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The Clash of Cultures: Digerati and Devolution in the Twenty-First Century

Karen Stephenson

Abstract

For over two decades, evolving digital platforms have connected human societies and nations enabling the rapid diffusion of information in patterns mimicking starling murmuration. Despite technological prowess, the digerati of the twenty-first century (Gens X, Y, Z), can be both informed and fooled by well-placed memes. Take a lesson from scientists Henri Milne-Edwards and Emile Durkheim in the 1800s. Their world of connection was nascent. Yet, they grappled with similar issues regarding the intended and unintended consequences of the interrelationship between the size and complexity of connection. For Milne-Edwards, he focused on the size and complexity of organisms later influencing Darwin and Durkheim. As for Durkheim, he examined society and its divisions of labor and the unintended consequence of social isolation and suicide. The malady of the infinite, as Durkheim labeled the socially disengaged, dealt with societal segmentation and isolation of individuals. This commentary addresses the elementary network structures of societal segmentation. Today's digital society is wildly connected as never before, and yet, the social ills of isolationism linger. Regardless of the ubiquitous connection, individuals are wantonly socially isolated. It is further suggested here that passively monitoring digitized data, such as that being explored and tested in China, may provide a viable, implementable and corrective course for isolationism.

Keywords: social networks, social media, anomie, organization, trust, trust index

1. Introduction

This chapter provides an anthropological[1] commentary for the malady of the infinite. It examines the multidimensionality of the digital and physical worlds and how this might enable a rise in the manifestations of social isolationism. The impact of massive human social connection is overwhelming given the *virtualization* of human relations through social media. This technological change has produced a type of viral connectivity akin to starling murmuration. Pass a toxic meme to a social media influencer and one can co-create contagion and conflict. One hundred years ago, Durkheim straddled the 1800s and 1900s, writing about the woes of social isolation in the midst of European industrialization. He called it anomie, or a malady of the infinite. Another century later, as the Industrial Revolution recedes in

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[1] Dr. Stephenson was a quantum chemist before classically trained at Harvard University in Anthropology.

the rear-view; a brave new world of digital and virtual connection swallows whole societies and nations.

What are the societal symptoms of individuals having too many, not too few, connections? Are they more connected or increasingly isolated? Big data and grandiose computational schemes point researchers in the direction of scale or size. Yet, the basic elementary forms of network structure persist, such that the size of economies and connections are subject to only a few small structures [1]. Thus, while the size of connectedness has increased exponentially, the science itself remains unchanged. What has changed is how we track connection and its obverse: isolation [2].

2. One is the loneliest number

In *The Division of Labor* [2] Durkheim advanced the notion of "anomie" as a response to industrialization—a transition from bucolic organic solidarity to the mechanical solidarity of mass-regimentation. Later in *Suicide* [3], he characterized anomie as the result of a rapid change in the standards or values of societies accompanied by a feeling of alienation and purposelessness. He believed that anomie is common when society undergoes significant economic or technological change. He was caught up in the middle of European industrialization. Durkheim envisioned a world of laterally connected groups and individuals. Was he prescient?

Preceding Durkheim, our human forbearers approximated virtual connection by crudely connecting via "tom-tom" or birdcall, staccato missives traveling through airwaves to distant relations. Today in the twenty-first century, staccato texts and tweets are tapped out finding their targets seconds after "send." At present humans appear to be insatiably engaged in the experience of connecting such that "down time" from screen time is calculated in a person's daily routine.

Maybe Durkheim could not foresee the digitization of personal information, but he could have foretold the story of the single student facing an army tank in Tiananmen Square in 1989. That image was sent around the world through a twentieth century fax. Two decades later, the revolution in Tahrir Square set off the Arab Spring and was emblazoned in the Twittershpere. These two iconic examples remind the reader that humans, in any age, whether prehistoric, industrialized or now, can be compressed into cultural memes and telegraphed as avatars in a Disney-esque world of virtualization. I suggest Durkheim's phrase "malady of the infinite" is indeed a proper nom de guerre for this maturing virtual reality age. Cyber-bullying, hoaxes and virtual mobs are the unintended consequences of anomie in this time.

3. Two can be as bad as one

Implicit in the phrase "malady of the infinite" is the notion of how messages through technology can be scaled [1], that is, countless connections occurring 24/7. Waves of millions of texts and tweets mimic starlings in full murmuration. While beautiful to watch, how does one contain such a force of nature? Collecting 500 friends on Facebook doesn't imply they show up when summoned. Having millions of followers means what?

Chattering exuberance can be transformed into deadly swarming behavior striking down a human—a daily occurrence as parents sift through digital debris to source a cruel cyber-bullying attack on their child. Waves of scandals dismiss reputations and careers. A mean meme can be propagated in the twinkling of an eye.

But mean memes have their antecedents in tribal culture. Anthropologists were frequently made the butt of jokes by less educated, but no less clever tribal elders. For example, the nineteenth century anthropologist Rivers [4] was sent on a hopeless pursuit by his tribal informant to trace the kinship of a clan member only to discover that it was all a ruse. Individuals in the clan didn't care if they were biologically related. That was a construct of the anthropologist. If it was inconvenient, they simply "made up" meaning to fit a political narrative. That's when Rivers realized the joke was on him. His lesson? A fictional familial relationship is just as credible [4] as a biological one.

This example of familial connectedness can be mathematically expressed. In any epoch there are "trusted" brokers of communication, and there is a calculus to their connection. For example, it takes a minimum of two people to make a trusted link. These two-person links undergird most assumptions about market economies, commerce, personal relationships, contract law and family structures. Bi-lateral contracts oversee the exchange of goods, services and information and can be traced to the binding force of reciprocity [5] that exists even in the most esoteric of "restricted" marriage exchanges [6] among wealthy classes or castes.

However, two-person links are fundamentally unstable over time. *Leverage* is all but impossible as information is simply parried back and forth like a tennis ball. If one person is betrayed, well then, the game is over. One becomes the loneliest number. Real leverage is when two-person links are brokered by a third person. To paraphrase Levi-Strauss [7] it is more important when a two-person household becomes a three-person household (or triad) than when there is a 10% increase in a population of 300 million. In other words, size is tempered by structure. The scientific rules of size, weight and structure [1] hold.

4. The triad: an atom of organization

At the turn of twentieth century, grand theories were being proposed in the sciences, linguistics and anthropology. At that time, Claude Levi-Strauss proposed a general theory of kinship, a DNA underlying the kinship patterns in all societies. Unfortunately, he never discovered it because his focus was on biological lineage, not social connection. As mentioned earlier, most societies finesse familial (biological) with familiar (and sometimes the altogether fictional) to gain political advantage. So if there were to be an atom of organization, perhaps it was a hybrid of these types of connection.

Triads are the most elemental of connections in crystalline structures, hydrocarbons and in humans. Under a microscope, triads are wobbly structures, both in carbon-based molecules as well as in human groups. In carbon-based structures they are held together by covalent bonds. Human structures are held together by valences of trust—the weaker the trust, the greater the uncertainty. The greater the uncertainty, the more people will *increase* their social ties to mitigate the risk [8].

In a triad there are three links and three nodes (or individuals). One individual is directly connected to the other two making the third connection an "indirect" link. The indirect link is present in every triad and this mathematical operation suggests that not every node or path is equivalent to each other. It is precisely this asymmetrical quality that makes triads wobbly. Were one to map a triadic structure onto human scenarios, this would look familiar: betrayals, love triangles or a child *playing* one parent against the other. History books are sprinkled with stories of toppled empires, which when mapped, point to the indirect link in a triadic structure as the culprit [9]. It is the indirect link that is

the source of this uncertainty. An indirect link and its associated risk is difficult to identify, although it is generally sensed by humans [1] prompting them to mitigate the risk by increasing the number of their contacts—the 500 friends on Facebook or the million followers on Instagram. The virtual world is the ideal petri dish to grow, observe and measure these occurrences. While social media has enabled this wobbliness, computational power and mathematics can help us understand it (a matter to which we will return).

5. We connect, therefore we trust

To say "I know of you but you don't know me" is a connection that is a one-way connection or directed graph. To say, "I know you and you know me" is an undirected graph, or two way connection. The reality is that when people do know each other, they are likely to reciprocate or exchange favors, messages, etc. This reciprocity is critical to forming trust—the who, the when, the what and the where is part of the calculus of exchange that exerts a governing logic over people exchanging with each other. Bourdieu called this calculus "habitus" [10]; Mauss called it the "hau" or spirit of the gift [11]. Multiply these exchanges over enough people over a period of time and trust develops, a binding force that keeps people connected to each other [12–14].

Low levels of trust infuse most exchanges. Despite trace levels, trust can have a moderating effect on uncertainty. That is why the first message to be believed generally comes from a trusted source, not from an authority figure. So if a person is a member of a professional group, social club or work group, then that person more or less trusts the information he or she hears from colleagues because it is too time-consuming to second-guess every message. An abundance of historical evidence [9, 13] indicates that empire-ending and life-chilling moments have been sourced to a trusted connection gone awry. That's why cabals, cartels, cults, mafia, mystery, and mob rule are effective in curbing and controlling behavior.

Trusting in trust can be so strong as to cause social cohesion, a benchmark of culture. Cohesion, or culture in general, can lead to significant behavioral changes and the abandonment of personal values. Once the process of trusting has begun, it infects the entire social network of the group. This network *maturation* is marked by a hardening of the edges in the service of establishing group boundaries. Ranks close and barriers to entry rise higher: "You don't look like us, you don't walk and talk like us, you don't think like us, you are not a part of our network." There's always a trade-off in these distinctions: conformity over risk; belonging over nomadism or isolationism. How to behave, who to trust, and, what to value influence how we see ourselves [15–19]. Herd mentality and groupthink result from unchecked conformity [20].

Trust is the medium to bring people together and once together group norms and conformity ensue. Therefore, if one is not a part of the group-an isolate-it is a lonely existence. With the advent of social media, cyber-bullying and more conventional bullying on the school grounds often results in the isolated individual recruited through the dark net or, tragically lashing out in violence. The recent spate of school shootings in the United States and worldwide correlates with isolationism brought on by familial abuse, drug abuse, radicalism or bullying. On post-mortem reflection, neighbors, students and families express incredulity that someone they thought they knew could have been so misled or misguided. One reason for being blind-sided is that people cannot correctly interpret warning signs and signals. What is needed is an objective perspective.

6. Discussion on trust

One way to approximate social cohesion is to passively monitor social connections through personal trace data made possible through social media. From this abundant data, algorithms for trust are being created in much the same way credit scores are now calculated for consumers. A trust profile, sometimes called a social capital index, has been developed in a few countries but it is still not broadly implemented. Nevertheless, the three generally accepted indices of finance, credit and health might soon add a fourth to their ranks. This was foreseen centuries before.

As early as the 1700's, social theorist Jeremy Bentham [21] put forth the notion that an architectural panopticon could help right society's wrongs through social observation and monitoring. He relied upon a "line of sight." Bentham's influence was re-envisioned by Foucault a century later into a knowledge architecture [22]. Foucault was less concerned about the physical architecture and more concerned about the architecture of power—disciplinary techniques used to deconstruct the individual and reconstruct him or her in the image of the institution. These ideas formed the foundation of early management theory. They presaged ubiquitous technological surveillance in the twenty-first century.

Industrialization marked a turning point in how humans interacted with machines. Initially tethered, humans mobilized and then digitized information and ultimately themselves. This turning point led to a tipping point whereby virality has disrupted the primordial territorial imperative. Oligarchies are passé. Ochlocracies[2] are fashionable. This is the world of the instantaneous: where information and entities mobilize, intimidate and disrupt the status quo. People conflate trust with technology and this has overridden caution. Now it is possible to passively track digital data exchange between people through social media platforms. This is why economists are actively researching the quantification of trust. The Chinese government accepted this challenge and has implemented a social credit system and national trust score for its citizens. The supporting data comes from social media activities based on location, friends, health records, insurance, private messages, financial position, gaming duration, smart home statistics, preferred newspapers, shopping history, and dating behavior. In 2020, the behavior of every legal person in China will be rated and ranked, whether they want it or not. One stated reason for this new trust index was to avoid the distrust and social isolation experienced by many Chinese during their cultural revolution.

Western nations watch. If there had been regular monitoring preceding 9/11, could the United States have intercepted the terrorists in 2001? A similar question could be raised for fraud networks or polling in political campaigns. The data collecting behemoths of Google, Facebook and Twitter have been covertly monitoring the consumers of their services for years. They are focused on financial capital. But who is focused on social capital [23–24]?

7. Conclusion

I introduced the chapter as commentary. I have suspected virtualization gives us the freedom to fly high in magnificent murmuration where humans give each other a hand up through crowd sourcing. But this brave new world also extrudes hate-crime hoaxes, cyber-bullying and victimhood chic. While I have my concerns about the unintended consequences of the China social credit syndrome, I agree with the

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[2] Ochlocracy is mob rule or the rule of government by a mob or mass of people.

justification for its existence. Perhaps we would do well to watch China and learn from its policy, as China has most certainly learned from the Western world's lack of one.

I remember Durkheim's lament about the malady of the infinite. It gave him pause and cause enough to write about anomie—the social isolation resulting from agrarian villagers migrating to industrialized ghettos. I wonder if he wasn't prescient about our own time. We may be flying high in virtual connectivity but are we meaningfully engaged when we at last alight on the earth? *One* may be the loneliest number but so it can be said of millions more.

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