

Comments on the paper

“Empires and Communication. The US, China and the EU in the digital age“ by Miklos Sukosd, for the “Media and democracy on the two sides of the Atlantic”, an international webinar organized by the Hungarian Europe Society, November 9, 2020

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“Twitter is out of control, made possible through the government gift of Section 230!”

Donald J. Trump, 5 November 2020

I really enjoyed reading the paper – and I admit it was not only because I found it thought-provoking and intellectually stimulating, but also because it provided me with a much-welcomed distraction from the almost unbearable, distressing pressure of immediacy, imposed on us in the form of all the doom and drama that is being played out in the news, day and night right now. It is certainly refreshing to take a break – and not just from the news but, more importantly, from what I would call the dominant line of scholarship in my field, media and communication studies, and political communication in particular, which seem transfixed on – or some might say obsessed by – the presence, especially when it comes to analysing the use social media and their impact on politics and society. The “longue durée” approach that is advocated by Miklos is arguably less popular, as our society we live in demands and rewards instant responses to the present-day challenges of the information age, rather than a longitudinal analytical perspective that might help us understand these challenges – and changes – within a broader historical and cultural context.

So, I very much welcome this attempt to go back to the classics like Harold Innis and Fernand Braudel, to explore some of the big questions surrounding the relationship between media and democracy today. I have just a couple of observations and comments on the proposed framework for analysis.

The paper is focused on two key concepts, both crucial for Harold Innis’s seminal work: civilization and empire. However, while “empire” has been a long-established concept within the field of media and communication studies, particularly within the media imperialism discourse of the 1970s/1980s but revived again with the advance of the Internet, “civilization” has arguably been a contested concept for some time, and especially in the version that Huntington has advanced, which has been criticized as overtly reductionist and inherently antagonistic, conflict-oriented. I take Miklos’s point that this is certainly not the only way how civilization can be conceptualized, and agree that Braudel’s multi-dimensional approach might be more fruitful and – despite preceding Huntington by three decades – potentially more inspiring for the digital age. However, I feel that more conceptual work needs to be done to demonstrate the viability of “civilization”, and to prove its analytical advantage over other concepts that have been much more commonly applied when studying the role of

communication in social change on a macro-level, particularly “culture” and “society”; I am not arguing it cannot be useful, but it needs more thought than is currently offered in the paper before it can be rehabilitated.

Unlike civilization, “empire”, as already mentioned, is a concept that is certainly not strange to the studies of new media and the digital geopolitics. Herbert Schiller’s original concept of “electronic colonialism” (1976) has been transformed into “digital colonialism” in the last couple of decades, and applied to analyses of new forms of dominance and dependency that are driven by the spreading of global digital communication infrastructure. However, while the media imperialism discourse has evolved to reflect on the diminishing role of the state, and increasing role and influence of multinational corporations over time – notably, Herbert Schiller himself argued in one of his last texts in 1992 that it is the corporations, rather than states, that are the primary drivers of cultural imperialism in the coming age of globalization – the framework that this paper outlines with regards to contemporary empires seems to be somehow stuck in the old, state-centred discourse of imperialism. It might be appropriate to talk about China as “digital totalitarian empire”, given what we know both about the level of state-party control of the rising tech platforms in China – after all, we were given an explicit illustration of who is the boss last week, when China’s richest entrepreneur and tech tycoon Jack Ma saw the planned IPO of his Ant Group (at an estimated value of 37bil. USD) halted by the government, following his criticism of China’s financial regulatory system.¹ However, I would argue that this system does not have an equivalent either in the contemporary United States, or – and much less so – in the EU. Calling the US as “a global digital empire”, as the paper does, makes it sound like the US government is directly controlling all the digital platforms and media companies that have their headquarters on the U.S. soil, and even uses them as vehicles for imperialist and colonialist practices. I don’t think there is evidence for either of these assumptions – at least not provided in the paper. Many of these corporations are publicly traded companies with large portion of stocks owned by global investors and hedge funds, so while falling under US jurisdiction, their organizational and financial structures exceed the boundaries and regulatory control of a particular nation state. Nothing can be more illustrative of this fact – and weakness of the US government vis-à-vis the digital platforms such as Facebook or Google – than the current discourse about their role in spreading disinformation and enabling the rise of populism and authoritarianism worldwide. It is a discourse dominated precisely by calls for greater regulatory oversight over these platforms which have apparently created global empires of their own – and far greater and influential than any of their analogue predecessors (as Miklos’s paper rightly observes). In other words, it is not so much the U.S. imperialism that should be held accountable for the current global digital monopoly of Facebook and Google (and the adverse effect this monopoly has over media markets and journalism worldwide); we can argue whether the real culprit is neoliberalism (and the long-term process of deregulation of communication markets in the West), or the blind pursuit of the ideology of the “information superhighway” and the promise of digital utopia that enabled these tech giants to grow to the levels far beyond anyone’s imagination; but either way, it seems to me that the global empires that were built by

¹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/ant-group-ipo-suspension-regulators/how-billionaire-jack-ma-fell-to-earth-and-took-ants-mega-ipo-with-him-idUSKBN27L2GX>

these giants cannot be directly linked to the U.S. geopolitical power structure; they operate more or less as autonomous powers, with budgets far exceeding those of many nation states, and audiences (customers) greater than any of them.

The point I wanted to make is that while Miklos's paper correctly describes some of the burning problems of the global communication environment related to the rise of digital platforms, creating structures of inequality and dependency – which might be even more difficult to undo than those that were established in the age of telegraph or radio and television broadcasting – it places these observations within a conceptual framework that appears at least partly outdated. By focusing on the role of the U.S. as the dominant “digital empire” of the Western world, it overestimates its influence in the increasingly multi-polar world, and underplays the role and power of the digital platforms themselves, whose rise to the present hegemonic status might have been initially enabled (and even actively supported) by the U.S. government policies, but who have become largely autonomous – unbound and completely out of any democratic oversight. The challenge is, of course, how to bring them back under control, and I am afraid there are no easy solutions for that (which of course does not mean we shouldn't be looking for them). I just believe that the solution to the problem of digital empires is not to create more of them – howsoever liberal-democratic they might be in their founding principles, as Miklos suggested with regards to the possibility of the EU becoming a digital empire. As the paper clearly demonstrates with regards to China's and Russia's imperialistic ambitions, digital or otherwise, the age of empires (which, incidentally, is the title of one of the most acclaimed real-time strategy video games, produced by Microsoft) is certainly not over yet; nevertheless, I believe that we – and by that I mean “we the Europeans” in particular – must explore other, less centralized and more participatory ways how to counter their power and dominance in order to nurture and defend the values and institutions of democratic communication, which (I agree with the author) continues to be among the key challenges for media and communication policy in the digital age.