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GOVERNING DIGITAL OPTIMISM

"Diplomacy does not exist in a vacuum. It is both shaped by and shapes the broader societal context" (Kurbalija, 2023).

In February 2023, the summit of Swiss University experts, students and staff assembled in awe and wander. The theme digital diplomacy is broad, especially in the marvellous surroundings of a 14-century old castle on the riverbank Rhone, where our university is located, mind can wander. Under the concept and moderation of prof. Anis H. Bajrektarevic, we experienced a great lecture of Jovan Kurbalija, Ph.D, who is the founding director of DiploFoundation and the Head of the Geneva Internet Platform. As former diplomat, he has a professional and academic background in international law, diplomacy, and information technology. We opened many interesting topics, starting to understand the role of diplomatic environment and context in digital axial age.

Context, socio-cultural, economic, and political backgrounds of historical intercorrelations, sounds as a password for Enigma decryption.

Whilst each epoch has its defining technology determining economic, social, and political success, in today's times we witness the omnipotent reality of cyber digital realms.

They are full of wonder, puzzle, and unknowingness.

This is precisely the reason why historical, philosophical, and cultural contexts are important for the future diplomacy in digital age. The environment in which diplomacy is ingrained is the heir of history, philosophy, culture, and technology intertwined developments. Latest have burst into digital transformation, triggering new questions on "social contract" and common sense of the world.

In the wake of pandemic, we were faced to reshape, rethink, and readjust the old patterns and immerging new cyber paradigms. Daily challenged with new versions of old paradigms, new shifts in defining what we take as universal fact, is a token of unimaginable mutations. We live in the flux world, liquid facts, and quantum realities: now is yesterday and tomorrow is a moment before.

"We live in a time where we need to confront new paradigms, ask challenging questions and view issues from multiple perspectives" (Kurbalija, 2023).

If the context is altered daily, social landscape is requesting new deal. This is the reason why we have no other choice than to step back and reflect on the future of humanity. We need to ask ourselves what defines us as human race? What defines AI as a tool for progress and a tool for growth? Where are common ethical algorithms and standards we ought to manage our actions and lives accordingly?

A new social deal, social contract, and the right to choose

Social contracts as societal answers to core dilemmas are negotiated and transmitted. Essential question in society is dyad between individual and societal, between choosing and accepting etc. The right to choose is essential for well-being, opening potentials and balanced social development.

"Even when choices are limited by circumstances, the very possibility of having a choice is vital for human dignity, freedom, and societal progress" (Kurbalija, 2023).

Remember, there was a strong assumption that the Internet provides more choices in social, political, and economic decisions, what has been soon increasingly challenged. All depend on the social and overall life skills of users and their goals and interests.

Choice is essential for economic development as well for free market economy. In theory, it enables the talent, creativity, energy and supports potentials of active agents, playing rational roles underlined with pragmatic dictions. All "choice theories" do focus on overall estimation what is essential to achieve optimum standard in life. The term "choice theory" is the work of William Glasser, author of the book so named, and is the culmination of some 50 years of theory and practice in psychology and counselling. His innovations for individual counselling, work environments and school, highlight personal choice, personal responsibility, and personal transformation. Glasser positioned himself in opposition to conventional mainstream psychiatrists, who focus instead on classifying psychiatric syndromes as "illnesses" and prescribe psychotropic medications to treat mental disorders. Choice theory posits behaviours we choose as central to our existence. Our behaviours (choices) are driven by five genetically driven needs in hierarchical order: survival and love, power, freedom, and fun. The most basic human needs are survival (physical component) and love (mental component). Without physical (nurturing) and emotional (love), an infant will not survive to attain power, freedom, and fun.

Hence, tyranny of choice is a reality encapsulated in postmodern and digital era. Choice involves risk. Thus, a possibility of choice may turn into a nightmare of choosing: we often need help, as observed in thriving businesses, from life coaches to fortune tellers of all kinds. Regardless to whom we delegate our right to choose, we are not free from choosing neither from consequences of our picks.

And, with choices we encounter dilemma of pro or contra digital. Progress, technology, and modernity are intertwined concepts. Most digitalization narratives are centred around techno-optimism and techno-pessimism. Techno-optimism usually focuses on the power and capabilities of digital technologies. These 'blue sky' narratives focus on how digital technologies help individuals and society. Often, techno-optimism narratives focus on medical uses. Techno-pessimism focuses on technology, which can 'extinguish' the Enlightenment flame. Techno-pessimism has gained momentum with the risks that AI creates for human agency and freedom. This narrative builds on a dystopian tradition in literature that includes books such as 'Brave New World' (Huxley) and '1984' (Orwell).

"The Gartner hype cycle substantiates techno optimism vs. pessimism dynamics by following the different phases of a technology's lifecycle: from the technology trigger, via its peak of inflated expectations, to disillusionment and, ultimately, the plateau of productivity. New technologies can easily trigger hype and even some 'magic'. While this 'irrational' aspect of technology can inspire, it can also be used for manipulation. Blockchain technology is one example of the hype cycle. A few years ago, blockchain was considered a silver bullet to many societal problems. In the naivest views, blockchain was supposed to 'automate' human trust. With time distance, blockchain cannot deliver on initially inflated expectations" (Kurbalija, 2023).

Clear judgement and healthy realism should not kill the enthusiasm and the magic around technology. A bit of magic and utopia could be inspirational. Still, this is also a very fertile ground for manipulation.

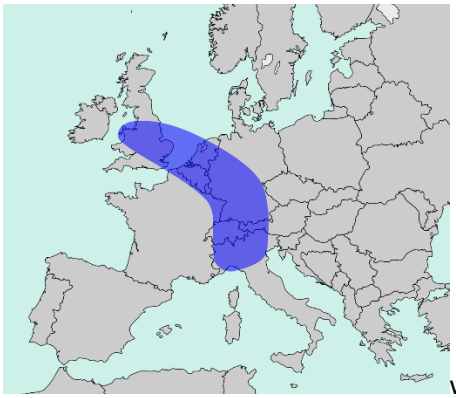
"Progress is about the continuous advancement of human conditions. Progress is powered by science and technology. For a long time, the idea of progress has been 'given'" (Kurbalija, 2023).

But progress excludes the idea of growth, which is non-linear, with no specific forms but simple premises: growth includes downfalls, deepness one's estimations and reflects obvious and scarce events we are witnessing. However, over the last few decades, especially after 9/11, the rosy glasses on the future of humanity became unknown. And yes, we are constantly news doom-scrolling, doubting on shinny furniture outlook realities, and questioning benevolent forecasts as wishful thinking.

We have acknowledged that digital policy deeply matters. The root of digital age is axial age[1], were first transcendence was made: now we live in digital axial age. Major religions today, such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism can trace their origins in axial age. Through the Enlightenment when rationality became the key pillar of societal thinking and with 'Vienna thinkers' who gave the last touches (so far) to modern thinking, we can more openly understand our modus operandi and cognitive pillars of humanity in contemporary digital axial age.

Who is on the winning side?

"Blue banana geopolitics[2]" was developed by a French geopolitician to explain the core economic and political axis of European geopolitics. The banana may shorten after Brexit. As the map shows, digital follows a traditional blue banana geopolitics. Most of the key communication channels go from northern Italy via Switzerland to Germany (Basel/Zurich - Frankfurt digital axis) and after that to the Netherlands and UK.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"In the last few centuries, modernity and humanity have been reinforcing each other. Advances in science and technology have helped to the emancipation of millions worldwide "(Kurbalija, 2023).

[1] The Axial Age, coined by German philosopher Karl Jaspers, is a period from roughly the 8th to 3rd century BCE that signified a cultural shift in the major Eurasian civilizations of China, India, Persia and the Mediterranean toward the modern era. Notable philosophers and prophets such as Socrates, Confucius, Zoroaster, the Buddha, Pythagoras, Lao Tse, and the Hebrew prophets all arose in this period, according to "The Great Transformation: The beginning of our religious traditions," by Karen Armstrong.

[2] The Blue Banana (also known as the European Megalopolis or the Liverpool–Milan Axis) is a discontinuous corridor of urbanization in Western and Central Europe, with a population of around 100 million. The conceptualisation of the area as a "Blue Banana" was developed in 1989 by RECLUS, a group of French geographers managed by Roger Brunet. It stretches approximately from North West England through the English Midlands across Greater London to the European Metropolis of Lille, the Benelux states with the Dutch Randstad and Brussels and along the German Rhineland, Southern Germany, Alsace-Moselle in France in the west and Switzerland (Basel and Zürich) to Northern Italy (Milan, Turin, and Genoa) in the south.

Certainly today we are witnessing one underlying tension of our era, that is partition of modernity (digital world) and humanity (new social contract). 'Ultra' modernity via AI reduces the space for human agency and, ultimately, our natural rights to make personal, political, and economic choices.

If Ai is studying us, through social media, apps, and other biotech tools, provides us with desires and states and decisions, what is there to remain uninhabited by AI?

"Tech companies do not charge users for the use of internet services; rather, they generate their income from selling information about users to advertisers, or in the words of Zysman and Kenney (2014) by 'delivering its users to advertisers'. In this new business model, user data is the core economic resource. When searching for information and while interacting on the internet, users generate significant amounts of data, including personal data. This is their electronic footprint" (Kurbalija, 2023).

Generally, there are three main shapers of digitalisation and society: economics, ethics, and governance. States have a limited capacity to influence online internet activities in their territory. The intangible nature of Internet services makes it difficult for states, among other functions, to coordinate economic policy, collect taxes, or impose customs controls. Many communities worldwide have been effectively digitally marginalised - the wisdom of 'forgotten' cultures and communities is in danger.

More, global geopolitics and geoeconomics are being shaped by the fast-growing economic power of tech companies. As an illustration of this shift, the market capitalisation of Apple is higher than the annual GDP of the entire African continent.

"This growing economic power of tech companies is impacting and will continue to impact digital governance and policy processes. Apple Market capitalization at the end of 2021 US$ 3.1 trillion Africa GDP of the entire African continent in 2019 US$ 2.4 trillion" (Kurbalija, 2023).

Consequential, ethical questions are battling the scope of academic and policy debates. Not just carbon, electronic footprint, moral and ethical are in the core of our concerns, not just regarding ethics, fairness, justice, transparency, and accountability. One of a great peril is a risk of discrimination and bias decisions made by AI systems. Researchers are carefully exploring mentioned ethical challenges posed by AI.

Over the past few years, there has been significant progress in the field of artificial intelligence (AI), (from intelligent digital personal assistants and smart home devices to autonomous vehicles, smart buildings, and medical robots), entering all the pores of intimate and inherent human experience. Implications on economic, societal, educative, political, and overall anthropological are unimaginable.

Microsoft has crossed this Rubicon in global digital politics by proposing a Digital Geneva Convention, which should 'commit governments to avoid cyber-attacks that target the private sector or critical infrastructure or, the use of hacking to steal intellectual property'.

The unthinkable has become almost inevitable (Kurbalija, 2023).

In the search for a more secure and stable Internet, global Internet companies need to work with governments. Any major fragmentation and disruption of the Internet would affect the core business model of Internet companies, based on global access to data. Governments are gaining more cyber-power, ranging from security to censorship and taxation.

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About the Author

Prof. Lucija Mulej, Ph.D is an author, columnist, professor and creator of the non-technological innovations (such as her own method: Connectivity of Intelligences 4 Q)