

Casualties of the Digital Revolution

Written by Alasdair McKay

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ALASDAIR MCKAY, NOV 3 2011

Today, the issue is no longer whether we are witnessing the digital revolution, but what the consequences of this revolution are. Many have heralded the Internet as a life-enhancing medium that promotes freedom, a sense of community, democratic participation, social movement mobilization and citizen empowerment beyond the borders of nation states. In an essay discussing the utilization of the Internet in the Chiapas rebellion by the Zapatista National Liberation Army against the Mexican Government, Harry Cleaver wrote that “the primacy of the nation state is being challenged from both above and below”. [i] Moving on to discuss the potential political consequences of transnational networks such as the Internet, he stated that “not only do such networks outflank national government policymakers; they often work directly against their policies”. [ii] These views were expressed in 1998, but they seem to carry relevance some thirteen years later.

Recent events in parts of the globe have been interpreted as further validation of this belief that *the net* acts as a vessel for citizen empowerment and tool for the mobilization of political protest. Optimists were quick to assert the importance of Twitter and Facebook in the Tunisian Revolution and the protests in Egypt. Elsewhere, the power of citizen journalism was providing a more amplified voice to the marginalized in states like Iran. All in all, it seems that these days the scent of the global digital revolution is in the air.

Yet, whilst there has been much talk about the beneficiaries of the digital revolution, there has been something of a hesitance to name the casualties. In the midst of revolutionary clamour, critics have argued that professional expertise, which in the past provided both public and private institutions in liberal democracies with their foundations of authority, is dying. [iii] This slow death is contested to be transpiring because, simplistically put, with the vastly increased and reasonably unmediated flow of online information there has been a decline in mechanisms such as quality control and critical review. The result has seen the Internet become something of a swamp of unreliability. Although it is difficult to contest the view that the Internet facilitates a more plural media sphere, it has also created something of a fractured public sphere in which people are becoming increasingly confused about who to trust on key issues. This growing sense of confusion is happening simultaneously in an age of growing discontent and pessimism.

A slew of various episodes has seen an environment form where those who had previously been seen as pillars of expertise are now being perceived as highly inept and untrustworthy. The expenses scandal fully cemented many people’s long-held suspicions that governments no longer cared about governing and were instead merely selfish egoists intent on lining their pockets. Likewise, the economic crisis has strengthened the belief that banks are merely charlatans occupying skyscrapers. The News of the World phone tapping scandals presented media editors as unquestionably corrupt. As the English riots raged in summer, questions were being asked about the capabilities of the English police force.

Scientists and researchers have also been clouded in doubt. In the aftermath of the Norway shootings, many decorated experts on terrorism offered premature insights on why Al-Qaeda would target Norway. [iv] Yet as events played out, most of the experts were gravely mistaken in their early evaluations as the identity of the attacker was revealed not to be a radicalized young Muslim, but a Norwegian male of Caucasian extraction with intense anti-Muslim, anti-liberal and anti-multicultural sentiments. This, perhaps aptly, led to the comment that “it wasn’t experts speculating, it was guessers guessing – and they were terrible”. [v] Climategate, which implied that researchers had been manipulating climate data and suppressing their critics, left many with the uneasy feeling that scientists are no

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longer capable of predicting or expressing factual claims. Instead, certain scientists were seen by some as part of a kind of global conspiracy which had invented the 'hoax' of anthropogenic global warming for financial and ideological reasons. These examples are of course not connected in any strictly obvious causal sense, but they do represent dovetails of this zeitgeist of mistrust and almost dislike surrounding the professional expert.

Arguably, this decline in trust of expertise and rising climate of pessimism is creating a vacuum of authority across all sectors, but clear answers to questions about whether this is good or bad have not become transparent. Nevertheless, there are some signs which suggest uncomfortable developments taking shape. It could be contested that, in the lacuna once occupied by professional expertise, forms of populism have grown in strength. In its most worrying forms this populism has been embodied in fractured dialects of conspiracy theorists and self-appointed experts, who, in various guises, have begun to propagate messages rife with misinformation, fear, paranoia, xenophobia and cynicism. More worryingly, people have begun to trust these messages and those who communicate them. Such developments carry serious risks and have the potential to slowly create a thoroughly toxic social climate.

In these times of social and economic fragility, there is a greater need for further discussion on the digital revolution's positive and negative consequences. As something of a loose starting point, three broad questions are directed at the readership of e-International Relations:

- 1) Does the internet spread democracy or ignorance?
- 2) Do you believe that the internet has really led to a change in the perception of the expert?
- 3) What consequences will the rise of populism in Europe and North America have for the future of democratic politics?

Al McKay is an Assistant Editor of e-IR

[i] Cleaver, Harry M., Jr. The Zapatista Effect: The Internet and the Rise of an Alternative Political Fabric. *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 51: 2, March 1998.

[ii] Ibid.

[iii] Fieschi, Catherine Populist Expectations (or the Dead Expert) available at <http://counterpoint.uk.com/projects/expertly-poised/>

[iv] Macdonald, Alastair (25 July 2011). "Instant media wounded by rush to judgment on Oslo". *Reuters*. Retrieved 2011-07-28.

Winter, Michael (23 July 2011). "17 dead in Oslo bombing, shootings; Norwegian held". *USA Today*. Retrieved 2011-07-28.

Lloyd Sarah. "Oslo attacker identified, tweeters question why public, media was quick to blame Muslim terrorists". *CBS News*. Retrieved 2011-07-28.

[v] Brooker, Charlie "The news coverage of the Norway mass-killings was fact-free conjecture", *The Guardian* Sunday 24 July 2011.

About the author:

Alasdair McKay is Senior Editor at Oxford Research Group. He holds undergraduate and postgraduate degrees

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from the universities of Manchester and Aberystwyth. He has edited several books for E-International Relations, including *Nations under God: The Geopolitics of Faith in the Twenty-First Century* (2015) and *Into the Eleventh Hour: R2P, Syria and Humanitarianism in Crisis* (2014).