what the last week of this presidential campaign has shown us is that technology has disrupted, is disrupting, is threatening to upturn the democratic process itself (Cadwalladr, 2016).

Many people may be surprised or shocked to discover that mass personality profiling, once an innocent tool for deepening self-knowledge, had been 'weaponised' and transformed into an insidious form of 'psych ops.' In the UK and the US it became a tool of mass manipulation and used, among other things, to undermine the election process. Again, however, the writer's warning of *possible threats* may be understated. The ruthless uses of IT and other advanced technologies to effectively undermine and destroy earlier ways of life are well established. Consequently, the threats they pose are no longer abstract - they are right out in the open. Harris, for example, sees how governance itself is being undermined. Here is how he describes this process:

Increasingly, the orthodoxies of government and politics are so marginal to the way advanced economies work that if politicians fail to keep up, they simply get pushed aside. Obviously, the corporations concerned are global. The amazing interactions many of them facilitate between people are now direct – with no role for any intermediate organisations, whether traditional retailers or the regulatory state. The result is a kind of anarchy, overseen by unaccountable monarchs: we engage with each other via eBay, Facebook and the rest, while the turbo-philanthropy of Mark Zuckerberg and Bill Gates superficially fills the moral vacuum that would once have pointed to oversight and regulation by the state (Harris, 2016).

Multiple examples of these processes emerge daily but the key point is this. The ability of governments to moderate, regulate or rein in the unchecked dynamism of high-tech innovation has failed at the very time when quality oversight and effective regulation for the public good has become more essential than ever before. There are many reasons for this decline in capability, some of which are not primarily technical (such as changes in values, social mores and cultural practices). In this context it's impossible to avoid the central role played by the ascendancy of neo-Liberal ideology, particularly in the US. The latter is, of course, the home of Silicon Valley where high-tech 'entrepreneurial exceptionalism' grew from benign beginnings into its present virulent and ultimately destructive form. The world we now live in is, to a remarkable extent, an artifact of neo-Liberalism. Unfortunately, however, the latter is self-perpetuating, resistant to any significant reform and extremely well funded. A publisher's overview of Jane Myer's book *Dark Money* contains the following passage:

A network of exceedingly wealthy people with extreme libertarian views bankrolled a systematic, step-by-step plan to fundamentally alter the American political system. The network has brought together some of the richest people on the planet. Their core beliefs—that taxes are a form of tyranny; that government oversight of business is an assault on freedom—are sincerely held. But these beliefs also advance their personal and corporate interests: Many of their companies have run afoul of federal pollution, worker safety, securities, and tax laws (Mayer 2016).

Some idea of the scale of the resources involved is provided by Charles Kaiser's review of this work. He writes:

The American Enterprise Institute (AEI) was one of dozens of the new think tanks bankrolled by hundreds of millions from the Kochs and their allies. Sold to the public as quasi-scholarly organizations, their real function was to legitimize the right to pollute for oil, gas and coal companies, and to argue for ever-more tax cuts for the people who created them. Richard Scaife, an heir to the Mellon fortune, gave \$23m over 23 years to the Heritage Foundation, after having been the largest single donor to AEI. Next, the right turned its sights on American campuses. John M Olin founded the Olin Foundation, and spent nearly \$200m promoting "free-market ideology and other conservative ideas on the country's campuses". It bankrolled a whole new approach to jurisprudence called "law and economics", Mayer writes, giving \$10m to Harvard, \$7m to Yale and Chicago, and over \$2m to Columbia, Cornell, Georgetown and the University of Virginia. ... Between 2005 and 2008, the Kochs alone spent nearly \$25m on organizations fighting climate reform. One study by a Drexel University professor found 140 conservative foundations had spent \$558m over seven years for the same purpose (Kaiser, 2017).

Finally Taplin's *Move Fast and Break Things* (Taplin, 2017) provides a valuable insider's account of how the Internet, initially government funded and intended for wide public use, was taken over by the Internet oligarchs. Of particular interest in his account is the history - especially the legislative changes that were enabled that provided legal support for the rapid growth and development of Internet monopolies. This included watering down previous anti-trust legislation that prohibited the growth of such monopolies. In other words, weak and compliant governance allowed the upstarts (increasingly powerful corporations) to ignore previous limits and swell to their present excessive size regardless of the wider costs. Now the US and the rest of the world are beginning to experience some of the costs of this course of action. Naked self-interest, if left unchecked, becomes pathological. Far from this being a mere rhetorical flourish Cathy O'Neil's book *Weapons of Maths Destruction* shows in some detail how the misuse of big data, algorithms, profiling and predatory marketing has exploited the least well-off social groups. What she describes is a commercial culture that devours its own while pretending to serve them. Which pretty much describes where we are today.

Yet as if growing inequality, mass unemployment, the decimation of entire industries and ways of life were not enough there are other emerging issues that are equally deserving of our attention. One of these has already attracted comment from high-profile individuals such as Bill Gates and Stephen Hawking. Both have warned of the possible dangers of artificial intelligence (AI) and the very real possibility that it may represent an existential threat to humanity. Fresh impetus to this debate was provided recently when Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk clashed over the same issue. While Musk echoed previously expressed concerns, Zuckerberg would have none of it. For him such talk was 'negative' and 'irresponsible.' He's dead against any 'call for a slowdown in progress' with AI (Frier, 2017). So it fell to director James Cameron, director of Terminator 2 and other movie blockbusters, to inject some reality into the proceedings by reminding everyone of the mammoth in the room. Namely that it's '*market forces* (that) have put us into runaway climate change, and the sixth mass extinction.' He then added that 'we don't seem to have any great skill at not experimenting on ourselves in completely unprecedented ways' (Maddox, 2017, emphasis added).

What's fascinating here is that it falls to *a movie director* to generate publicity around what, in competent government contexts, would surely be a matter of primary interest to public authorities. Which also raises the question: who gave permission for the disruptors of Silicon Valley - or anywhere else - to carry out these 'unprecedented' experiments? Reinventing the world - whether by innovation or disruption or both, is not a trivial matter. Nor is creating quite new hazards that threaten the viability of humanity and its world. So how is it that these powerful entities continue to operate openly and with confidence without limit or sanction, lacking anything remotely like a social licence? The development of AI could be seen as *the* test case that decides the matter for once and for all. Here is Taplin again speaking of the way that the benign legacy of an Internet pioneer was turned toward darker ends. He writes: 'What is so important about Engelbart's legacy is that he saw the computer as primarily a tool to augment - not replace - human capability. In our current era, by contrast, much of the financing flowing out of Silicon Valley is aimed at building machines that can replace humans' (Taplin, 2017, p. 55).

It's not necessary to jump directly to dismal SF-type speculations about how advanced AI could take over the world and either destroy humanity or render it redundant (which is not to say that such outcomes are impossible). A much more immediate threat springs from the fact that a variety of agencies are also looking to AI for military and 'security' purposes. The development of robot soldiers, for example, has been under way in the West for some years. Then there's this summary of Chinese intent from Paul Mozur in Shanghai:

China's ambitions with AI range from the anodyne to the dystopian, according to the new plan. It calls for support for everything from agriculture and medicine to manufacturing. Yet it also calls for the technology to work in concert with homeland security and surveillance efforts. China wants to integrate AI into guided missiles, use it to track people on closed-circuit cameras, censor the Internet and even predict crimes (Mozur, 2017).

This may not seem like a particularly major departure from what is already happening elsewhere. But there is a significant difference in that China is *already* a totalitarian society ruled by an inflexible party machine that makes no pretense of having any interest in human rights or other democratic norms. Although in the West the US has long been hamstrung by dysfunctional governments, all passively beholden to the giants of Silicon Valley, at least it still has a constitution that protects certain core rights (such as free speech). Despite systematic predation (including copyright theft and monopoly

power) by what some refer to as 'Goobook' the US still has the remnants of a free press and many diverse groupings and interests that will never accept authoritarian rule. Furthermore, the European Economic Community (EEC) has already shown that it is willing and able to take on the Internet oligarchs and force them to change their behaviour in regard to tax and individual human rights. So in the west there's a prospect of reining in at least some of the excesses.

But China is a very different story. It's already had a Dystopian 'grid system' of systematic surveillance operating in Beijing since 2007. Aspects of this oppressive new system were summarised in a 2013 Human Rights Report. For example:

The new grid system divides the neighborhoods and communities into smaller units, each with a team of at least five administrative and security staff. In some Chinese cities the new grid units are as small as 5 or 10 households, each with a "grid captain" and a delegated system of collective responsibility ... Grid management is specifically intended to facilitate information-gathering by enabling disparate sources into a single, accessible and digitized system for use by officials. ... In Tibet the Party Secretary told officials that 'we must implement the urban grid management system. The key elements are focusing on ... really implementing grid management in all cities and towns, putting a dragnet into place to maintain stability. ... By 2012 the pilot system was in 'full swing' (as it had stored) nearly 10,000 basic data' (and collected) hundreds of pieces of information about conditions of the people (Human Rights Watch, 2013).

By 2015 this vast project was ready to be rolled out to enable the full-on mass surveillance of China's 1.5 billion citizens. One report noted that:

It envisages a national population database linking people's compulsory identity cards with their credit histories, travel records, hotel registrations and social security details. Police and state security agencies will have access to every aspect of a person's life at the click of a keyboard and everyone will be issued with a single 'all-in-one' identity card (Sheridan, 2015).

The race to create artificial intelligence (whatever that turns out to mean in practice) is being pursued primarily in Silicon Valley and China. But none of the key players appear willing to pull back and rigorously assess the risks or seek guidance from wider constituencies. To 'follow the technology wherever it leads' is merely technological determinism writ large. It's a strange and perverse notion upon which to base decisions, let alone to gamble with the future of humanity. Yet it's rare for any government to show a real and sustained interest in effective responses (by, for example, developing and applying high quality oversight or strategic / social foresight). Leaving the high-tech disruptors to their own devices, so to speak, simply means that the human enterprise is placed in ever-greater peril.

Yet it's unhelpful to be intimidated by money, power and technical prowess. Rebecca Solnit's work on hope provides one of many ways of responding (others are among the subjects of later posts). Her characterisation of what she calls the 'sleeping giant' provides a useful illustration. She writes:

The sleeping giant is one name for the public; when it wakes up, when we wake up, we are no longer only the public: we are civil society, the superpower whose nonviolent means are sometimes, for a shining moment, more powerful than violence, more powerful than regimes and armies. We write history with our feet and with our presence and our collective voice and vision. And yet, and of course, everything in the mainstream media suggests that popular resistance is ridiculous, pointless, or criminal, unless it is far away, was long ago, or, ideally, both. These are the forces that prefer the giant stays asleep. Together we are very powerful, and we have a seldom-told, seldom-remembered history

of victories and transformations that can give us confidence that, yes, we can change the world because we have many times before. ... The past is set in daylight, and it can become a torch we can carry into the night that is the future (Solnit, 2016, p. xxiii).

So there it is. If there's a consistent theme it's that *power in the wrong hands creates many more problems than it solves*. So it's time to take back power from remote entities and organisations. It's time to own our power and give only such of it as we judge necessary to structures of governance that meet our real needs and those of our times. Finally, it's time to disrupt the disruptors. They've had their moment in the sun. It's time for them to stand aside so that a different world can emerge.

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