

Empires and Communications

The US, China and the EU in the Digital Age

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“Communication ... occupies a crucial position in the organization and administration of government and in turn of empires and Western civilization.”

Harold Innis: *Empire and Communications* (1950/2007: 23)

What are the key global and internal challenges to public communication in the democratic world? How can the values and institutions of democratic communication – and liberal democracy itself – face, resist and survive powerful external autocratic contenders as well as internal backsliding from democracy? How could we compare the strengths and weaknesses of media systems in the EU and the US from the perspective of media freedom, pluralism and the chances they provide for vigorous democratic communication? How could the key values of Western civilization be preserved and disseminated in digital infrastructures and platforms? And what are those “Western values” exactly? How can they relate to, or be manifested by, contemporary communicative values, platform principles, and institutional practices? Could these values be linked to the logic of social media algorithms? As we try to ask these big questions, historical, (geo)political, social, technological and normative approaches to media systems could all help to put the issues into perspective. What follows here is not a traditional academic paper, let alone a research article, but only an introduction that tries to frame these questions and offer a potential approach to a familiar list of problems to spark a discussion.

1. Civilizations: not clash, but competition and cross-fertilization

In his influential work, *The Clash of Civilizations?* Samuel Huntington characterized the post-Cold War world order by conflict and potential war between civilizations (Huntington 1993). Listing eight key civilizations (Western, Muslim, Orthodox Christian, African, Latin American, Confucian/Chinese, Hindu, Japanese) Huntington argued that Islamic extremism was the greatest threat to US interests and -- what he more or less equaled to that -- world peace.

Huntington’s approach could certainly be criticized along many lines. His conceptualization of civilizations creates a shortcut between ancient religious civilizations and present day empires; even between civilizations, nation states and military alliances. Equating Western civilization with NATO on the global chessboard seems a shot too long indeed. Also, if civilizations are rooted in world religions, why would Buddhist civilization be missing from the picture? Because it is not represented as a unified force in international affairs -- Huntington posits. On the flip side, although Japan is part of Confucian culture, it gains its own civilization status due its military and economic power. The supposedly existing African

and Latin American civilizations also acquire that status – in their case it is their market size and strategic importance that provides the legitimation. In short, questions related to *civilizations as agency* remain problematic: the definition of what dimensions constitute a civilization, how unified it is as a global actor, what military, economic and soft power capacities and conflict potentials it has, and how it relates to other civilizations.

Another problem is the hawkish discourse that Huntington's book represents. Featuring *clash* as its central concept -- rather than dialogue, cooperation, interdependence, or at least competition and non-military types of conflict --, *The Clash of Civilizations* sounds like a self-fulfilling prophecy that predicts, and in a latent way even stipulates, war as the expected form of conflict between civilizations.

Yet civilizations certainly count and remain meaningful units of comparative analysis, not only in comparative world history, but also in contemporary global politics. Huntington was definitely right to highlight the growing importance of identity politics and the relevance of civilizations as key sources of identity in the age of globalization. As we witness national, ethnic, gender, populist, religious and cultural identities driving political conflict, civilizations as reservoirs of cultural values and religious systems re-emerge both as peaceful soft power resources and weaponized ideologies. Aggressive universalist political ideologies such as radical Islam, Chinese/Han nationalism or far-right identitarian Western "civilizationism" (Brubaker 2017) could all be interpreted as selective strategies of exploitation of their respective, religiously rooted civilizational values.

In fact, civilizations are much more peaceful, pluralist, complex, multi-level historical phenomena with diverse meanings than these abrasive, modern academic and political simplifications would suggest. Based on world religions, civilizations have been existing for centuries or millennia. We certainly need have a more nuanced concept of what civilizations are.

"Civilization, in fact, has at least a double meaning. It denotes both moral and material values. ... spiritual concerns and material affairs." -- Braudel explains in his seminal work, *A History of Civilizations* (1963/1993: 5). His multisided definition offers four aspects or elements of civilizations. First, civilizations may be understood as *geographic areas*, spatial zones and frontiers. „(V)ast, or otherwise, (they) can always be located on the map" (9). Second, they may also be interpreted as *societies*, as „there can be no civilizations without the societies that support them and inspire their tensions and their progress. ... If a society stirs and changes, the civilization based on it stirs and changes too." (15-6) Third, civilizations are also *economies*: „every society, every civilization, depends on economic, technological, biological and demographic circumstances, Material and biological conditions always help determine the destiny of civilizations." (18)

Finally – and most importantly for a communication perspective --, civilizations are *cultural entities*, longitudinal „ways of thought, collective psychology, awareness, mentality... Dictating a society's *attitudes*, guiding its choices, confirming its prejudices and directing its actions, this is very much a fact of civilization. Far more than the accidents or the historical and social circumstances of a period, it derived from the distant past, from ancient beliefs, fears and anxieties, which are almost unconscious. ... These *basic values*, these *psychological structures*, are assuredly the features that civilizations can least easily communicate one to another. They are what isolate and differentiate the most sharply. And

such *habits of mind survive the passage of time*. They change little, and change slowly, after a long incubation which itself is largely unconscious too. Here religion is the strongest feature of civilization, at the heart of both their present and their past. And in the first place, of course, in civilizations outside Europe.” (21-22, italics added.)

Taking this *longue durée* perspective, one may observe a less conflict-oriented coexistence, cross-fertilization and competition of civilizations than a conflict-oriented geopolitical definition of civilizations would suggest.

2. Four empires (US, EU, China and Russia); but only two digital empires with online infrastructures (US and China)

Civilizations do not have agency – but empires do. Civilizations thrive, compete and cross-fertilize like ecosystems. Centralized empires with political leadership and organization act as strategic agents.

“Civilizations can survive only through a concern with their limitations and in turn through a concern with their limitations of *their institutions, including empires*” – Canadian communication scholar Harold Innis warns in his classic *Empire and Communications* (1950/2007: 22, italics added). In Innis’ view, *empires are the institutions of civilizations*. Empires form on the foundations of civilizations and act on their behalf. Civilizations may be seen as deep historical reservoirs of symbolic values, and empires as their active political agencies that utilize those civilizational values for imperial legitimation.

Today four key empires, dominate world politics: the United States, the European Union, China and Russia. All four constitute empires in one classic sense: they are powerful, multinational, aggregated realms, occupying vast territorial space under the rule of a central government. However, their political systems differ starkly. On the one hand, the US and the EU are democratic liberal empires, based on rule of law, constitutionalism and political pluralism. On the other hand, China and Russia represent varying degrees of autocratic dictatorships from the neo-totalitarian system of China under Xi Jinping to the authoritarian regime of Putin’ Russia. Three of the four key empires (the US, China and Russia) also present themselves as nation states – but the EU remains a political union with an internal single market of 27 semi-sovereign member states.

Historically, all four empires (or their predecessors) had been imperialistic in various ways, extending “relations of power across territorial spaces over which they have no prior or given legal sovereignty, and where, in one or more of the domains of economics, politics, and culture, they gain some measure of extensive hegemony over those spaces for the purpose of extracting or accruing value” (James & Nairn 2006: xxiii). If, how, and to what degree they engage in imperialist and colonialist practices today – this important issue can only be mentioned here without elaboration. (Left-wing critics argue that today, the older Western European member states of the EU internally colonialize the new member states in Central and Eastern Europe (cf. Böröcz 2009). Similarly, China’s role in Tibet or inner Mongolia may be also interpreted in terms of imperial colonization).

Western civilization today remains Janus-faced, as it is represented by two parallel yet rather different empires, the US and the EU. NATO as a military alliance links the US and key EU member states and their allies on the two sides of the Atlantic.

“Communication ... occupies a crucial position in the organization and administration of government and in turn of empires and Western civilization” -- Innis advises in an excerpt of *Empire and Communications* (that I also chose as the motto for this introduction, (Innis 1950/2007: 23)). The two Western empires differ sharply in terms of their global communication capacities and digital power.

The US as a global digital empire

The internet was originally created about 50 years ago as ARPANET, a military computer network of the United States. As far as digital communication infrastructures are concerned, the US (at least private commercial American corporations) has preserved its leading role in maintaining several forms of hegemony, even control over the major part of the global internet as well as global media markets. American digital services, platforms, softwares and media such as Google, Facebook, Instagram, Microsoft, Netflix, HBO, Disney and thousands of others acquired hegemony in significant part of the world.

The EU: no digital infrastructures and pan-European media

The EU, its member states and companies have never been able to develop or sustain similar digital platforms. European social media services, platforms, search engines or even significant apps (the counterparts of Facebook, Google, etc.) simply do not exist. The only European telecom app Skype had originally been developed as a Swedish-Danish-Estonian enterprise. But eBay bought Skype in 2005, and then finally Microsoft acquired it in 2011. The EU has not even been able to launch a European online streaming platform that could feature French, Italian, German, Skandinavian and other European films and television series.

Similarly, the EU was not able to launch a pan-European news or entertainment television network either. The Euronews cable television channel, that had been closest to such a project, was abandoned by the European Commission. Today, after a bumpy history, it has a marginal position even in the EU member states. It is now majority-owned (88%) by Media Globe Networks, led by Egyptian billionaire Naguib Sawiris. Another transnational European initiative, the German-French art television ARTE also has only 1-2 percent market share in two respective national markets, and practically non-existent in others EU member states.

The media market of the EU remains broken down to 27 segmented national communication spaces with limited European public spheres and basically no common digital and media infrastructures. On the one hand, the communication markets of Europe today are dominated by American digital platforms. On the other hand, the European communicative space is occupied by national commercial and public service media that represent mostly banal nationalist identities (Billig 1995), as opposed to European discourses.

China: a digital totalitarian empire in an inverse intranet

The only empire that successfully resisted American digital dominance is China. The People's Republic of China (PRC) hosts a unique online system, a national “inverse intranet” that was developed as a distinct unit within the global internet (Sukosd 2014). The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) created this “intranet” using a double-pronged

strategy: control and growth. The government exerts strong control over online access, content production and distribution, and ownership of online companies. Meanwhile, American platforms and services are banned and access to key foreign websites is blocked, thus creating a huge market for domestic online services. As a result, successful Chinese online companies dominate the domestic online market and collaborate with state agencies to censor content. These companies and their digital platforms and services, WeChat, Baidu, Weibo and thousands of others, provide a full alternative to American services. To cultivate politically acceptable content, the CCP established a plethora of state- or party-owned news portals (i.e., the People's Daily, Xinhua News Agency, and CCTV) and co-opts large, privately owned commercial websites to advance the communist party line. These infrastructural and content policies make China a digital empire, a counterpart of the US digital empire.

China's "intranet" policies have enabled the CCP to exert strict political control, minimize public discontent, and encourage a booming online economy. These policies may also be seen as the constituting elements of internet sovereignty, creating a strictly party-controlled, state-centered information regime. This presents a robust alternative model to the original, US-based Internet, pointing to the power of a centralized, walled empire in reshaping what was once envisioned as borderless, global network commons based on free speech principles.

Since China's first Internet connection in 1994, a self-sufficient, gated digital universe has emerged within the global internet. This gated universe boasts the world's largest national online population with about 940 million users in 2020. We may see China's internet as an "inverse intranet" with limited access from inside to the external world. Intranets were originally designed to facilitate information sharing within an organization while blocking outsiders' access. The opposite happens with China's large domestic "intranet" universe. China's "Great Firewall" limits domestic access from the inside out, to foreign websites. However, external internet users may access China-hosted content from abroad. This is why we developed the specific notion of "inverse intranet". Only Chinese netizens with access to foreign VPNs can "jump over the wall" from the inside out.

Huntington was certainly right relating geopolitics and international relations to civilizations. But the missing link is the level of empires. We witness fierce political, economic, technological and military competition between empires and not civilizations per se. Almost thirty years after the publication of *The Clash of Civilizations*, we witness China frontally challenging the United States for global hegemony in all possible areas, including digital infrastructures. The strategic intent behind China's unique online policies to create a sovereign, fully controlled digital totalitarian universe became successful. The Chinese internet now represents an alternative to the rest of what is known as the global internet. This was made possible at the price of market entry restriction for foreign companies, targeted state planning and aid, heavy censorship and the widespread repression of basic human rights in China. An additional problem for the world is that China also tries to exercise censorship globally the way it implements that in the PRC (see e.g., the case of

silencing critical voices in the NBA and many other venues regarding the suppression of the democracy movement and human rights in Hong Kong during 2019).

While China has been successful to establish itself as a digital empire, the EU and its members states are nowhere in the global competition. Internally, European users-citizens are not served by European digital platforms and apps. Globally, Western civilization remains one-sided as it is not represented by Europe in terms of digital infrastructures. American digital platforms colonize Europe (and most of the rest of the world except China) by offering global services that became monopolistic beyond comparison in the history of humankind.

A particular problem is that these platforms and services (most importantly, Facebook and Google) syphon off major (and still growing) parts of advertising revenues from traditional national media markets (including that of the US). This undermines the financial basis of independent news and entertainment content production by market-oriented commercial media. The result of this process is shrinking resources, fewer journalists, editors and other content creators who can produce less pluralistic and lower quality content.

Today, there are two *de facto* internets of the world: one dominated by American companies, and the other controlled and censored by the Chinese Communist Party.

Would the EU ever be able to develop its transnational, pan-European digital infrastructures and services? Could the EU ever become a digital empire? If yes, what could be the communicative principles of those European platforms services and how would these relate to the basic values of Western civilization?

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