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The Book in the Era of Facebook and Twitter

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Abstract: We live in an era where the standard of communications is the 140-character Tweet. This is creating a culture of superficiality where celebrity replaces well-earned fame, and where opinion is everything. Truth is treated as subjective statement, and the new media dominate the public discourse. Yet Books remain plentiful, and there is an ever increasing number printed and sold every year. But what will the book bring to a generation of youngsters who have grown up surrounded by the new media and whose social relations are much more defined by Facebook than by neighbourhood, school or family?

Keywords: Big data; book; culture; facts; freedom; media; social.

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A hyper-connected culture of superficiality

We live in an era where the standard of communications is the 140-character Tweet! This is creating a culture of superficiality where celebrity replaces well-earned fame, and where opinion is everything. Truth is treated as a subjective statement, and the new media dominate public discourse.

The illusion of knowledge is reinforced by the tremendous advances in the access to knowledge. We can instantly check any fact, find any bit of information we want - thanks to the age of the internet and the smart phone - and thus armed, we go forth into the world of the rapidly changing society in which we live. We advance, thinking that we know a subject because we retrieved a fact, not counting that that fact may be wrong for we live in the age of fake news, “alternative facts”, smear campaigns and distortions of all kinds; any person can easily set up a website, and post information to the net.

Mobile telephony not only enabled us to reach anyone we want at any time and in any place, but also, its links with the internet made possible the liberation of many of the services of ICT from the anchor of the desk top and laptop computers. Hand-held devices are becoming the norm, and the penetration of mobile telephony is awesome. There are more mobile phone lines than there are human beings on the planet, and about three billion of these are smart phones. And the smart phone is barely 10 years old.

In the meantime, social connectivity has also had an equally rapid growth, with Facebook alone accounting for over a billion connected persons in less than ten years. Content has grown apace, as people post on the net everything from videos and pictures to music and text. Today, the Internet is adding to the amount of data, and we possess about two Exabytes of data every day. Just how much is an Exabyte? Well if you converted all the text in the Library of Congress into digital format, an Exabyte would be 100,000 times more! The age of big data¹ and social connectivity is here.

Not that all of that content is particularly useful. Most of the self-centred tweets, the inane emails, and the gossipy WhatsApp chats are not particularly interesting or useful. Yet many of us spend a large part of the day reading bits of text and looking at images on a

¹ “Big Data” has been a major issue in many research institutions and generally in circles concerned with ICT. See inter alia Kenneth Cukier and Viktor Mayer-Schonberger, *Big Data: A Revolution that will Transform How We Live, Work and Think* (Boston: Hodder & Stoughton, 2013); also Eric Siegel, *Predictive Analytics: The Power to Predict Who Will Click, Buy, Lie, or Die* (New Jersey: Wiley; 2nd edition, 2016); and also for the perspective of business, see inter alia Foster Provost & Tom Fawcett; *Data Science for Business: What You Need to Know about Data Mining and Data-Analytic Thinking* (CA: O’Reilly Media; 1st edition, 2013); and Mike Grigsby, *Advanced Customer Analytics: Targeting, Valuing, Segmenting, and Loyalty Techniques* (G.B & USA: Kogan Page; 1st edition, 2016).

screen that we would never spend time reading off a printed page. Yet we feel compelled to do so. Our modern hyper-connected culture has inculcated into us a fear of missing something. We feel guilty if we leave emails unanswered, we worry about being left out of the circles of the chatrooms, then we complain that we are so busy that we cannot find the time to do what we really want to do. A real life echo of the questions that T.S. Eliot posed in the last century:

Where is the Life we have lost in living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?
—T.S. Eliot, *The Rock*, 1934.

We are entering the era of new realities with the emergence of Big Data and a powerful combination of machine learning, deep learning and Artificial Intelligence (AI). But the scale of the coming AI revolution promises change of such a magnitude, and at such a speed, that the international firm McKinsey has estimated will have 3000 times the disruptive effect of the industrial revolution².

But already the new realities of Internet and social connectivity are also creating an ideal environment where cyber-bullying and hate speech, and much more seriously, where fake news, smear campaigns and false data can flourish. But many are now asking, how can the awesome power of the new technologies from big data to machine learning to AI be harnessed to the task of dealing with fake news, falsehoods, cyber-bullying and hate speech?

With so many young people relying entirely on the internet for finding out facts and even learning about events and issues, the absence of the book, more fleshed out, more thoughtful, more deliberate, is a loss. So we must try to ensure in the education of youth that we emphasize books as well as the new **Media Literacy**.

Beyond inaccurate information, purposefully or accidentally distributed, at a time of superficiality in our interaction with the available information on the internet, there are other problems with the new culture of tweets and electronic texting. We think that everything is available on the internet – and it largely is – and that therefore people who are net-savvy are well-read and well-educated, and can discuss thoughtfully all aspects of an issue. But that is not true for two main reasons:

- First, there is ample evidence that people gravitate towards sources of information that act as “echo chambers” to reinforce their prejudices, not to sample the wide array of opinion and information that is posted on the web every day; and
- Second, that minorities may be bullied to the point where they do not dare express their view or in some cases, many teenagers—in their formative years – experience cyber-bullying, in addition to regular schoolyard bullying, to the point that some of them commit suicide.

So it is important in the formative school years that we teach Media Literacy as well as at least a part of the cannon of Western literature and humanities that promote values that are central to Western Culture. Then we must emphasize manners in how we speak, reminding ourselves that texting is no different than speaking directly to another person. The way the

² “Compared with the Industrial Revolution, we estimate that this change is happening ten times faster and at 300 times the scale, or roughly 3,000 times the impact”, Cited in Book Excerpt from Richard Dobbs, James Manyika, and Jonathan Woetzel, *The four global forces breaking all the trends*, (McKinsey Global Institute, April 2015)
<http://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/the-four-global-forces-breaking-all-the-trends>
(accessed August 25, 2017).

message is communicated is important. That is another form of teaching manners. Cyber-bullying should be tackled early in the lives of children, and monitored and countered whenever possible.

But many would go way beyond these formative years, and seek to limit freedom of expression. Indeed, there are many calls for promoting filtering the kind of speech that is posted on the internet in all its forms, and forcing the providers of platforms such as Facebook and Twitter and others to assume some responsibility for the material that is being posted on these most important platforms. Technical difficulties aside, and assuming that AI will enable us to develop some filtering capability, which even if it is not foolproof will still reduce considerably the phenomenon, there remains a fundamental question about whether that would be a desirable thing to do, or otherwise.

Interfering with freedom of speech has never been a good policy³, no matter who does it. It inevitably leads to a slippery slope that will harm that essential lifeblood of all societies which is freedom of speech and freedom of access to information. Countries that have tried to do so in the name of national security have found out very quickly the moral strain that it puts on society. Look at the US “Patriot Act”, passed by congress right after 9/11, which was intended to give the government the tools it needed to launch a “War on Terror”. It soon begat Guantanamo, rendition, enhanced interrogation techniques, outright torture and even extra-judicial killing, and all this in one of the most solid of democracies in the world.

A footnote here. Librarians in America stood up to some of the most pernicious of the Patriot Act’s provisions, namely giving the right to the police to find out who was reading what in the libraries, and the criminalization of the librarian talking about it with anyone, even a lawyer. Four Librarians from Connecticut stood up and 80% of the public backed them up, and this particular provision of the Patriot Act was dropped⁴.

In a great statement generally attributed to Voltaire, or at least fully reflecting his thinking, he is alleged to have said:

I disagree with what you say, but I am willing to fight to the death to defend your right to say it.

So for adults on the internet, I personally favour a vigorous debate where ideas will defeat ideas, and we rely on the foundation that children have received in home and school to form character and instill manners and promote critical thinking. For critical thinking is the essential antidote to the illusion of knowledge.

Books in this new culture

But where are the books in this new world of 140 character tweets and Facebook posts? Books remain plentiful, and there is an ever increasing number printed and sold every year. The wide range of books written and sold go from Sci-Fi to romance novels, and the resilience of the essay as a form of writing suggests that public receptivity to the book, with its attributes of depth and length, and the interactivity between author and reader, is still strong. But what will the book bring to a generation of youngsters who have grown up

³ There is a long and extensive literature on the importance of defending free speech. A most recent contribution is Timothy Garton Ash, *Free Speech: Ten Principles for a Connected World* (NH: Yale University Press; 2017). See also David Cole, “Why We Must Still Defend Free Speech” in September 2017 Issue of *The New York Review of Books*.

⁴ For more on the Librarians who stood against the patriot act, see: Connecticut Four – Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Connecticut_Four. In general, the four Connecticut librarians filed a lawsuit known as *Doe v. Gonzales*, challenging the constitutional validity of National Security Letters (NSL) issued by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) under the USA PATRIOT Act.

surrounded by the new media, and whose social relations are much more defined by Facebook than by neighbourhood, school or family?

Fundamentally, we live in a complex world, full of complex societies that are the result of that most complex of creatures: The human being. We need to learn to look at ourselves, and to look at others. It is that complexity that the book – and only the book – can address.

First, let us define the “book” in today’s world. The book is defined as a collection of words of a certain length, usually of the order of 40,000 words. Whether it is in electronic or print or audio form, is less important. It is through an unfolding narrative that the words acquire meaning and substance in a creation where the whole is far more than the sum of the parts. The length of the product is necessary to qualify as a book, because the complex ideas, and the narrative arc of a book cannot be cut short without significant loss. I am not only talking of the novel, but also of any effort to spell out something worth knowing and worth understanding in any level of depth.

Only thus can we drill into the opacity of character, the unpredictability of the human mind, and try to gain insight into our complex interrelationships as human beings. How else can we probe how love and hate coexist, or how passions for abstract causes can be unleashed? Great literature in every age has also spoken to us through the prism of multi-faceted lives, and even through showing us the mechanisms of how experiences in early childhood have shaped our evolution into adulthood.

All humans struggle to develop that schizophrenic balance between individualism and dependency that our identifications with parents and siblings as we struggle from childhood through adolescence and into adulthood, and how that struggle can shape the complicated beings we become. Books for age, for every reader, good books, help us navigate that necessary evolution.

The 2017 Nobel Prize for Literature has been awarded to the British author Kazuo Ishiguro and the Nobel Committee specifically mentioned that he “... was most associated with the themes of memory, time, and self-delusion”. Themes such as these need the vehicle of the book to be expressed, explored and appreciated.

Books ... good books... great books allow us to craft mirrors in which we see ourselves and our societies, and to create windows through which we see the world.

All of that cannot be done in the brevity and superficiality of continuous connectivity and short messages. It requires reflection, and appreciation. Interaction with great authors and intellectuals is a training that we all need, for it enables us to approach complex problems with the thoughtfulness and lucidity that they deserve. And in today’s society, with the endless complex choices we have to make as citizens in this rapidly changing world, it is the reading of books that remains the best means to the formation of judgment, and the development of the means to engage in fruitful public discourse. To know others, to know our society, to know ourselves, and to be true to our innermost conscience. Thus, we can turn to the Bard’s great lines:

To thine own self be true,
for it must follow as dost the night the day,
that canst not then be false to any man.⁵

Complex societies, complex choices

So, despite the echo chambers and the ingrained prejudices, despite the spread of fake news, smears and outright lies, we need to encourage the civility of our public discourse, the

⁵ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, inspired by Socrates (“Know thyself”, quoting Pythia, the Oracle of Delphi).

marginalization of hate groups and, we must promote lucidity of our public discussions. We live in complex societies and the slogans of t-shirts and bumper stickers are not adequate to discuss real alternatives for social action. Even when all agree on the basic facts, the selection of the course of action can be very difficult, as we can see in the reform of healthcare in the US.

Let us stop here for a **parable**. It is a story that I owe to my friend Amartya Sen⁶. You meet three children with a flute and they ask you to help them decide who should get the flute. The first child is poor and has no toys, while the other two are rich and have many toys. The facts are not contested. Thus it is “fair” to let the poor child have the flute.

Now consider the same three children, but the middle child says that she is a talented musician, she enjoys playing the flute. The other two have no musical abilities at all, and they enjoy listening to her play. Again, the facts are not contested. She should get the flute.

Now let’s consider a third scenario, again where the facts are not contested: The third child contends that even if the first is poor and the second is talented, he is the one who made the flute. He took the reed and made the holes and turned it into a flute. Surely it is only fair that he should get the result of his own work.

What we have here is some, and only some, of the criteria of social choice: equity in the first case, utility in the second and entitlement in the third. All social problems and policies involve a mix of these dimensions, and choosing in a fair way has a lot to do with how society values these different dimensions and the weights that we put on each of these at a particular moment in the history of that society. To redress past injustices, it may well be very necessary to put the emphasis on one or the other of these dimensions. That is frequently the case when allocating quotas or according compensatory preferential treatment to some underprivileged group in a society. Clarity in the political debate, civility in our public discourse, and lucidity in our social intercourse can ensure that social cohesion is enhanced and not undermined by the use of such methods.

Only through the training of books in childhood and throughout adulthood can we become better citizens. The echo chambers of the social media tend to divide societies and make discussion of complex subjects impossible.

So, if Social Justice has many dimensions, how do we get there? The two pillars of achieving Social Justice are, to my mind, Freedom and Equality. Freedom entails the exercise of rights, and equality may need to take into account the innate inequalities between individual capabilities. Each of these points needs some discussion.

Freedom, rights and equity

“... to be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.” - Nelson Mandela

Freedom is about the ability to decide, to choose. But we very quickly notice that many in society are not able to choose, even if the law guarantees them that right. Thus, extreme poverty severely limits the choices open to an individual. Lack of education or illness can also be important constraints in an individual’s ability to fulfil his or her potential, not to mention social attitudes towards gender or ethnicity. Therefore, the exercise of rights needs the empowerment of individuals with certain capabilities that allow them to effectively practice such rights. To many, society’s assistance to each individual to ensure that they acquire such capabilities becomes itself a human right since it is necessary to exercise these rights. Without that, there can be no Social Justice. Amartya Sen has cogently argued about the importance of balancing rights and capabilities to ensure the exercise of freedoms, and

⁶ See: Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (Mass: Belknap Press, 2011).

he recast the issues of development as broadening the space of freedom in which people can thrive.

But if freedom is ultimately to allow each person to live as fully as they can, then the inherent differences between people challenge us in terms of the inequalities that they will generate. People are multi-dimensional and we are unequal in our endowments in various dimensions: musical talent, ability in sports, physical strength, educational achievement, entrepreneurial drive, and so on.

To measure equality before the law is but a start. Some people would see fairness as the provision of equal opportunities only. If the result is to have some who are as rich as Bill Gates and some who are extremely poor, so be it. Others, most of us in fact, would see that a society where some people are lighting cigars with thousand dollar bills and others are starving is inherently unjust, whatever the starting position was and whatever the procedural guarantees have been.

Extreme inequality is corrosive. It hardens the attitudes of the rich and powerful towards the poor and lowly. It builds acceptance of the incongruity of wealth amidst misery and exclusion, undermines the very notions of social justice and social cohesion, makes a mockery of fairness, and leads to the slippery path of class warfare as the only means of redress.

Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey,
Where wealth accumulates, and men decay.
—Oliver Goldsmith, *The Deserted Village*, 1770

And that brings us back to the issue of freedom of expression. Solutions to societal problems need reflection, discussion, and the ability to articulate new and novel solutions that will use the technologies of our time. All the new ideas face an uphill battle, for as Carrie Chapman Catt observed, there is no written law that has ever been more binding than unwritten custom supported by popular opinion. Without investing in books to develop our critical thinking and educate our taste, we risk falling prey to our opinions inherited from our parents or superficially acquired from our friends, as John Fitzgerald Kennedy (JFK) remarked:

The great enemy of truth is not the lie—deliberate, contrived and dishonest—but the myth—persistent, persuasive and unrealistic.
Too often we hold facts to the clichés of our forebears. We subject all facts to a prefabricated set of interpretations. We enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought.
—JFK

Envoi

Finally, to conclude this discourse, I believe that the book is here to stay, and that the new generation will indeed use tweets and Facebook, but they will also find their own way to write their own books, in their own language. And like the best of the legacy of the previous generations, they will be books that will connect with the past, understand the present and invent the future. Throughout human history it has been so, and it is very much part of our humanity.