ORF

ON THE CUSP OF DIGITAL HISTORY

NINE LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

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As we step into a year of uncertainties after a disruptive year of the pandemic, there is only one universal certitude: 2021 will witness the increasing adoption of technology as innovation gathers extraordinary speed. Clearly, our digital future is exciting, but it is hazy too. There are galactic black holes; and even that which is visible is overwhelming.

Despite acknowledging the need for critical discourse, our pace of enquiry, examination and action has been lethargic and out of step with the motivations of coders hardwiring our future through soft interventions. They are changing economies, societies, politics and, indeed, the very nature of humanity at an astonishing speed and with far-reaching consequences.

Nations that effectively respond to the advent of the Digital Era will be in the vanguard of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and will emerge stronger as the 21st century approaches high noon. Others will suffer the adverse consequences of the coming digital disruptions.

At the turn of the decade, Delhi hosted a stellar set of thinkers and speakers at the annual CyFy conference organised by the Observer Research Foundation, which focused on technology, security and society. Here are nine takeaways from the debates and discussions that threw up a kaleidoscope of scintillating ideas.

1

CHINA'S DIGITAL VICTORY PARADE

That the US accomplished in the 20th century, China has set out to achieve in the 21st. The first takeaway from the CyFy debates is that China's surge will continue, and it will profoundly change the world order. The US and its partners are witnessing the inexorable rise of an authoritarian digital power with the COVID-19 pandemic emboldening Beijing to tighten its surveillance and suppression networks—bolstered by big data, facial recognition, et al.

The China Electronics Technology Group Corporation (CETC), a defence contractor, for instance, pitches such future applications as detecting 'abnormal behaviour' on surveillance cameras or among online streamers. These applications intimate such detections to law enforcement agencies.[i] Several regimes around the world are attracted to these Chinese offerings, which enable them to control their citizens.

Meanwhile, the old Atlantic Consensus is in total disarray. Europe is intent upon carving out its niche in emerging technologies while promoting new technology champions to challenge American tech dominance. After taking over the European Union presidency, Germany has called for the expansion of digital sovereignty as the leitmotif of EU's digital policy.[ii] A new Digital Services Act may fundamentally alter intermediary liability and mark a new milestone in digital rights and freedoms.[iii]

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Across the Atlantic, the US has made its fear of China Tech apparent but is yet to initiate a coherent effort to build an influential digital alliance as a sustained response to China's relentless digital expansionism. Which brings us to the central geopolitical question: Can the US and Atlantic nations, currently marred by divisions and domestic disquiet, get their act together to respond to this emergence? Authoritarian tech is at the gates: Does the West have the resolve to respond? Will a new Administration in Washington, DC herald a new and meaningful approach? Or will America continue to turn inwards?

China will not offer any negotiated space. Beijing's offer will be binary, so will be the outcomes. It is, therefore, imperative for a club of technology-savvy countries to come together if liberalism is to be preserved in our digital century.

2

END OF MULTILATERALISM AND THE RISE OF CLUBS OF STATES

To say that the international order is failing and floundering is not to state anything startlingly new; it's only to underscore the bleakness of the global reality. However, like the proverbial silver lining, there is a degree of optimism around the role and centrality of smaller groupings. Regional partnerships, alliances of democracies, and plurilateral arrangements between nations with focused engagements and specific purpose platforms are seen to be important in these turbulent times. This is best exemplified by Australia, India and Japan—who with an eye towards China and propelled by their shared interest in a free, fair, inclusive, non-discriminatory and transparent trade regime—are banding together for a Supply Chain Resilience Initiative.[iv]

These small groupings, built around shared but limited objectives, are dying multilateralism's lifeline. The Year of the Pandemic and its resultant disruptions have left the world with few options. One of them is to begin rebuilding multilateralism with smaller groups of countries with aligned interests. Hopefully, over time, this will lead to an efficient, inclusive international order.

India, Japan and Australia have taken on the responsibility abdicated by the US of building a resilient, vibrant, secure technology network in the Indo-Pacific. The role of the EU, ASEAN (more difficult due to deep divisions) and democracies in the Indo-Pacific in defending and strengthening norms and laws associated with technology and politics was elaborated loudly and clearly at CyFy.

States matter and the leadership of individual nations will have to drive the global arrangements that will best serve this century. While dialogue with geopolitical adversaries remains critical, meaningless consensus-driven multilateral approaches are not viable in a world fundamentally fractured along political, economic and ideological fault lines. We need action, not pious declarations. Given the pace at which emerging technologies are evolving, organisations like the UN are too slow, unwieldy and politically compromised to have any significant impact.

3
GLITCH IN GLOBALISATION

In the post-COVID-19 era, globalisation as we have known it will be in tatters, yet decoupling will be more difficult than before. There is a simplistic assumption that you can decouple your digital world from the real world. This is not so. If you exclude entities from your digital platforms, it will be difficult to sustain traditional trade in goods and services with them. Commerce and connectivity of the future will have a different texture.

As economic growth, national identities and digital technologies collide, "Gated Globalisation" will be the new mantra. With interdependence no longer fashionable, supply chains will be shaped by rising national security concerns. Increasingly, cross-border flows of data, human capital and emerging technologies are viewed as vulnerabilities. A focus on autonomy and indigenous capabilities has accompanied growing incidents of cross-border cyber operations and cyberattacks.

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Commerce may be conditioned on norms along the lines of what the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) seeks to do with the digital economy. The Blue Dot Network and supply chain initiatives may all end up creating layers of permissions and permits that will create toll plazas on digital freeways. The digital domain was built on the assumption of hyper interconnectedness. Will it be able to grow with mushrooming policy barriers?

4

UNCHARTED TERRITORY: BETWEEN TECHNOLOGY AND STATE

A new and fascinating dynamic is rapidly emerging between democracies and technologies, raising an interesting question: If a democratic state tames technologies, can democracy survive? This question has been posed by Marietje Schaake, the International Policy Director at the Stanford Cyber Policy Center.[v] Technology is being co-opted into a 'techno-nationalist' narrative: The melding of a country's national interest with its technological capabilities while excluding 'others'. This techno-nationalist narrative often emanates from tech giants who are increasingly speaking in the state's protectionist language. Mark Zuckerberg's written statement ahead of US Congressional anti-trust hearings was couched in the language of protecting the core American values of openness and fairness, as opposed to China's (authoritarian) vision.[vi]

The corollary to that is equally true and prompts another question: Can democracies survive if they do not regulate technologies? The isolating and polarising effects of social media, for instance, have already resulted in a slew of analysts chanting the dirge for democracy.[vii] The answers to these questions are unclear, but it is certainly true that the protection of the public sphere, the integrity of political regimes, and the robustness of conversations must be common aspirations should we want democracy to survive and strengthen.

Be it regulations, education, incentives, ethics or norms, we will have to dig deeper into our toolbox to come up with answers that would allow this to happen. Currently, the negative impacts of technology on our evolving and fractured societies are threatening to overwhelm its promise and potential. Can a new regulatory compact emerge that negotiates the digital ethics for corporations, communities and governments? This decade will witness an unspoken contest over writing this new code of ethics. It remains to be seen whose code will prevail and, more importantly, for what purpose.

5

UNACCOUNTABLE TECH AND CORPORATE BOARDROOMS

W e cannot overlook the changes that the relationship between big companies, technology and societies has undergone. If successive anti-trust actions in the US, EU, Australia, India and elsewhere are any indication,[viii] accountable boardrooms are now an expectation and will soon be a reality; the shape it will take will be defined by the debates taking place around the world. We can be certain that in the coming years, corporate governance is not going to be the same.

Large companies, having dominance and influence, will need to be more responsive to the communities they serve. The blueprint of new corporate governance cannot but be influenced by the needs of the locality; the nature of the framework will have to be contextual and culturally sensitive. Since mammoth corporations determine our very agency and choice, it is part of their fiduciary duty to ensure that the interests of the company and the community are ethically aligned.

Outside corporate boardrooms, we cannot ignore the role of coders or programmers in Bengaluru, Silicon Valley, Tel Aviv and other tech hubs. As we become increasingly reliant on software, can we let coders be the new cowboys of the Wild West without any accountability? As we get further entangled in the intricate web of algorithms, it has become clear that we need to demystify them. No more black box responses, no more unaccountable algorithms. What we need are programmers who are held responsible for the impact their codes make on people's lives. We need algorithms that are not only transparent but also seen to be so.

6

THE PANDEMIC & DIGITAL SOCIETIES

The pandemic has made us reassess our approach to life and behaviour. We consume, we communicate, and we integrate using technology. Nearly a year on, COVID-19 has not only furthered technology's invasion of our lives but also brought to the fore new realities, especially regarding privacy. The deepening concern over privacy is intertwined with the change in the ownership of data. The pandemic provided the pretext to alter the role played by big corporations and the control of the state over technological devices, products and services.[ix]

The digitalisation of our day-to-day lives may enable an unprecedented level of personalised oversight over individual behaviour. In its mildest form, this can be 'libertarian paternalism', a nudging predicated on the belief that individual choices are rarely made on the basis of complete information and are instead a product of psychological biases. At the other end of the spectrum, the 'gamification' of citizenship under this new paradigm would be the ultimate realisation of the Hobbesian social contract, whereby the *Leviathan* would be entrenched in every aspect of citizens' lives.

In order to retain the ownership of data and individual autonomy, all these changes must be accompanied by the strengthening of our resolve to defend individual choice, freedom and rights by formulating adequate laws that would ensure that the values we create serve us, the people.

7

REWRITING THE SOCIAL CONTRACT

The world needs a new social contract—a digital social contract. The pandemic has thrown the old workplace order into a state of flux, thereby, reopening the debate surrounding the provision of the three Ps: Paycheck, protection and purpose to individuals. The equivalent of 475 million full-time jobs vanished in the second quarter of 2020[x] and many others found themselves without health insurance and other benefits typically linked to work contracts at the greatest time of their need. To 'build back better', the new order is being shaped by new terms of contract and employment, concepts of social protection and minimum wage for all, and the altered role of the state, big tech and individuals. The global shift towards virtual workspaces also provides an opportunity to induct a more diverse work force, especially individuals from historically marginalised communities. However, we need to take note of the challenges that might accompany these changes—such as ensuring safe, inclusive digital workspaces, keeping pace with ever-changing technology, meeting the demand for human skills, and coping with the displacement of jobs. As we move to a more 'virtual first' work environment, we need to make sure that nobody is left behind.

Meaningful engagement with vulnerable communities necessarily involves outreach by governments as well as large technology firms, both of whom have benefited from the data of these communities. It is, therefore, the responsibility of both to build bridges with the communities that would be most vulnerable to the disruptive impact of the technologies they build and benefit from. We must take advantage of this moment to forge technology that will be in service of humanity—taking 'people-centered innovation' from a buzzword to actual practice.

8

OUTLASTING THE VIRUS: INFODEMIC AND I

An intense battle is being waged against the Infodemic, which is running parallel to the battle against the Pandemic. Misinformation, the darkest shade of grey in the Chrome Age, is now being used to destabilise businesses and political systems, and dissolve the social cohesion shared by individuals. "Misinformation costs lives",[xi] and the Infodemic has led to uncountable preventable deaths.

No amount of digital distancing is helping curb the spread of fake news. This emergence of a highly polarised information system should be effectively countered by a new guarantor of the public domain. No single agent can ever ensure the integrity of the global information system. The answer, therefore, lies in the coming together of all the three important actors—the state, big tech and the public.

The state should help denounce disinformation and simultaneously promote high quality content. Big tech can devise algorithms to filter out such misinformation, curtail the financial incentive acquired through it and display a higher sense of responsibility. Indeed, if platforms can display the same energy and responsiveness they did during the US elections in other jurisdictions, we may have some hope for a tenable solution.

Finally, the public should expand their information base by incorporating different sources of information, reading before posting on social media, and exposing and reporting fake news. It is only through the realisation of collective responsibility that we can hope to find a 'vaccine' for the Infodemic.

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9

#TECHFORGOOD – A RAY OF HOPE

In a gloomy landscape of various shades of grey, we are at last beginning to see some light and some white. The emergence of a technology moment where communities are beginning to find their voices and change the course of their future, provides a glimmer of hope. Across the world, especially in Asia and Africa, people are discovering, nurturing and shaping new aspirations and goals for themselves by using technology. The African Union highlighted the need to diversify, develop and assert ownership over its digital society and economy.[xii] Community data has transformed from a fringe idea to a mainstream policy debate, receiving a nod, for instance, in India's Non-Personal Data Governance Framework.[xiii]

Even as the pandemic upended our lives, we saw governments deploying technology for the greater social good; we saw businesses respond to it with extreme ingenuity; and we also saw women seizing this moment and retaining agency.

The post-pandemic era offers us an opportunity to build a more diverse and inclusive digital order. We can, and must, redefine diversity and support minorities and women to play a key role as a new world emerges from the debris of the war on COVID-19. The world today once again stands on the cusp of history. It cannot afford to fail in laying a new foundation which is free of the of the frailties of the past.

END NOTES

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