

Issue 3 2019

The challenge to institutions

Anthony Painter asks how we can create a new institutional landscape

Pankaj Mishra on inequality, democracy, nationalism and compassion

Baroness Wolf addresses Whitehall's shortcomings

RSA JOURNAL

21st century enlightenment



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Matthew Taylor



“Institutions need to be agile and adaptive; as able to learn from failure as scale up success”

At home and internationally, we are going through difficult times. It is far from clear whether we have the capacity to address some of our most pressing challenges. Weak and unpopular institutions – such as those comprising our democratic system – not only fail to address these issues, often they make matters worse. In this edition of *RSA Journal*, we have taken a closer look at institutions and how we can renew them. As my colleague Anthony Painter argues in his article, our ability to renew social progress relies today, as it has in the past, on whether we can build new institutional capacity.

Whether looking at the media (as Meera Selva does in her article), aid (Ravi Gurumurthy) or government (Baroness Wolf), how might we assess whether an institution is fit for purpose? Reactively, effectiveness lies in an ability to manage and respond to change. Proactively, it is about being able to articulate and effectively pursue a progressive purpose.

There have been many analyses of why public policies and social interventions so often fail to achieve their objectives. Two problems seem particularly common. First, what could be called the ‘Kerplunk’ effect, in which the inherent instability and complexity of a system confounds efforts to change just one or two variables. Second, as it is generally necessary to win a mandate to pursue change, interventions suffer from forms of path dependency, which make it hard to adapt when neat plans meet messy reality. Rather than admit that things are not going as intended, the temptation is to double down. An old colleague of mine, former Number 10 head of strategy Geoff Mulgan, has memorably described this process as the journey from “evidence-based policymaking” to “policy-based evidence making”.

The RSA’s response to these inherent difficulties is a change model we call ‘thinking like a system and acting like an entrepreneur’. Speaking to a wide range of organisational leaders, I find the problem is

not with the concept but with being able to work in this way. Thinking systemically involves developing parsimonious but insightful ways of understanding the core dynamics of systems. One approach focuses on three core drivers of change and of motivation which interact to hold a system in place: authority, values and incentives. System analysis requires a range of quantitative and qualitative data, some of which will demand close and sustained engagement with key actors. Having analysed the current position, the next stage is to envision a new and better equilibrium. This visioning process involves convening the main players across the system, developing realistic and resilient forms of collaboration and then carefully monitoring progress towards shared aspirations.

Acting like an entrepreneur means focusing not just on what we want to change but on where change seems most possible. New leadership, technological capabilities or shifts in stakeholder or public attitudes may all be enablers. Change can come seemingly out of the blue. Take the recent award of the Stirling Prize to an innovative, green, community-focused council housing project in Norwich. Literally overnight, it became much more possible for similar ideas to be taken seriously. In addition, institutions need to be experimental, agile and adaptive; as able to learn from failure as scale up success. As Matthew Cain wrote in his book, *Made to Fail*, a common mistake is to fall too deeply in love with your first idea.

As Pankaj Mishra and Katharina Bauer argue from their different starting points, focusing on the process of change should not distract us from difficult and inherently political questions about what change we want to achieve and to whose benefit. Nevertheless, at a time of unprecedentedly high levels of social pessimism in many countries, it is vital that the RSA shows that, with the right approach, well-intentioned people working through effective institutions can still make a difference. ■

Matthew Taylor is Chief Executive of the RSA

ISSUE 3 2019

Long read



10 A CRISIS OF LEGITIMACY?

Anthony Painter addresses our current institutional unravelling. How can we bring about a new institutional landscape?



24 IN CONVERSATION

In a wide-ranging discussion, writer Pankaj Mishra speaks with Matthew Taylor about democracy, nationalism, capitalism and inequality

Medium read



18 A NEW WAY OF GIVING

Ravi Gurumurthy proposes a way in which international aid could be improved



30 ON GOOD AUTHORITY

There are three key areas where the civil service needs to reform, writes Baroness Wolf



44 AN AGE OF CHAOS?

It seems that some people just want to watch the world burn. Michael Bang Petersen explores why



34 BREAKING NEWS

Meera Selva examines the problems facing the media today



40 TERMS OF ENGAGEMENT

Matt John puts forward the case for effective service user engagement

Short read



22 KEEPING IT REAL

High value is placed on being authentic. But what do we really mean by this, asks Katharina Bauer



38 A NATION OF SHOPKEEPERS?

It might look gloomy for traditional retail, but there are ways it can adapt, says Alan Lockey

16 DATA

What does the typical family look like these days?

43 CAN EUROPE RELAX?

Once Brexit is over, it will be business as usual, says Pepijn Bergsen



48 GLOBAL

Mike Peckham and Dr James Whitehead argue that we need to rethink how leaders work

49 FELLOWSHIP

The RSA Tees Valley Fellowship Network is encouraging democratic participation among young people



50 LAST WORD

Mandy Len Catron looks at what we want from marriage these days

Periscope

1 Distrust in the EU has risen from 28% of the adult EU population in 2004 to 39% in 2018 (page 10).

2 In a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, six in 10 people from 27 countries said they thought family ties had weakened (page 16).

3 In 2018, more than 70 million people were forced to flee their homes owing to conflict (page 18).

4 Our idea of what makes a person 'authentic' still relates to being original and not a 'copy' (page 22).

5 Philosopher Thomas Kuhn introduced the idea of "paradigm shifts" to science, but it readily applies to how we run government as well (page 31).

6 Only 42% of digital news users worldwide say they trust the news, down from 44% in 2018 (page 36).

7 In the first half of 2019, some 3,000 shops in the UK closed for good (page 38).

8 In a US survey, 30% of respondents did not reject the statement "I think society should be burned to the ground" (page 47).

9 Our world is increasingly networked, but we have not quite managed to keep up and understand networks on a strategic, operational or tactical level (page 48).

10 According to psychologists and sociologists, we are increasingly looking to marriage to fulfil all our needs. Is that wise? (Page 50.)

Housing



MAKING HOME

Designing housing solutions for young people, with young people

The growth of the gig economy and flexible work threatens young people's ability to prove their income adequately, according to a new RSA report published in October. *Making Home* found that this is compounded by unaffordable private rental options.

The report was informed by a series of workshops involving people aged under 35 in Greater Manchester. These sought to understand the challenges young

people face when trying to access and maintain affordable housing, and the approaches that might help.

"Young people are facing a range of different and intersecting insecurities," said report author Hannah Webster, Senior Researcher at the RSA. "Half of young renters in Greater Manchester had cut back on basics like food and drink to cover their housing costs."

Workshop attendees helped co-design a 'blueprint' for the future, which considers how various

initiatives – from using proof of rental history to improve credit scores, to new housing models such as 'escalator ownership', which allows young people to rent at a reduced cost before buying anything from 1% to 100% of the property – might better provide adaptive housing options.

Local MP Lucy Powell spoke at the launch, attended by the RSA's research partners, One Manchester, and representatives from the housing and education sectors.

■ To download a copy of the report, visit www.thersa.org/MakingHome

Data

ABOUT DATA ABOUT US

The RSA launched its Tech and Society programme in September, including its project About Data About Us. The research, conducted with the Open Data Institute and Luminata, spoke to groups of citizens about their personal data, and explored how they wanted companies and government to use and safeguard that data in public life. It found that, contrary to popular supposition, citizens, when supplied with expert analysis on how data actually works, respond less well to the idea of ‘owning’ their data and more to the idea of ‘data rights’ and a shared framework or charter of rights for the use of personal data.

The findings were discussed by former Facebook investor Roger McNamee with the RSA’s Director of Economy Asheem Singh and Matthew Taylor at an event at RSA House. The work has been platformed at UK political party conferences, and the animated video accompanying the research has been shown at personal data workshops and conferences across Europe, including at MyData 2019 in Finland.

“Technology is too important to be left solely to the technologists. We need to find a way to have useful ethical conversations so that we are enlivened and not oppressed by technology. In this space, the RSA and our Fellowship can come together to move the conversation forward,” said Asheem.

■ *About Data About Us is available to download at www.thersa.org/AboutDataAboutUs*

RSA insights

PATHWAYS TO QUALIFICATIONS



The performing arts are taking centre stage in a new drive towards alternative, inclusive and accessible qualification pathways for young people. Xenia Horne FRSA developed drama-based activities as part of the Royal Opera House’s Culture First project, working with young people on the edge of exclusion. She has helped to develop a range of schemes that assist vulnerable young people with developing crucial skills such as critical thinking, and in gaining confidence without the pressure of traditional exams.

■ *To find out more, contact Xenia Horne on xeniahorne@icloud.com*

108,000

This was the net decline in sales and customer service workers between 2011 and 2018 in the UK. Most of these workers were women, demonstrating how the change in the way we work is already disproportionately affecting one gender.

■ *To find out more, download our latest report on retail and the future of work: www.thersa.org/RetailTherapy*

54%

That’s the proportion of teachers who would like to be able to refer pupils to an in-school mental health practitioner. This was the top choice for how to reduce students being regularly removed from class among 1,500 teachers in England surveyed by the National Foundation for Educational Research for the RSA. The survey is part of the RSA’s Pinball Kids project exploring how to reduce school exclusions.

■ *To find out more, download our report on school exclusions at www.thersa.org/ExclusionsSurvey*

ECONOMIC SECURITY

Some 24% of British workers report that their income varies month to month and that they sometimes have trouble meeting basic living costs because of this.

Trezeo, an initiative from the Economic Security Impact Accelerator, a partnership between the RSA and the Mastercard Center for Inclusive Growth, is working to address this challenge of income volatility. Trezeo uses open banking and machine learning to help smooth out incomes, ensuring more consistent paychecks.

■ *To download a copy of our economic security report, visit www.thersa.org/SafetyNet*



Agenda

PUBLIC SERVICE INNOVATION



Innovation and the public sector are often seen as antithetical. Yet the RSA's work shows that the caricature of a creaking bureaucracy, unable to keep up with changing times, is largely false. The pressures our public services face – increasing demand, rising citizen expectations, decreasing budgets and accelerating technological change – also drive innovation. Public institutions need not only to be renewing their legitimacy and operating methods but also building the capability to continuously experiment and adapt. The RSA's research is exploring examples of early transformation and innovation and how these can be supported.

■ *The RSA would love to hear from you if you have examples of innovative public services; please get in touch by completing our short survey: www.thersa.org/innovation*

STUDENT DESIGN AWARDS

As an organisation, we unite people and ideas to resolve the challenges of our time. Through the RSA Student Design Awards, we invite the next generation of changemakers to join our community of active problem solvers. Our 2019/20 briefs pose tough challenges and open up a vast range of possibilities. How might you design ways to make fashion circular, engage diverse communities through food or transform health using AI?

■ *You can find the full list of this year's briefs at www.thersa.org/sda*

Fellowship

New Fellows

Professor Adesoji Adesugba is Provost at the Abuja Chamber of Commerce BEST (business, entrepreneurship, skills and technology) Centre in Nigeria. He founded the organisation in order to help Nigerian entrepreneurs develop their skills. Last year, he launched a programme to provide free training in different vocational skills to 1,000 unemployed graduates.

Tina Lee is the founder and CEO of MotherCoders, a San Francisco-based non-profit that helps mothers break into tech. The company provides a part-time training course, events, workshops and on-site childcare, enabling participants to develop skills they can use in the tech industry. One of Tina's key beliefs is there are few limits to what you can achieve when you leverage the power of networks.

Make the most of your Fellowship

by connecting online and sharing your skills. Search the Fellowship at www.thersa.org/fellowship. While you're there, don't forget to update your own profile: www.thersa.org/my-rsa.

■ *Follow us on Twitter @theRSAorg
Our Instagram is www.instagram.com/thersaorg
Join the Fellows' LinkedIn group
www.linkedin.com/groups/3391*

Meet other Fellows in person at Fellowship events and network meetings, which take place all over the world and are publicised on our website www.thersa.org/events.

Grow your idea through RSA Catalyst, which offers grants and crowdfunding for Fellow-led and new or early-stage projects with a social goal.

■ *Find out more at our online Project Support page www.thersa.org/fellowship/project-support*

Events

CATCH UP ON THE CONVERSATION

Unmissable online highlights from a packed public events season, selected by the curating team for your viewing pleasure.

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Launching the 2019/20 RSA Student Design Awards, a panel of design, sustainability and futures experts, including fashion journalist **Hannah Rochell** and the RSA's Make Fashion Circular programme leader **Josie Warden**, explores how we can accelerate the transition from a 'take, make and waste' model of production and consumption to a regenerative fashion industry.

Watch now: youtu.be/vqQtBwN4giw
#RSADesign



The London Interdisciplinary School is training a new generation of problem solvers for an increasingly complex and interconnected world. Writer **Ella Saltmarshe** and DaVinci Network founder **Waqas Ahmed** join a panel to explore the new connections and collaborations that will be vital to solving our biggest challenges in the decades ahead.

Watch now: youtu.be/1WrQtXZOqAA
#RSALIS



Bestselling author and broadcaster **Matthew Syed** offers a radical blueprint for the future, challenging hierarchies and forcing us to rethink success. Drawing upon cutting-edge research in psychology, economics and anthropology, Syed shows that cognitive diversity is the critical factor in strengthening individual, team and institutional performance.

Watch now: youtu.be/yf53Rf_qbv8
#RSAIdeas



Silicon Valley insider and former mentor to Mark Zuckerberg **Roger McNamee** shares his concerns about the threats posed by Facebook and the world's tech giants, and sets out the actions we need to take to build a better future for technology, society and ourselves.

Watch now: youtu.be/mv7BZhlbkVc
#RSATech

A CRISIS OF LEGITIMACY?

Institutions are increasingly the subject of public ire. How can we bring about their restoration and rejuvenation?

by Anthony Painter

🐦 @anthonypainter

A century ago, the industrialising world was in the foothills of a remarkable revolution in institutional creativity. This would not have been apparent in the aftermath of the First World War, and this institutional spring almost became winter in the shadow of the Great Depression. But, by the late 1950s, most of the institutional architecture on which we now rest – international, economic, state and cultural – was largely in place. In recent decades, however, decay has set in. Why?

Institutions exist to pursue and safeguard a common purpose. They embed values such as fairness, freedom and the rule of law in ordered human relations. Institutions safeguard values and seek equity. They are ethical in character. In contrast, organisations pursue goals and objectives (such as profit) that are often private in character. Of course, institutions are also organisations, and therein lies a tension. The NHS, for example, has high reserves of public legitimacy, as it protects our health and is available to all citizens; it has become a source of national pride. When institutions combine efficiency of outcomes with equity of values and a sense of emotional commitment, they flourish. When any of these elements decay, they fail.

Arguably, one of the emblematic creations of the institutional revolution was the EU, or so it became in 1993 following four decades of evolution. The bloc started as the European Coal and Steel Community before becoming the European Economic Community and, finally, the EU.

Established to help solder a fractured European continent, the EU has two fundamental functions: peace and prosperity. Its values can be found in its key documents; it aims to achieve peace and prosperity through strengthening democracy and the rule of law.

The EU has been deemed so successful in achieving these goals that it was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize in 2012.

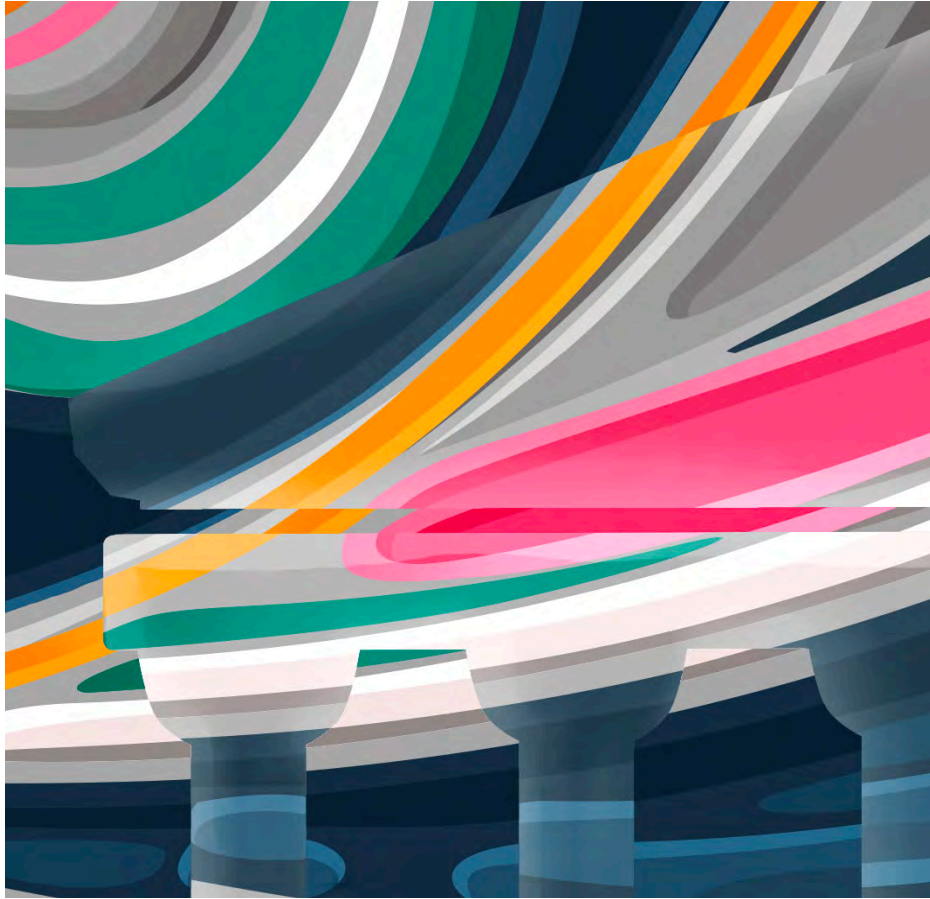
Yet, when the prize was awarded it felt incongruous to many, coming as it did in the aftermath of the financial crisis and the European debt crisis. At the time of writing, the UK, one of the three biggest members of the bloc, is attempting to leave the union. And while Brexit has seemed to bolster support for the EU, this is based on the fear of undergoing the exit process rather than being a positive affirmation.

Gaps have emerged between its values as expressed and its values as experienced. According to Dijkstra, Poelman and Rodríguez-Pose's paper *The Geography of EU Discontent* (2018), in 2004, 28% of the EU population over the age of 15 did not trust the EU; this had grown to 39% by 2018. Opposition to further integration has soared despite the ambition of 'ever closer union' embodied in EU treaties. This is even though a healthy majority of Europeans (including, ironically, in Britain) see the benefits of membership, according to Eurobarometer.

From the left, the critique is one of a superficial commitment to solidarity, especially in the aftermath of the eurozone crisis. On the right, the critique is one of a commitment to solidarity that is too great, particularly when it comes to multiculturalism and the movement of people. The realities of Brexit may have caused a pause for thought among the EU's populace on how far to push anti-EU sentiment, but this may well turn out to be a temporary deceleration in the context of wider institutional decay. A misalignment of efficiency, values and emotional commitment comes at a time when the EU has few authentically democratic tools, in terms of direct public engagement, to respond. ▶

Anthony Painter is the RSA's Chief Research and Impact Officer





“This great unravelling of faith in common institutions has emerged just as we face extraordinary collective challenges”

There is similar dysfunction at national level, not least within the UK, where successive governments have pursued national growth as a primary goal. This has meant focusing on industries and sectors that have the greatest growth potential and prioritising their needs. The global leaders in such sectors (which include finance, pharmaceuticals and digital technology) are often clustered in or near to London. Until the austerity years, regions that were losing out were partly compensated through redistribution; this has now broken down completely. A blinkered Whitehall perspective on efficiency – including the ugly process of centralised austerity – has concentrated power and resources and overridden concerns for equity. Discontent in the UK’s nations and regions furthest from the capital has proliferated. Populism and nationalism have become more widespread, fragmenting the country politically across geographical lines.

The end of consensus

After decades of institutional revolution, the social theorist Herbert Marcuse became deeply concerned about the absence of critique within advanced,

industrial society. Describing the modern sensibility as that of “one-dimensional man”, he outlined how a modern consumerist economy, facilitated through industrial technology, mass media, politics and corporate culture, had combined to create an insipid consensus. People bought into capitalism and became inhibited, unable and unconsciously unwilling to challenge the structural power inequalities undermining what he saw as real human freedom.

Now, that consensus has broken down. Our world is increasingly dominated by digital technologies and operates very differently than it did at the time Marcuse was writing. In the age of Cambridge Analytica and online extremism, we now know that our darkest psychological recesses can be plundered and mobilised to confuse, disorient, misinform and deploy us against one another. No longer one-dimensional, we are now increasingly tribal and angry.

Brexit was one of the most spectacular deployments of real discontent as efficiency and equity in institutions became misaligned. The ‘take back control’ slogan of Vote Leave deployed psyop, psychological and emotive hyper-targeting, to great success. At the time of writing, the government is turning its political

power against public representatives in Westminster, with a 'People versus Parliament' election coming up. In the 1960s, Marcuse feared the obsolescence of critique to the intersection of capitalism, politics and culture. Today, we face the opposite risk: pervasive critique and a shattering consensus.

The exponential gap

This great unravelling of faith in common institutions has emerged just as we face extraordinary collective challenges. As the entrepreneur and analyst Azeem Azhar has described, there is now an exponential gap between accelerating new technologies and institutions' ability to respond. As we have seen with Brexit, this is compounded by a democratic deficit as polarisation leads to a fraying of faith in political institutions.

In the shadow of a climate emergency, we are also facing an existential gap. Action on climate change, the necessity of which has been scientifically clear at least since the 1980s, has been slovenly, to say the least. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is already in its Sixth Assessment Cycle. The Kyoto Protocol was signed a generation ago. Nonetheless, global carbon emissions are still rising. Even to keep global temperature rises to 1.5°C requires a 55% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030. Such a temperature rise would still cause enormous ecological disaster and result in the mass movement of people. The institutional response to climate change, including the creation of the IPCC, has been real. Unfortunately, we have been fighting with two hands – equity and emotion – behind our backs.

Some, including the American writer David Wallace-Wells, have suggested that the climate crisis is so urgent that business as usual, including the reliance on representative democracy, might have to be deprioritised. Yet, institutions thrive when they align efficiency goals (such as emissions targets) with values (such as commitment to the universal welfare of humanity and the wider biosphere) and emotion (such as a sense of potential deep psychological loss through a failure to protect the sanctity of humankind's home).

To succeed, institutional responses must safeguard existing values. In the west, this includes the belief that public policy should be accountable to the people. Without the democratic process, shifts of policy that require enormous resources can never have legitimacy. That is why the emergence of the Extinction Rebellion movement is so encouraging: it helps to create a fertile ground to connect rationality to values and emotion.

The story of a failure to decarbonise is a warning shot. When science, expertise and rationality are

in the driving seat, we often struggle to find lasting solutions, or solutions that operate with enough urgency. As radical technologies spread into public services, including health and the workplace, this lesson will become ever more pertinent.

The academic and innovation communities surrounding the introduction of these technologies – such as artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning – are acutely aware of the need to put them on an ethical footing. For instance, trade unions in Denmark are seeking to understand how new technologies can benefit workers; healthcare providers, including the NHS, are seeking to understand how AI can improve care grounded in ethical codes; and academics are developing frameworks and practice to embed the ethical application of technology in arenas such as public order and safety.

Healthcare is one area where change could not only be radical but also revolutionary. As the American cardiologist, geneticist and scholar Eric Topol has outlined, AI fundamentally recasts the relationship between doctor and patient, redistributing knowledge and power to the latter over the former. It remains to be seen whether the current professional configuration will adapt to these changes, which will require a greater sharing of understanding between medic and patient if trust in the system is to be maintained.

Technologies such as genetic screening and CRISPR gene editing raise fundamental issues of access and power. What will be sanctioned, on what basis, and who has access? A Chinese scientist, He Jiankui, has already claimed to have 'edited' the genome of embryos of two girls born in 2018. How can we protect the rights of the unborn? What new inequalities will emerge if technology to manipulate genes that influence our cognitive capability, our physical strength, wellbeing and personalities becomes feasible and affordable? What data do we want to share, and for what benefit, in a world where our potential future health can be known through our genetic make-up? What will that mean for us psychologically and for equality and fairness in society? All these questions are critically questions of power; it is far from clear that we have the institutional capability to respond with legitimacy.

Polarisation

One significant threat is deep polarisation. Humanity could be separated into those who have access and agency with regard to critical technologies and those who do not. The worst of both worlds could be access without agency. If we access systems that manage our behaviour through monitoring, 'nudging' and other

forms of behavioural manipulation, then we are faced with a substantive loss of freedom no matter how happy we may be.

This polarisation would take place in public spaces, determined by who has control of technology. It would occur in workplaces; access to control of AI and algorithms could be a new class divide. Within services, the divide will open: who has access to the resources, knowledge and technologies that enhance their health, education, wealth, and access to networks of power and influence?

Polarisation will play out in politics as behavioural technologies, targeted on our own individual cognitive frailties, turn us against one another, possibly cocooning the wealthy and powerful in the process. And polarisation could be coded into the social contract: perceived 'good' behaviour, defined in a manipulated political space, will be rewarded, and perceived 'bad' behaviour will be micro-managed beyond the point of coercion. For example, Philip Alston, the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, has highlighted a harsh regime of welfare conditionality under Universal Credit and disability benefits that is backed by algorithmic systems, with no transparency or accountability. From targeting resources on crime to sentencing, new technologies already contain biases that disadvantage minority groups.

Each of these challenges requires more than the efficient pursuit of utilitarian ends. Ethical bolt-ons where norms are devised to deal with new technologies are also insufficient. A bolder impulse of institutional creativity is imperative, something akin to Theodore Roosevelt's vision of a 'Square Deal' society. The incredible aspect of the institutional revolution of the early to mid 20th century was the fusion of goals such as health, growth and economic security with values such as universalism, fairness and solidarity, all bolstered by emotional connection with the people. Modern institutional innovation is thin and slow by comparison, even with its technical, problem-solving approach. In an age of technology, technocracy is not enough.

Bolt-on solutionism

Recently, the US Business Roundtable, comprising the CEOs of the US's leading companies, redefined the purpose of the corporation as serving an array of stakeholders, rather than shareholders alone. Major corporations have a clear sense of unstable legitimacy, an organisational existentialism. Taken at face value, corporations are accepting that the age of shareholder primacy and even 'shared value' (how to exploit environmentalism and social justice to create wealth)

are moving to the past. In reality, the commitment is weak, not because it is insincere, but because it expresses a new bolt-on solutionism, albeit with wider goals than shareholder value. Corporations still hold control, although this new stakeholder initiative could mean that their power is exercised more benevolently.

In this, the state and corporations have much in common. States act like states, setting administrative goals and turning administrative efficiency towards them. As Max Weber described, the iron cage of bureaucracy takes over. And corporations act in much the same way. The modern state and modern corporations 'think' in similar solutionist ways. What is missing is something essential: democracy.

When facing rational efficiency, people are basically left, in terms explored by the German economist Albert Hirschman, with two options: exit or loyalty. Exit occurs when trust breaks down. In the case of states, this involves citizens not engaging with a state's services, or not voting or opting for anti-establishment parties and candidates. With corporations, they lose business and access to the best employees.

In a democratic society, a third response to failure is critical, and that is voice. And as modern states and corporations seek to respond to the gulfs that have emerged between themselves and people, they seem incapable or unwilling to truly open up to greater voice. Business and government have become problem-solving-centric, each offering solutions of different types. But what of values and passion? For that we need not simply a redefinition of goals or stakeholders, but an opening, an injection of what the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas calls "communicative action". In other words, a sense that we have an ethical voice and deep attachment to the social institutions we nurture.

Expanding the 'lifeworld'

Habermas is concerned with the increasing invasion or colonisation of what he describes as the "lifeworld" by the instrumental rationality of "the system". The system had two elements: power as derived from administrative authority, the domain of the state, and money as derived from the market and the organisations that populate the market. In the modern environment, we should also see technology and the organisation of the biosphere through energy and food systems and the like as distinct though overlapping elements of the system.

The lifeworld is where human interaction is sacrosanct. It is where families, community, friendship, creativity, civic life, art, culture and, perhaps, one should add, where the personal relationship to nature and the environment, are to be found. It is

“We must seek to bring about a second creative explosion and a new institutional landscape”



a place of ethics, human connection and meaning. This interface between the lifeworld and the system lies right at the fault line of failure of institutions: the lifeworld becomes encroached upon rather than aided by the system of money, power, technology and our relationship with nature.

Whether through lack of empowerment at work for many, or through our smart devices and their ever deeper intrusion into our lives, or in facing the amplifying consequences of climate change, an array of institutions need to find new means of alignment with our goals, values and passions. This applies to international institutions as much as to public services. The system spreads further and further into the lifeworld. It should be the opposite: we should be expanding the humanistic lifeworld further into the system.

In seeking to lean into the social challenges, the RSA cares about what is meaningful, significant and possible. Seeing the whole and shifting the possible is what we have termed ‘think like a system, act like an entrepreneur’. We see ourselves alongside an array of fellow travellers in civil society, including the commercial world and public entrepreneurs,

in an endeavour that is both positive and realistic about the future.

Fundamentally, an institutional restoration – a redesign on universal, ethical and humanistic lines – and revolution on a scale of the early to mid 20th century and its Square Deal become necessary to counter current and potential ill effects of the system. This process is the next great democratic step. The consequence of not responding with vigour is that we are risking further alienation, anger and disillusion, and the collapse of the viable natural system on which stable human life depends.

The challenge is not a pause of the current institutional unravelling or its reverse. Instead, we must seek to bring about a second creative explosion and a new institutional landscape; one that reunites our sense of what is efficient, what is equitable and what also harnesses our emotional commitment. If a politics of meaningful democracy cannot be cultivated then we are left with a reactionary politics of divided identities, impulsive populism and ethically simplistic ideologies. That is where we currently are. There is a bigger progressive and humanistic project that could be within reach. We should reach out. ■

FAMILY TIES

Our ideas about families – what they look like and how they are composed – are rapidly changing. Rising gender equality and the legalisation of same-sex marriage in many countries around the world are contributing to alterations in the make-up of the family unit. As more women work, childcare is increasingly no longer seen solely as the domain of women. And as same-sex couples are given the same rights as heterosexual couples, the stereotypical idea that a household is headed by a man and a woman is increasingly looking like one option among many.

In addition, years of austerity have contributed to a change in the number of older children living with their parents. As work becomes more precarious and housing remains expensive, younger people are remaining in their parents' homes for longer.

The Pew Research Center interviewed people from 27 countries around the world. They found that six out of 10 respondents thought that family ties had weakened; most thought this was a bad thing. There were, however, outliers: in Indonesia and the Philippines, people thought that family ties were strengthening. ■

Men living alone

Aged 45 to 64 years

14.2% increase*

Aged 65 to 74 years

55.6% increase*

Women living alone

Aged 45 to 64 years

13% increase*

Aged 65 to 74 years

16.5% increase*

Living with parents

Aged 20 to 34 years

24% increase*

*2008-18



Living alone

There are just over 8m one-person households in the UK (15% of the UK adult population). This is up from 6.7m in 1998.

The biggest rise in one-person households is in women aged 45–64 and men aged 65–74. This shows an increase in those divorced or never married; and male life expectancy catching up to female.

The changing family

The number of cohabiting couple families continues to grow faster than married couples or lone-parent families, rising by 25.8% over 2008–18.

The number of single-parent families has risen from 2.5m in 1998 to 2.9m in 2018.

Sources: Office for National Statistics; Working Families.

Married or civil partner couple families

2008	2018
12.3 million	12.8 million

Cohabiting couple families

2008	2018
2.7 million	3.4 million

Fathers' attitudes

47% of younger fathers (aged 16–35) said they would consider a pay cut to work fewer hours

Some **76%** of millennial fathers said they would consider childcare before taking a job or promotion



A NEW WAY OF GIVING

Trust in aid organisations is low; the path to restoring it is to empower givers and recipients

by Ravi Gurumurthy

🐦 @RGurumurthy

Public trust in our aid institutions is low and falling. In the UK, according to research consultancy nfpSynergy, just over a third of the public now trust charities that deliver overseas aid, a fall of 6% in one year, whereas more than two-thirds trust those that treat cancer. After more than a decade of public spending cuts and plateauing living standards, the brittle cross-party consensus on aid spending is being challenged.

At the same time, rebuilding trust in aid could not be more critical. War in Syria and Yemen, the spread of Ebola in the Democratic Republic of Congo and economic collapse in Venezuela have led to more than 70 million people fleeing their homes; more than at any time since the Second World War. With over 61% of the UK public still believing that tackling poverty in developing countries should be a major priority for central government, the challenge is to ensure that our compassion for others is matched by a confidence in the institutions that channel our giving.

Damaged trust

Low trust in aid is not without reason. Aid spent by the UK and US governments and the EU is often

allocated based on geopolitical motivations rather than humanitarian need. Aid agencies continue to fund interventions that lack evidence of effectiveness, from the billions spent by the World Bank on skills programmes to donors' continued commitment to microcredit, despite extensive evidence of its ineffectiveness in addressing poverty. The convoluted delivery chain between donor and recipient is deeply inefficient, as funds pass from government donors via the UN and international non-governmental organisations to local actors.

Long-running concerns about the allocation, effectiveness and efficiency of aid have been compounded by a number of recent high-profile scandals affecting some of the best-known charities. Over the past two years, the chief executives of three of the largest aid organisations in the UK and US – Oxfam, Save the Children and Mercy Corps – have resigned following allegations of misconduct made against members of their staff (or in the case of Mercy Corps, against its co-founder). These cases highlighted the weakness of non-profit boards, whose members often see themselves as promoting and protecting the organisation rather than holding executives to

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account. This is exacerbated by lack of turnover among senior executives and board members.

The sexual exploitation of aid recipients in Haiti by Oxfam employees raised more fundamental questions about the power dynamic created by aid. While aid organisations need to improve the mechanisms for reporting exploitation and abuse and create independent investigation processes, the underlying driver behind these issues is the highly unequal relationship between aid workers and the recipients of aid.

Beyond rhetoric

In the aftermath of well-documented shortcomings in the responses to the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 and the Haiti earthquake of 2010, the aid sector made renewed promises to increase accountability to crisis-affected populations. This included the ‘Grand Bargain’ of 2016, a commitment between some of the largest donors and aid implementers to usher in a ‘participation revolution’. But, despite ever more hyperbolic rhetoric, accountability still flows entirely upwards to donors rather than downwards to the people served by aid organisations.

We need a much more ambitious and practical approach. In order to develop greater trust in the aid sector, an ‘Impact Charter’ should be established, to which major donors, non-profits and private organisations would be signatories. This would include a series of commitments designed to rebuild standards in the sector.

Donors would have to commit to publishing criteria for allocating funds based on objective measures of need. The OECD estimates that 620 million people – 80% of the world’s poor – are likely to live in fragile contexts by 2030. Yet at present, just 38% of aid is spent in fragile states. A commitment to allocating funds based on need would aim to ensure aid adapts to where poverty is.

Donors and implementers would also commit to only allocating funds to programmes that have a rigorous evidence base, or, where this is lacking, to supporting the full costs of building evidence through experimental trials. Over the past two decades, there has been a huge investment in rigorous evidence in low-income contexts. But there are still major sectoral and geographical gaps. Although nearly 5,000 impact evaluations have been ▶



conducted in low- and middle-income contexts, only 171 have been in fragile states. Outside of health, and in less stable settings, there remains a dearth of evidence.

Implementers would also commit to measuring and publishing the cost-efficiency and cost-effectiveness of their programmes. Instead of the focus of existing charity watchdogs on the misleading notion of ‘overhead’ – the ratio of administrative costs to programme costs – implementers would have to publish the cost per output or outcome delivered. Such analysis can yield huge opportunities for cost savings. For example, the International Rescue Committee analysed the cost-efficiency of programmes treating child malnutrition and found that they vary from \$100 to \$500 per child treated. Although some of this variation is associated with the cost of operating in particular contexts, the main driver of cost-inefficiency is the small scale of many programmes. Transparency about cost-efficiency can drive donors and implementers to consolidate their programmes.

Empowering clients

Making aid more focused on need, more cost-effective and more results-focused are the first steps in rebuilding trust. But the more fundamental challenge is to unpick the paternalism that remains inherent in how aid is delivered.

Currently, aid delivery relies on a large staff presence and operating footprint in low-income, fragile states. This workforce is tasked with understanding needs, securing funding, and managing the procurement of supplies and implementation of services. It assumes that aid workers are better placed to make decisions about what people need than the recipients of aid. It also relies on the good intentions of frontline professionals or the top-down supervision from managers, rather than the bottom-up pressure from clients choosing their service.

Over the past decade, an alternative approach has emerged. Following the first World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, there is now considerable momentum behind a shift to simply giving aid recipients cash transfers. A key aspect of the Grand Bargain, which has 61 signatories, was a move towards cash programming. Multiple studies show that cash transfers are more efficient to deliver, are used well by recipients, and create economic benefits for local producers and retailers. Cash is not used for ‘temptation goods’ such as alcohol and tobacco, but to purchase essential items or invest in supplies for recipients’ businesses.

With choice comes a greater need for aid recipients to be informed. But with the majority of refugees now in middle-income contexts – in particular, in the Middle East and Latin America – mobile phone penetration is high. Websites such as Refugee.info

“The more fundamental challenge is to unpick the paternalism that remains inherent in how aid is delivered”

have emerged; these locate refugees when they cross a border and can direct them to relevant pharmacies and other services. Experiments have also been conducted to include user feedback and ratings.

If we put this together, it is possible to envisage a streamlined, non-intermediated model of aid. In this, the default way of delivering large amounts of aid is through cash transfers to mobile phones, with opportunities for recipients to provide feedback and share concerns, and access a range of digital apps to support learning and health access. It is a model of aid that is leaner and more empowering; it is less prone to the power imbalances that occur when aid workers have resources in environments marked by extreme scarcity.

The role of donors

The lack of control experienced by the recipients of aid is mirrored at the other end of the aid delivery chain. Taxpayers today have little control over the countries, causes or organisations that receive aid. With aid spending increasingly under attack in the UK and the US, we need to think more creatively about how to restore citizens’ engagement with, and connection to, the giving that is done on their behalf.

It is possible to envisage an aid system where citizens exert far more control. Every year, each citizen could be given a share of the overall aid budget in the form of an ‘Individual Giving Account’. This could be spent on a curated list of causes and organisations. If citizens top up their individual giving with their own resources then government would match that funding up to a certain level.

When citizens allocate resources, they would do so through an ‘impact calculator’. This would enable them to compare the potential impact of their spending and see how others have optimised their giving. It would force citizens to think through some difficult trade-offs: what value should we place on improving people’s lives through education versus keeping people alive through healthcare? Should funding go to the UN or go more directly to organisations closer to the crisis? Should we cut out the intermediaries altogether and give cash to citizens themselves?

To enable informed giving, there could be incentives to deliberate; for example, greater matched funding if citizens form collectives and go through

an online or offline deliberative forum. The process could culminate in a national giving day, which would be a deadline for when choices are made, and a moment in the year to make debates about international development more salient.

There are many reasons why this might be a bad idea. You could argue that international aid ought to be allocated by politicians and civil servants who can make more informed, expert decisions and allocate funds that exploit economies of scale. Yet often those decisions are guided by geopolitical concerns rather than humanitarian ones. Aid is often spent in the wrong countries, through UN channels that sap speed and efficiency, and on small interventions with a weak evidence base and no rigorous evaluation. Perhaps citizens would do no worse in optimising spending than politicians and bureaucrats.

But perhaps the biggest reason for giving these kinds of approaches a try is that they might create spin-off benefits. If citizens are in control of how aid is spent, they are more likely to defend the use of aid. And if they are forced to consider where to spend money abroad, they may become more engaged in thinking about whether our trade, aid and foreign policies are doing good in the world.

Shifting power

Since the Brexit referendum and the election of President Trump, technocracy has understandable appeal. But as political scientist Yascha Mounk has warned, shutting the public out of the decision-making process – what he calls “undemocratic liberalism” – might, in the long run, strengthen the popular backlash and the dominance of “illiberal democracy”. A better alternative might be to deepen and renew our democratic institutions by engaging citizens in informed, deliberative decision-making.

The degree of distrust in aid requires immediate action. Improving the governance of non-profits and building a coalition of donors and implementing organisations that adopt an Impact Charter are essential first steps. But if we are to create deeper trust in our aid institutions, we need to shift power away from the intermediaries who hoard resources and decision-making authority, and towards the givers and recipients of aid. We need to trust people if we are to renew our trust in the institutions that aid them. ■

KEEPING IT REAL

Is it possible to be truly authentic?

by Katharina Bauer

On the plane from Amsterdam to Belfast, on my way to a conference about ‘Modern Ethical Ideals’, I was browsing through the airline’s in-flight magazine. And there it was again: the ubiquitous discourse of authenticity (the very topic that I was going to talk about). By referencing the cultural heritage of the Netherlands, in particular Rembrandt, the airline was positioning itself as an ‘authentic’ company offering authentic travel experiences. It was claiming the authenticity of an artist.

Being true to yourself and being authentic appears to be an important imperative of our times. But what exactly does it mean, and why do we value authenticity to such a degree? Critics of the ideal regard it as a pop-cultural fad, or an element of self-help ideologies, a ‘malaise of modernity’, or a concept not easily defined. Still, next to autonomy and integrity, authenticity has become one of the core issues in current philosophical discussions about ethical ideals.

Authenticity has no direct relation to ethical or moral standards. We can imagine an authentic mafioso or dictator. However, there are good reasons to defend an ethical ideal of authenticity, as far as it is related to the idea of authenticating one’s self-image and self-constitution. It is a positive thing to take responsibility for the self to which one wants to correspond in an authentic manner.

Originally, it was not common to attribute authenticity to a person or a company, and the term had a rather narrow meaning. A work of art or a document could be identified as an authentic product of a particular person. One could talk about an authentic painting of Rembrandt, but one would not say that Rembrandt was an authentic painter. The modern ideal of authenticity is still related to the notion of being an original and not a ‘copy’. Fans of the football coach Jürgen Klopp who say ‘this guy is authentic’ mean: he does not play a role or follow a textbook that others

have written for him. He expresses himself and acts in a manner that we perceive as corresponding to his true, original character.

A person’s authenticity can be defined as self-correspondence. According to the volitional account of authenticity, which is dominant in current philosophical discussions, a person is authentic if her actions and her life are expressive of the person she wholeheartedly wants to be and identifies with. This definition of authenticity is deliberately neutral with regard to ethical principles or moral standards. Being authentic means corresponding to the version of yourself that you want to be, no matter what that is.

To thine own self be true

But does this ideal of authentic self-fulfilment lead to self-indulgence? Does the imperative ‘just be yourself’ lead to the notion that you can do whatever you want, so long as you are expressing your true self in your actions? Even if authenticity is interpreted as an ethical ideal, this does not mean that it offers concrete guidelines for morally righteous behaviour. It is an ideal that is not action-guiding but can create good, in the sense that, if the ideal is met, it contributes to the quality of a person’s life.

However, it is not possible to lead a good life in a social vacuum. Humans are essentially social beings. To find out who and how I really want to be, with which self-concept I truly identify and which way of life is authentic and good for myself, I need other people. I need them as a mirror, reflecting my strengths and weaknesses, as in Aristotle’s ideal of friendship. And I need their recognition.

Yet, as Sartre has pointed out, other people can be our hell. Your view of my self determines a picture of my self and fixes my identity in stable categories. The desire to be authentic can be an element of rebellion against these determinations. I do not want to be the



“Authenticity has no direct relation to ethical or moral standards. We can imagine an authentic mafioso or dictator”

Model by Fortmoon, photography by Michael Hedge

person that you see in me, I just want to be myself. This critical potential of resistance against conformity is an important reason why personal authenticity is valued. The ideal incorporates an oppositional force against suppression and self-alienation, be it by corresponding to antiquated role models or extreme ideals of self-control or selflessness.

This kind of authenticity is not something that you just have. It is something that you try to achieve in a process of self-reflection, of distancing yourself from particular roles and of developing and ‘authenticating’ a more self-determined version of yourself. The ideal of personal authenticity is related to an idea of self-

authorship. But here again, we cannot ‘make ourselves’ out of nothing. The ideal of personal authenticity is not separable from social interaction – which asks for ethical standards – and from the common goals and ideals that humans develop and exchange with one another.

Let’s be authentic, and in doing so keep the productive tension between the implications of being an authentic individual in terms of being creative, original, inventive, self-reliant and unconventional, and of a responsible, moral and socialised way of being an authentic representative of humanity. Authenticating one’s self also means taking responsibility for one’s self; a responsibility towards oneself, but also towards others. One can even say that this responsibility includes a duty to oneself to make the best of one’s capabilities and to enable others to do so. If authenticity is understood as an *ethical ideal*, the authentic self is an unfolded and responsible self. ■

“We’ve moved very far from any realistic notion of democracy. We continue to use these words without realising that they’ve been hollowed out”

Matthew Taylor talks to writer Pankaj Mishra about the challenges facing democracy today

Matthew Taylor: You argue powerfully that liberal democracy in the west is based upon the exploitation of other people around the world and at home. Is liberal democracy an idea worth saving if it were possible to detach it from those elements? Or is it impossible to imagine liberal democracy working without the context that you have so vividly described?

Pankaj Mishra: Liberal democracy will have to be rescued from the alliance its ruling classes have formed opportunistically with capitalism over several decades. This much seems plain; it has become compromised by its alliance with a system that generates inequality and creates various oligarchies and special interests. And when democracy starts to lose its appeal, this occurs very dramatically. This is what has happened in the last two or three decades. People increasingly distrust liberal democracy. There is a lot of cynicism about it, because many people see it, and quite rightly, as a kind of ideological, or moral, cover for oligarchy, special interests and elites.

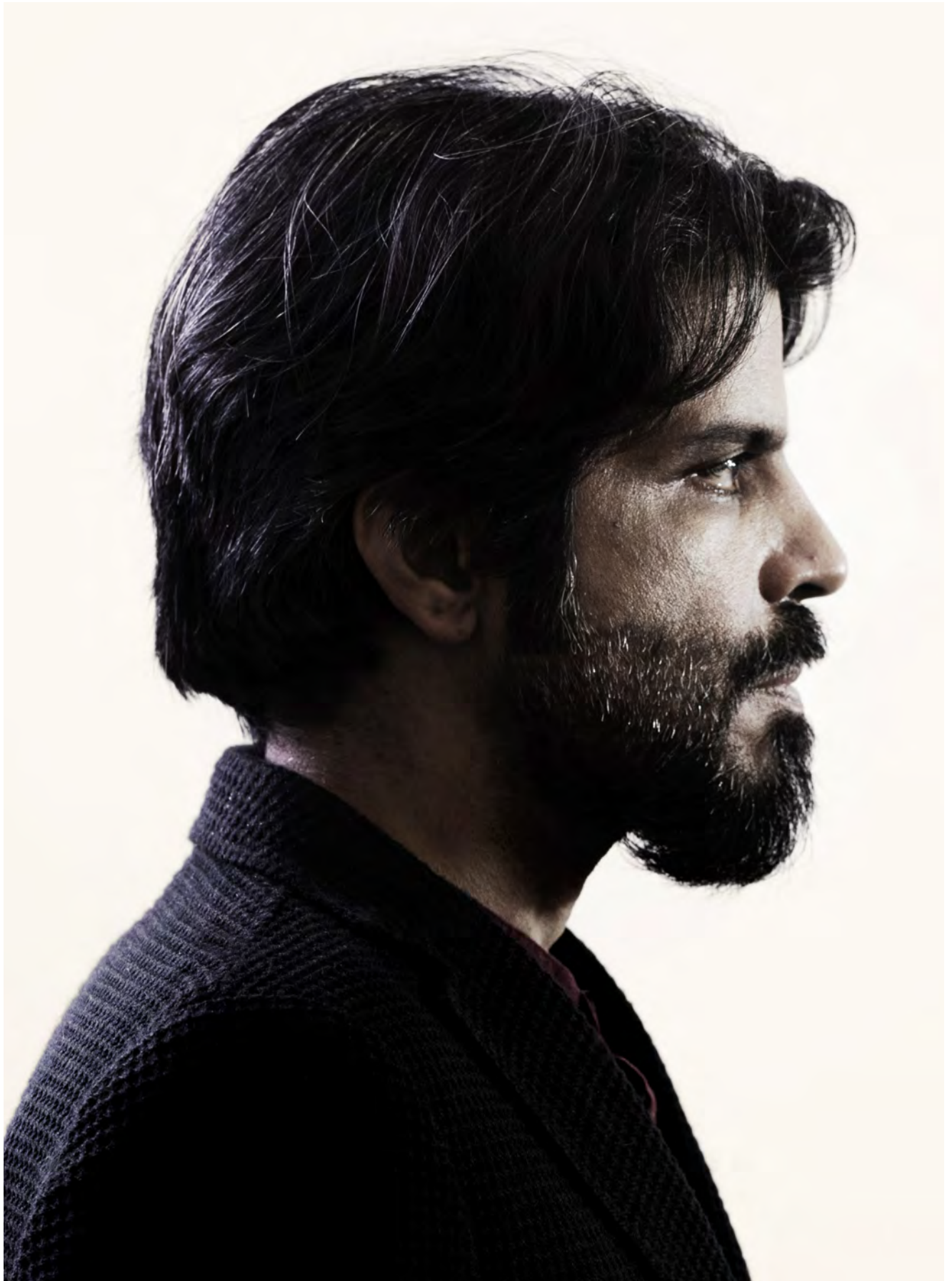
However, the ideals of liberal democracy – the equality and dignity of human beings – should be cherished. And we have cherished them over the centuries without affiliating them to an explicitly

liberal democratic project, or even without calling it such. These values of equality and dignity ought to be protected and perpetuated. But the question is: what kind of social and economic system do we want? Currently we have one that is actually continuously violating those values while at the same time claiming great moral superiority. And this is what hacks off a lot of people in the west today. Of course, people in countries colonised by the west always saw its democracy as deeply hypocritical.

Taylor: One of the reasons I find your work so rich is that there is a recognition that, underlying everything, there are problems with life. If you accept that it is hard to make human life meaningful and argue, as you do, that the problem is inequality, it could be taken as saying that if we could achieve less inequality then somehow the problems with living our lives would disappear. But from my reading of your work, that’s not something you believe; you believe that it is inherently challenging to make life meaningful.

Mishra: Social and economic inequality makes that challenge even harder, and the experience of living in a highly competitive society wears on people on ▶

Pankaj Mishra is an essayist and novelist. His most recent book was *Age of Anger: A History of the Present*





“The experience of living in a highly competitive society wears on people on a daily basis”

a daily basis. Let's not forget that all of these factors are relatively new given the long sweep of human history. It's only in the last 200 years that a large part of the world's population has lived with these pressures of competitiveness, the desire to catch up, to be recognised as an equal citizen. All of these desires, values and ideas are very specific to the modern commercial society that we inhabit, which only began to emerge in the late 18th century. Inequality in that context becomes a huge source of pain and distress for people because it deeply violates their desire for recognition, for human dignity, which can really only be affirmed through the eyes and consciousness of other people.

But that doesn't mean that there aren't other challenges that have always haunted human beings. To take one example, the challenge of working with linguistic concepts that have a very complicated relationship with reality. For instance, what we have today is not democracy. It is something that claims to be democracy, but it isn't really, and when you start exploring the question of what is democracy, you realise that we've moved very far away with our massive systems of representation, the power of the executive, the bureaucracy, the power of oligarchies. We've moved very far from any realistic notion of democracy. We continue to use these words without realising that they've been hollowed out.

Taylor: To what extent do you think the capacity of liberal democracy to reinvent itself free from its role in buttressing capitalist elites is to do with the need to invent and reinvent institutions? You have made the point that we focus too much on the processing norms of democracy and not the substantive elements, such as genuine equality, and a genuine voice for people. To what extent do you think that the crisis we're witnessing is an institutional crisis?

Mishra: We need new institutions that are responsive, that are actually sensitive to the simple idea that democracy is literally the rule of the people, the *demos*. If this is our starting point – that democracy is the rule of the people – then we will work towards institutions that enhance the voice of the people and the power of the people.

This means decentralisation and centring citizens in democracy is imperative. India is continuously called, and bills itself as, the world's largest democracy, but what is actually going on there? In what way is it a democracy? Really, only one way: it holds routine elections every five years, and that is when the vast majority of its poor citizens have the chance to exercise their franchise and to either vote for the party in power or to vote out the party in power. And that's about it. They are not involved in any other process whatsoever. There are no citizens' assemblies where they can have their voices heard, the corporate-owned media is completely indifferent to them – right now it is cheering on India's military occupation of Kashmir – and there is absolutely no way in which a democratic preference can be expressed by an ordinary citizen in the world's largest democracy. This is really a farce. This is not a democracy.

We focus far too much on the formal, procedural aspect of democracy. We think it is only about electing representatives and then basically we sign off on the whole process. All of us have to go back and look at some of these notions, such as citizens' assemblies, that have been around for a long time and think about what we can do to enrich democracy. And when we speak of liberal democracy, we should also separate it a little from liberalism, which is not only often not democratic, but also often in conflict with democracy. We need to infuse this completely hollowed-out notion of democracy with some new reality, and that reality can only come about if we think of citizens as active, everyday participants in the democratic process.

Taylor: If you take one aspect of our human condition, our yearning for belonging, which psychologists tell us is one of the core human motivations connecting us, all the good things that come out of that desire

to be part of the group are also associated with the notion of an 'in' group and an 'out' group. If you look through history, this question of how human beings get on with people, how it is they have solidarity within their group without that turning into hostility towards other groups, this is an inherent human challenge isn't it?

Mishra: It always has been. The advance of the nation state, which imposes a very different, radical form of collectivity upon its citizens, and demands a stringent kind of loyalty, has complicated that notion of solidarity and belonging.

Human beings have devised very complex systems of coexistence; we can see that in the Ottoman Empire, the Mughal Empire, China, the centuries of Habsburg rule in Europe. It's not as though human beings haven't had experience of living with people who don't speak the same language, or who are not of the same religion. On the contrary. There are multiple examples of human coexistence across the centuries, but the one political system that is perfectly suited to advance modern human goals, particularly goals such as prosperity, individual expansion and economic growth, is the nation state. And that's one reason why one community after another around the world since the 19th century has adopted this particular notion, largely for reasons of survival, and much of our discourse of solidarity and belonging is now deeply connected to ideas of nationalism.

It raises the question: what really is the feeling of solidarity here, what is the feeling of community? Is it something being manufactured or forced by, for example, the tabloid press, by politicians, or is it something that is genuinely felt? I think that this is the great deception of nationalism. It continuously forges a fake solidarity, which is often built upon excluding some community or other, and we are seeing this on a dramatically accelerated scale right now.

Taylor: Do you think that nationalism by its very nature is always prone to pathologise into the kind of aggressive, exclusive form that we're seeing everywhere from India to Istanbul?

Mishra: It always has a sort of latent tendency, which is exacerbated during times of social and economic distress. I won't say nationalism is capable of great tolerance; it never has been, it has always been built upon its difference with something else. It always required a kind of foil, but I think it's possible for it to live at relative peace with that old imagined adversary. But then in times of crisis, when demagogues emerge, they always point to this or that figure, this or that

community that has to be excluded, that has to be demonised. This is something we're seeing with Trump today. American nationalism is perfectly capable of assimilating and accommodating people from different parts of the world. Right now it is completely intolerant of them.

Taylor: Is it your sense that the political, social and cultural automatic stabilisers for societies like Britain and America, and other countries which are seeing democratic turmoil, are sufficient to find a way through these crises? To put it another way: how bad could it get?

Mishra: It could get pretty bad at this point, because when you think about how stability was previously achieved, a lot of those factors have disappeared.

In the first instance, prosperity and relative political stability were achieved through capitalist imperialism, which was the model in the 19th century that allowed Britain to get a head start over all other nations, to become richer than them even though it was a small country. People managed to conquer territories and acquire resources in far-off lands and, along with technological and scientific innovations, this helped Britain to become a major power. Those factors have been replicated by other countries over the decades, so Britain has lost those advantages. It made some terrible decisions after the Second World War, so it also lost its competitive economic edge, even to rivals it had been leading for a long time, such as Germany and France. Its scope for manoeuvre has been shrinking all this time. When you speak about stability, we have to remember that stability in the future will have to be sought on a completely different basis from that of the past.

Taylor: It seems to me that society is a balancing act between our individualist motivations – which aren't necessarily selfish – and our feelings of solidarity, which are to do with belonging and notions of justice and responsibility. The role of democracy is to try to hold these things successfully in tension. It is hard to see how we can move towards equality unless we can renew democracy.

Mishra: Absolutely. Democracy has been in such disfavour in so many countries around the world because most people see it as something that has no substance whatsoever, that is simply providing cover to the beneficiaries of the system. That's one reason why people have lost faith in it. They feel powerless, they feel that they have no stake and no voice, and they are electing people who've openly expressed contempt

for the democratic process. Contempt for Parliament, which you know Boris Johnson expresses, is actually shared by a lot of people, both on the left and on the right. These elected representatives are supposed to stand for citizens but actually are beholden to party politics, to special interests, to business lobbies. The kind of institutional renewal you're speaking of is really the need of the hour. It's the only way in which one can even start to think about rolling back the populist tide we're all engulfed by right now.

Taylor: I interviewed Francis Fukuyama a few months ago about polarisation. I said if you look back about 50 years, to 1968 for example, it felt as though there was as much division and polarisation going on then. In some ways it was worse, in terms of, for example, political terrorism. His argument was that, yes, the forces of division were as great then, but there were much greater forces on the other side pulling people together. From his perspective that was to do with identity, and nationhood and inclusion. But from your perspective, it was the economic capacity of those societies that enabled them to sustain themselves.

Mishra: Oh absolutely, and their capacity to meet the challenge of inequality. Let's not forget that was also the case in the 1960s. The man in charge from 1969 onwards in the US, Richard Nixon, would be seen by most standards today as someone on the left in terms of his economic policies. We inhabit a completely different environment when it comes to dealing with an economic system that continuously generates intolerable levels of inequality.

I am suspicious of the cultural argument here. It leads inevitably to the conclusion that multiculturalism has destroyed societal cohesion, and we need to get this cohesion back and can do so somehow without confronting the social and economic iniquities that have actually undermined societal cohesion. Back in the 1960s, you could argue quite persuasively that most European countries, and even the US, were still growing economically, and had social security nets in place. Inequality was not nearly as bad as it is today. Cultural identity looked cohesive. Demands from minorities and women for equal rights were being met, however partially and grudgingly; nationalism was still a potent force because inequality was not the pressing issue. Inequality polarises, and I think the reason people didn't erupt into the kind of tribalist passion that we see today is because there was still much to be hoped for from both the political system and the economic system.

Taylor: What's your view of the UK's current situation?

“Stability in the future will have to be sought on a completely different basis from that of the past”



Mishra: A kind of political dysfunction that we have been seeing in different parts of the world in the past few decades has now finally arrived in the heart of the modern west. I think that’s one way of looking at what is happening in Britain today. It’s not unprecedented; societies far less privileged historically have had to suffer these kinds of political ordeals. Britain was less prepared for it than most other countries because it has enjoyed a kind of uninterrupted good fortune for much of modern history. But now it’s really struggling. I think the next few months are going to tell us what will actually happen to this country: whether it’s going to stay together, whether Scotland will remain part of the United Kingdom. So many questions will be settled in the months to come.

Taylor: Is anger a necessary part of our political system? I imagine you would say yes, because it’s part of what drives people to organise and to rebel and to demand more, but also it feels as though the renewing of democratic institutions that we talk about is made

much more difficult by social media for example, which seems to privilege anger above other mediums for expressing feelings.

Mishra: Social media privileges the short fuse more than any other kind of emotion or impulse, and this has made it even harder for people to feel compassion. Compassion doesn’t really come at the end of a short fuse, it is something for which you create space in your heart and mind for yourself and for others. We have lost sight of this. Compassion is in many ways a basic principle of a democratic society. If you go back and read figures as disparate as Rousseau and Tocqueville, this is something they are very clear about. The feeling that a fellow citizen is suffering, and that suffering can be mitigated, is the foundation of modern society. I’m not that keen on this notion of anger as a way to mobilise people. The confrontation with injustice or atrocity moves people to do things they wouldn’t otherwise do, but it’s compassion that is the more enduring and enriching emotion. ■



ON GOOD AUTHORITY

The civil service often comes under fire for perceived failings. With yet another election looming, what does that mean for reforming it?

by Baroness Wolf

Philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn divided science into “normal periods” and “paradigm shifts”. His theory was that, most of the time, scientists are engaged in relatively small advances (“puzzle-solving”) within a fully agreed framework and understanding of the world. However, at some point, it would become increasingly clear that the framework was not working; the scientific community would be plunged into disagreement and angst until a new paradigm emerged. Think of evolution or Newtonian physics.

Kuhn was remarkable because he understood human psychology. His insights apply in many ways to how we run our government. We constantly question the role of central government, of quangos and public bodies, and of the civil service. There are always projects aimed at reforming them, tweaking them. But this usually takes place within the current model. Of course, there come moments of true change: the creation of the modern civil service; joining the EU; the ability of the House of Commons to overrule the House of Lords. But once institutions emerge, they become enormously sticky. The Supreme Court is a very new institution, but imagine trying to abolish it.

There is currently a lot of talk about a paradigm shift in public services and in government. Having been promised radical change throughout my lifetime, I am pretty sceptical; however, it seems clear to me that whoever wins the next general election will seek serious reform. Leaving the EU certainly requires us

to rethink how our government operates, and under what rules. If an incoming government was serious about central government reform, as a prerequisite for systemic change, what might that mean?

I think there are three areas that could and should change: how the machinery approaches its role and responsibilities; how people are trained, appointed and promoted; and who is involved in policy formation and delivery. None involves razing the civil service to the ground, but all would make a difference.

The government machine

I am a crossbencher and I have never been a member of a political party, but I have been deeply involved with policy and policymaking for most of my life. An impartial civil service is central to effective government within a democracy. You have to be able to move, relatively seamlessly, from one democratically elected government to another.

But our current system has made officials too unresponsive to the electorate, and it has given politicians insufficient numbers of people who can drive through their reforms.

One of the things I am always struck by when I talk to government departments is the depth and degree of their producer-orientation. This is most obvious in the use of the term ‘stakeholder’, which is used all the time and means producers. Not the public, who have the biggest stake. Education officials talk about and to teachers and exam boards and people running

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schools. Environment officials talk about and to farmers and the food business. Housing officials talk about and to developers.

This is not deliberate, just instinctive and self-perpetuating. These are the people the officials know, they are easy to reach and poised to come into the department. These are the contacts civil servants pass on to one another as they move between jobs. If you go through the last 100 press releases from the Department for Education (a part of the civil service that I know particularly well), how many are directed towards the sector, and how many towards the public? If you go on their website, does it tell you anything as a parent? Not really.

Politicians are different. At least they occasionally have to talk to people in their surgeries and – eventually – persuade them to vote for their party. But the disconnect between the civil service and public is a real problem. Officials are professionals who tend to live in certain parts of the country (predominantly London). Their lived experience is one slice of the country, and of course that affects their attitudes and instinctive responses because they are human beings. And they talk, mostly, to people rather like them.

In my view this consistently warps decision-making and advice to ministers. If you wanted small tweaks,

you would require every civil servant above a certain grade to attend focus groups on a regular basis. Larger scale, you would seek to reorient departments' focus ruthlessly towards users of a service, and the people who pay for them. If you were being really radical, you would look at how to incorporate the jury principle – of randomly selected members of the public – into more decision-making in government.

Incoming ministers tend to be pleasantly surprised by their civil servants. 'Our wonderful civil servants' is a phrase used with conviction, not just as an expected trope. And of course, they are wonderful in many ways: whatever the party in power, they look after 'their' ministers, they produce papers and briefings on any topic that emerges, they are behind them in those sessions at the dispatch box which, to an onlooker, appear utterly terrifying.

But the current system is crazy. I know this is a cliché, but that does not stop it being true: in what other area would you expect a CEO to come in and have no power over who works for him, how, and in what positions? And how can it possibly be right that the only people likely to lose their jobs over failures are one politician and maybe two advisers who are expected to sit on top of an enormous machine and direct it effectively? As government gets

bigger and bigger, we have to address these issues of responsibility and accountability.

Knowledge, not skills

Those who follow education developments will know there has been a major debate in recent decades over the value of knowledge compared with ‘transferable skills’. That debate has become more sophisticated over the past few years because of our increasing understanding of the human brain: how it absorbs information, how it learns and how it becomes ‘expert’. What we have discovered is that skills are much less transferable than we thought.

In some ways this is obvious. If you put a chess grandmaster into a GP surgery, their ability to think critically does not mean you want them to treat you, even if they have access to the internet. Or, to give another example, to effectively compare and contrast the merits of two different Brexit deals, it turns out you need to know a lot about how trade works, as well as how countries work. It takes a long time to absorb and apply such in-depth information; it is not something you can do by simply spending a bit of time online.

Yet the civil service, in my experience, continues to value ‘general skills’ over specific expertise to an excessive degree. It even trains people on that basis, while trying to encourage the opposite in our schools. And when Whitehall brings in outside ‘expertise’, it is all too often from general-purpose consulting firms, full of energetic, clever and generally rather young people who are also generalists (and very like the civil servants they deal with).

We have long careers, and you can of course become expert in more than one area. There is huge value in being, in general, someone who reads widely and is curious about lots of areas (as Philip Tetlock and Dan Gardner have demonstrated with their book on superforecasters). But Whitehall simply does not value knowledge nearly enough. It expects everyone who succeeds to be good at management, able to swap areas and departments effortlessly, and to be simultaneously pleasant and incisive. These demands mean that those with ‘spiky’ profiles – and those who really know the areas – are often buried far deeper than they should be.

The problem is compounded by the constant movement of people between divisions and departments, and the fact that such movement is central to career advancement. When government is moderately stable – as during the 2010–15 coalition – ministers can rapidly find that they have longer experience of a particular policy area than

do their senior officials. I have just been a member of the independent panel for the Post-18 Review of Education and Funding, led by Philip Augar (which produced the Augar report). The team of officials that supported the review developed specialist knowledge and are now, of course, being scattered not merely across the Department for Education but across Whitehall. So if a future government decides to implement the review’s recommendations, that knowledge will be gone.

The role of the outsider

In some cases, individual politicians have managed to achieve substantial change, directly or through their use of outsiders. In education, the area I know best, Andrew Adonis is an obvious example, and so is Michael Gove. I was one of the beneficiaries of Gove’s approach. He asked me to review vocational education, he accepted my recommendations, and these were implemented more or less in their entirety. Leaving aside whether they were correct (and I of course think they were), what lessons are there here?

I think there are two. First, you need outsiders who are passionate and expert. I do not mean that officials are indifferent. But the mindset that allows you to move from, say, reversing nationalisation to delivering it wholeheartedly, is quite different from that of an academic or practitioner with a particular worldview formed by long experience of a particular field. You need both.

Second – and crucially – you need to embed those outsiders for a while. Why was my review implemented when the general view is that reviews languish and perish? Because for a year after the report was published I worked closely with civil servants in the Department for Education. I was embedded. Many of the implementation team came to the task fresh and had no real sense of why the review had been commissioned or why it had come to its conclusions. As that year went by, people in the team came and went. But throughout, I was around to interpret, explain, nag and, on occasion, to the team’s benefit, go direct to the top. That was and is a ridiculously rare approach.

So, three changes: how the civil service views its responsibilities; what kind of qualifications and experience we look for in civil servants; and who is involved in creating and delivering policy. All are potentially transformative and all require some pretty sustained and detailed attention. Am I optimistic? Not very; but then, as Kuhn points out, things always seem fixed and normal until, suddenly, they are not. ■

BREAKING NEWS

Seemingly facing attacks from all sides, the media must adapt quickly if it is to survive

by Meera Selva

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Journalists and journalism sit both inside and outside the corridors of power. Journalism is itself essentially about power: the power to shape public debate, and to bring about political change. However, to be effective, journalists need to be outsiders; close to, but independent of, other political actors. Traditionally, in the UK this independence has come either by charter, in the case of the BBC, or by financial independence gained through advertising revenue, where large private companies essentially pay for journalism but accept a contract where they do not influence the news.

There are still several media companies where this power holds, and for many media houses the bulk of revenue still comes from print. However, the trend is downwards. At the same time, the more traditional media finds itself mistrusted by the public, under attack from politicians, and facing competition from platform companies such as Google and Facebook, which are taking away advertising revenue. It is also threatened by readers themselves, who see no reason to buy a daily newspaper or pay for a digital subscription when so much news is freely available.

Who is in control?

The *Cairncross Review*, commissioned by the UK government and published earlier this year, addressed this point, arguing that independent journalism is both a public good and financially unviable in its current form. It called for an array of possible solutions, including: new codes of conduct for technology companies; public funds to be spent on rescuing local newspapers, which it said were vital to a functioning democracy; and tax breaks for

publishers. While the review addresses funding and regulation, a key under-answered question is: who controls the media?

We have long known that the media is no longer a gatekeeper to information, but we are now in a world where it has lost control of the distribution of its own content. The combination of smartphones, search engines and social networking companies means media organisations may create content, but people access this content through channels provided by others. For example, data from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism shows that two-thirds of online news users worldwide get their news through ‘side door’ access. This means that they come to news through search engines, social media email newsletters or mobile alerts, as opposed to through a newspaper’s own website or app. Among those under 35 this figure is even higher.

In the UK, the numbers are slightly different. The BBC is still an organisation many people go to directly for news, and the BBC news app is one of the more successful worldwide, but even here the trend is towards a more distributed discovery model.

This raises several questions about who and what should be considered a publishing platform. If you get your news through your Facebook feed, is Facebook a publisher or a broadcaster? And if it is a broadcaster, should it be regulated by Ofcom, and therefore be obliged to reach the same standards of impartiality and balance as the BBC or ITV? As yet, there is no consensus on how and where technology companies should be regulated. The UK and the rest of Europe are minded to treat them as publishers, beholden to national laws worldwide.

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Fake news and mistrust

As the media fragments, and regulation fails to keep up adequately with new technology, distrust in media has risen. In many instances, people do not trust what they read because it does not tally with what they believe. They also do not always trust the media to reflect their own situations and concerns accurately. But this decline in trust has been matched by a rise in concerns over fake news or misinformation, which poses an existential threat to the media.

Many people, including politicians such as Donald Trump, have used the term 'fake news' to discredit all critical media. This threat is compounded by some of the responses to the issue of fake news. Several countries, including Singapore, have leapt on the term as a way to pass yet more oppressive laws designed to attack independent journalists. Governments, regulators, and indeed much of the general public, are now using the terms 'fake news' and 'misinformation' to mean news they do not like,

produced by journalists they do not trust. This is a subjective, not an objective, definition, and it sets a dangerous precedent.

The UK government tried to address the issue of misinformation through the *Online Harms* White Paper published earlier this year. The paper deals with all online content, not just news, and wants to make internet companies responsible for illegal and harmful content on their platforms. It proposes an independent regulator to establish good practice and enforce penalties, mainly financial.

The problem with trying to deal with misinformation through such measures is that they effectively give internet companies the role of policing content, and give them huge powers and responsibilities to decide what is accurate and what is not. It essentially makes them gatekeepers to information, which is the traditional role of the media.

The European Court of Justice has also tried to combat fake news. In early October, it announced ►



that individual countries can order Facebook to take down content not just in their own jurisdiction, but elsewhere. This creates an extraordinary, and worrying, precedent. For example, China may be able to order Facebook to take down news of Hong Kong protests worldwide if it violated its own national defamation laws. Laws that appear perfectly reasonable in one country with constitutional guarantees on free speech and the rule of law can be abused elsewhere.

How to regain trust?

There are two big battles in this area. The first is to persuade people to spend time with the news, and the second is to persuade them to pay for news. In order for people to do either of these things, they need to feel that they trust the media. Yet, the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism's 2019 *Digital News Report*, which tracks patterns of media consumption in 38 different countries, shows that only 42% of digital news users trust news worldwide. This is down from 44% last year, and less than half (49%) trust the news they consume themselves.

In some countries, this fall in trust has been precipitous, and has accompanied a rising mistrust in all institutions, according to Reuters Institute data.

In France, the *gilets jaunes* movement pushed trust in media down to 24%, from 35%. In the UK, trust in news overall is at 40%, but people do at least have a bit more faith in the news they choose to consume; 51% say they trust the news they use.

One slight consolation is that trust in the most reputable brands – in many cases legacy media such as the BBC or the *New York Times* – is rising, as people grow every day more aware of the perils of online news sources and variations in quality and accuracy.

Reaching the people

Another problem media institutions face is the growing divide in their audience reach. Public sector broadcasters are meant to reach everyone in a country.

Television news is still the single most important source of news for the UK population as a whole, but across Europe, public sector broadcasters tend to reach an audience that is mainly older and well educated. While these broadcasters are generally trusted, there are sections of society that are no longer listening. They are not trusted by people on the right or on the populist end of the political spectrum.

Public sector broadcasters face a real challenge in reaching younger audiences who are used to being

“Journalists and editors need to constantly assess what and who they are for”

online. Even the BBC, which is relatively inventive in this area, is lagging. In terms of its UK audience, the BBC currently makes up 63% of all radio listeners and 31% of all linear television viewing, but only 1.5% of time spent on digital media. Comparatively, Google takes up 22% of people’s time on digital media, and Facebook 14%.

Journalists and editors need to constantly assess what and who they are for. According to Reuters Institute data, people feel that, while the news media worldwide is reasonably good at breaking news, it is not as good at helping them to understand it. Only 51% of people worldwide say that the media gives them clarity on the news. There is obviously demand for clear, simple explanations: in mid-October, as Turkish troops moved into northern Syria, the most popular article on the *New York Times* website was a straightforward text-based explainer about the invasion.

This kind of explanatory journalism does not rely on investment in new technologies, or new forms of storytelling, and does not even require a huge newsroom. It does, however, require thinking hard about what news is meant to do.

Journalism also needs to seek out new audiences – the poor, minorities, people who have not entered higher education – all of whom need reliable information presented in ways that are relevant and accessible. Journalists are able to use new social media tools to take the news to these audiences in formats they use, but the bigger challenge is to ensure that journalists are truly representative of society and that stories reflect this diversity.

Reconnecting with audiences

As well as catering for a wider audience, media also needs to reconnect with its traditional audience. *The Guardian*, which has always kept its online content free, has launched a successful membership model where it asks readers to pay for its journalism, not so they can have exclusive access to it, but so they can ensure *The Guardian*’s reporting is available to everyone. Other organisations such as Tortoise, the media startup launched by James Harding, a former editor of *The Times*, are building membership

around events and a two-way conversation with their readers. These models redefine relationships with audiences. They make journalism a shared endeavour where journalists and readers both work together to create a product. They are about more than simply asking readers for subscriptions; it is about asking them to buy into a brand that they trust and identify with for a variety of reasons. Access to content is only a very small part of that equation. Yet such models can only work in an environment where readers believe journalism is worthwhile and a benefit to society.

However, this is not a moment for despair. Looking closely at the challenges facing the industry, we can see the seeds of possible solutions. In a climate of lay offs, falling revenues and fierce competition from newcomers, media houses must find a way to invest in new technologies, stay relevant and fight off harmful regulation. The media industry still has the money and the public goodwill to experiment with new formats, new content and new models to find a way to carry on providing core services. But it needs to act now to ensure it adapts to changing audience expectations and news consumption. ■

RSA Fellowship in action

Local Equity Stakes

Seeing that top-down government-led policies were not helping those most affected by austerity measures, Phil Arnold FRSA was inspired to set up Local Equity Stakes in Manchester. The project aims to create real, widespread change from the grassroots up, supporting neighbours to help one another. By starting democratic dialogue within neighbourhoods and encouraging collective action, Local Equity Stakes helps to counter social isolation and poor health and wellbeing. It was awarded an RSA Catalyst Grant Seed Award, which was used to conduct a series of consultations with those using Local Equity Stakes.

Building on this feedback, Phil is now hoping to expand the Local Equity Stakes model out into a large-scale social enterprise ecosystem in several boroughs in Greater Manchester.

“Without the Seed Grant, I don’t think this would have progressed as quickly as it did,” said Phil. “The RSA has been really positive and supportive; the network is a great way to learn from others.”

■ To find out more about Local Equity Stakes, contact Phil on phil.arnold2012@gmail.com

A NATION OF SHOPKEEPERS?

The decline of high street retail is worrying, but the Future Work Centre's scenarios show there is a way forward

by Alan Lockey

🐦 Modern_Lockey

Alan Lockey is Head of the RSA's Future Work Centre

Benjamin Franklin, arguably the RSA's most famous Fellow, once said "keep thy shop and thy shop will keep thee". Yet with every passing week it seems fewer people are keeping shop on the UK's beleaguered high street. Toys "R" Us, Maplin, Poundworld, Thomas Cook: the list of recent high-profile failures is lengthy. Some 3,000 shops closed for good in the first half of this year, and a record one in 10 retail units currently lies unoccupied. With Brexit potentially spooking consumers – sales in September were the worst since records began, according to the British Retail Consortium – the omens for the crucial run-up to Christmas do not look promising either. Difficult questions will again be raised about the future of the high street itself. Might we be witnessing the collapse of a cornerstone institution of British cultural life? And what on earth can we do to try and save it?

The RSA recently convened a Future Work Lab to address this crisis. Our first step, working with a range of major retailers, including John Lewis and Tesco, was to define and embrace the challenge in all its bracing reality. Rather than a single cause that can easily explain the malaise, the truth is that the UK's retailers are grappling with something of a perfect storm.

For one, there are fierce economic headwinds, both in terms of the current business climate and the

longer-term clustering of success in the UK's already prosperous metropolitan areas. Then there is the unhelpful cost of policies such as business rates, which currently seem to punish high street retail property compared with the distribution warehouses of their online competitors. However, the indisputable megatrend driving UK retail's existential angst is, of course, the huge recent shift in consumer demand towards e-commerce. Less a nation of shopkeepers, the UK is now the world leader in online shopping. According to the Office for National Statistics, 19% of all retail transactions are now completed online (up from 9% in 2011).

Not only that, technology is transforming the nature of work in the sector, further threatening jobs. Online supermarket Ocado has opened a fully automated warehouse, and Amazon has launched a chain of cashier-less convenience stores. These changes can have severe distributional effects. Our research found that a shift from customer service to warehouse roles means that the decline in high street jobs has disproportionately affected women.

An experiential future?

We asked the major retailers to consider the consequences that might emerge from the four futures of work scenarios that our Future Work Centre developed. Two of the scenarios in particular caught their attention. The first was the Empathy Economy, which envisions a scenario of responsible stewardship, where businesses work with democratic forces to adopt technology on mutually beneficial terms and where tech is applied to augment human capabilities rather than to squeeze and scrutinise workers. Retailers could see positives in this scenario, particularly the idea of 'in-store influencers' who

The RSA Future Work Centre's four futures of work scenarios:

- **The Empathy Economy** • **The Big Tech Economy**
- **The Precision Economy** • **The Exodus Economy**

■ For more information, please visit <https://bit.ly/2Pw4bWM>



would help the sector shed its low-skill, low-pay image problem. These influencers are similar to the personal concierge roles present in many high-end stores. Such individuals are highly knowledgeable about products and brands, as well as having strong customer service and sales skills. In supermarkets, for example, creating in-store influencers might mean skilling shopfloor workers in cooking and nutrition so that they can host cooking classes in-store.

The Big Tech Economy scenario describes a world where technology develops at a rapid pace, leading to widespread automation, and where local high streets outside of cities have all but disappeared, with demand shifting to online retail. In this scenario, delivery drones serve even the most rural areas and the major tech companies all have large retail operations. This scenario embodied retailers' fears for the future.

The Empathy Economy scenario puts forward a vision for retail that is more experiential, with stores becoming a destination for more than shopping. An extreme example of this approach is the Lego store in Beijing, which provides so many hands-on, tech-enabled playing experiences that it often feels more like one of the Danish brand's theme parks than a traditional store.

But this desire to make retail more of an experience should also be seen as an invocation to think more deeply about how we use physical space in our communities. The reason we find it harder to emotionally divest from high street retail is that a healthy local retail economy is bound up in our idea of what gives our towns, cities and villages their sense of identity. Bill Grimsey, a former CEO of Iceland and author of a government report on high street retail, *The Vanishing High Street*, said that every town should draw upon its local produce, heritage, culture and craft to become "its own Disney World".

Such an approach would require a new collaborative spirit, both between retailers more used to cut-throat competition and democratic stakeholders who might feel uncomfortable relinquishing control to new governance structures. Moreover, as our Future Work Lab suggests, the government should consider creating a helpfully deregulated policy environment – perhaps with more lax planning laws, or business rates holidays – to enable place-based collaboration to take form. But there is a definite sense of the problem embodying the solution: if we need high street retail because we need a sense of place, perhaps we should start thinking about retail environments primarily as places. ■

TERMS OF ENGAGEMENT

Service user participation is all the rage. To be effective it must go beyond listening to people's experiences

by Matt John
 @_matt_john_

I was sent to prison at the age of 19. I entered that space with many of the typical deficits and disadvantages that so many 'offenders' have. Now aged 38, my experience of moving from an angry, disempowered and disengaged recipient of services to an experienced and informed practitioner seeking to shape policy and services has been a long one. I suspect this process never ends, but we all need to start somewhere.

For me, the initial experience of becoming an engaged individual was a relatively passive one: those doing the engaging had already framed how this was going to happen, the questions at hand and my role. What I gave was energy and emotion, and what they got was fairly useless.

While service user participation is now all the rage – even in prison – this dynamic is still very much characterised within such practices. At its weakest, participation remains a case of populating a space with a predetermined agenda and format set by those with a motivation to engage with service users. Too often the result will be a group of ill-informed, poorly prepared, under-equipped (and sometimes vulnerable) people being asked to share their experiences and how these made them feel, responding to questions in a context-free zone in the vain hope that this will lead to insight or innovation. More worryingly, sometimes nobody in the room actually expects anything to happen, nothing to change; it is just that engagement must be seen to be taking place.

Now, as a practitioner, I am clear that when we involve service users we need to make sure that this is not tokenistic and that we genuinely seek to co-produce with those with lived experience. But this



path is slower and more difficult; it requires that we take a deliberative and flexible approach that does not limit the scope for debate either by design, or inadvertently, by virtue of the power differentials between those involved.

Co-producing in context

Effective co-production also requires the exploration of the wider system and context in which the process is taking place. This is important for a number of reasons.

First, such an approach builds trust, as the agenda and mechanisms behind those seeking the views and opinions of service users are made explicit. Often, when agencies or services look to receive input from service users, they do so because they are obliged to and/or because they think that what they have to say matters and is of value. More importantly, they also often do so when there is a need, when they think something is not working or needs to be improved. The outcomes of participation are usually richer and more insightful when service users are involved in shaping that process and agenda. This is not just

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about ‘ownership’; a failure to do so risks constraining the nature of involvement and restricting the value of contributions.

Second, taking the time to share and discuss context creates a greater equity in relation to information. More often than not, service users are capable of understanding the wider political and systemic implications in play. It is a mistake to assume that they are unable or unwilling, particularly when we do not ask. When people are given the wider context and facts, this helps to direct the intrinsic, albeit entirely necessary, emotional response to their experiences in more collective and constructive ways.

My road from passive recipient of services to engaged prisoner, and then to managing a team of people and being responsible for the establishment of service user involvement within a criminal justice service was only made possible when trust had been built between myself and the agencies that sought my engagement. At its worst, I had experienced first-hand that tokenism which amounted to cursory surveys of sentiment as opposed to meaningful dialogue and sharing in the discovery of issues and solutions.

What proved valuable to me, and I believe is important for those I now work alongside, was when participation involved sharing and discussion of the complex contextual circumstances. Service users always start as passengers on their journey and service providers are always the drivers. So, when these drivers ask passengers to share their experience, the passenger comments in an entirely personal, emotive and cursory manner. They will tell you how they feel: I hate this. I didn’t like that! But dig a little deeper and you are more likely to open up their needs, opinions and ideas: make it go faster. Turn around; why are you driving like that?

When the needs of the passenger conflict with the needs of the driver and the capabilities of the vehicle, we often reach a dead end that sends the passenger hurtling back to that emotive, cursory interpretation of their own experience. However, when these limitations are explained honestly, passengers begin to understand and set their feelings in context: that is to say, context breeds context.

Now of course, some will argue that not all service users want or need to know how services work, their

functions, the things that empower or constrain them, their motives or goals. But you do not find out who does unless you ask, and I would argue that one of the reasons people do not engage is because they find themselves repeating their ‘experience’ endlessly, rather than being encouraged to go down a different and more innovative road.

None of this means that the process of co-design needs to become so broad as to be meaningless and that fixed boundaries do not have a role to play. To stretch our analogy, passengers may want to drive faster in a 30mph zone and the driver can explain the need to stick to the speed limit or the limitations of the vehicle itself. By revealing to service users the machinery of services and agencies, the policies and procedures, funding structures and culture around the workings of any particular service, we not only empower people with knowledge but also contextualise their own priorities and experiences in relation to collective experience and system change.

Importantly, we avoid treating service users simply as bringers of subjective experience and emotional responses, with experts only bringing objective knowledge and analysis. Ultimately, we are seeking to align the experience and emotional response of service users with the priorities and politics of a service. As providers, if we want to understand and respond better to the needs of service users, we may need to become more open and honest about the emotional aspect of system failure.

Investment and legacy

Such an approach is likely to be more truly empowering. Like most clichés, the one about knowledge being power has a degree of truth to it. When agencies and services act in the spirit of revelation, translation and exploration – rather than simply ‘excavating’ people’s emotions and experiences – this can act to redress power imbalances and facilitate a richer experience.

However, it is also important to note that the pressure to develop quick responses to issues does not sit well with effective design and delivery of good co-production. A critical challenge for commissioners and services is to avoid short-term, simpler and cheaper forms of engagement. At best, this serves simply to shore up predetermined outcomes; at worst, it leaves those who have participated with higher levels of cynicism and dissatisfaction.

Certainly in the prison context, and in my work with people who often have a range of complex needs, more often than not they are service users because there has been a lack of investment in them

as people. They need to up their formal and life skills; their knowledge needs to be increased and they need to begin to see themselves as assets in this process with the power to influence and change. Of course it is easier and cheaper (in the short term) to seek disapproval/satisfaction ratings on a scale of one to 10. And yes, it is more ‘efficient’ to undertake a simple focus group, where the context is left for the experts to consider outside the door. However, the inherent danger of prioritising efficiency over quality (and equality) usually results in asking the same questions and making the same assumptions. The risk is that we do not gain a deeper understanding of the issues at hand or the nature of the change needed.

If time and resources are invested in this first step – of contextualising and co-producing the process – we would be more likely to leave a legacy by creating permanent and embedded consultative processes within services that are able to develop, adapt and innovate in serving local and wider systemic priorities. ■

RSA Fellowship in action

The Turnaround Project

In his former role as a special adviser in the Northern Ireland Department of Justice, Richard Good FRSA became increasingly aware that the rehabilitation of former prisoners could not be achieved by the justice system alone. In 2016, he founded the Turnaround Project, which has two aims: to try to improve the life and employment chances of those leaving prison, and to change the attitudes of people in the wider community towards them.

Turnaround works with people for six months before the end of their sentence and six months after. “We ask them to think about what they want to achieve for themselves,” says Richard. “What might they be able to do to support someone on the same journey as them? What could they offer the wider community?” They have the chance to join one of the project’s enterprises, benefiting from transitional employment and other support, before eventually moving to conventional employment.

The Turnaround Project received a £10,000 RSA Catalyst Scaling Grant, which will be used for the development of a ‘New Futures’ centre. Turnaround has also been supported by the RSA’s Transitions project and work on prison reform. The aim is to develop a place where the whole community can engage in supporting people as they turn around their futures.

■ *To find out more about the Turnaround Project, contact Richard at richard.good@theturnaroundproject.org*

CAN EUROPE RELAX?

The EU is enjoying a moment of relative calm, but it should not take it for granted that this will continue

by Pepijn Bergsen

🐦 @pbergsen

Through the Brexit negotiations so far, the EU has put on a remarkable display of unity and has enjoyed a boost in support across the continent as voters have been repelled by the domestic political chaos created by the UK's attempts to leave.

However, this unity is likely to be short-lived. Once Brexit is over, the bloc's remaining members will not find it so easy to coalesce around any single topic. Aside from long-standing disagreements, such as on integration in the eurozone and on defence issues, the continent faces significant future challenges, such as climate change and mass migration.

From the start of the Brexit negotiations, the UK hoped to use a divide and rule strategy among the 27 other member states. This was complicated by the UK not being willing to use its security cooperation with the rest of Europe as leverage to gain concessions from one or more member states, leaving it with little to offer them. As a result, the unity among the 27 remaining countries survived. Furthermore, the UK was perceived as wanting to cherry-pick the best bits of the single market, a stance clearly untenable to the other EU members. If one country were allowed to opt in and out at will, this would give other states a clear incentive to abandon the union, thereby undermining the whole project. The negotiators' clear mandate from the European Council and the technical nature of the talks also contributed to the EU's relatively harmonious position over Brexit.

This harmony should not be taken for granted. Brexit is a very specific situation, and finding immediate consensus on other topics will not be so easy. Opinion polls show that climate change is an area in which voters across Europe believe the EU should adopt a strong stance. Given the recent uptick

in support for the green cause, making progress on this topic could provide the EU with a significant boost in support. Unsurprisingly, the new European Commission has voiced significant ambition on this front, talking of a European Green Deal. An effective and unified EU response would be likely to increase support for the project. However, different member states are far apart on how to tackle this problem. Some are pushing for significant carbon taxes, but for many central and east European countries, which still heavily rely on fossil fuels, this is not a priority.

The EU faces numerous other challenges, including migration, competitiveness, regulating digital technology, and a widening split between east and west. Meanwhile, a resurgence of the eurozone crisis is never far from EU leaders' minds, particularly now that the European economy is slowing again. None of these challenges can be dealt with by member states alone. But in most instances, their various positions lie much further apart than in the case of Brexit, making it harder to respond harmoniously to these issues. The result is that, once it is back to business as usual, relations between the member states will return again to their more contentious form. This can already be seen in the ongoing negotiations over the next EU budget, which is currently in a holding pattern due to significant disagreements over its size and function. Expect a lot more political fireworks within the EU in the coming years; the boost in public support for the EU following the Brexit mess will not last. ■



Pepijn Bergsen is a Research Fellow at Chatham House, where he works mainly on issues related to the European economy



AN AGE OF CHAOS?

Many of society's current ailments are symptoms, not causes. The root lies in rising inequality

by Michael Bang Petersen

🐦 @M_B_Petersen

“Some men just want to watch the world burn.” This quote is the culmination of an iconic monologue in the 2008 movie *The Dark Knight*. Here, Batman's butler, Alfred, illuminates the core motive of the supervillain, the Joker, who spends the film wreaking destruction and chaos. A little over a decade later, a new film about the Joker has hit box offices. Simply entitled *Joker*, the film seeks to explain how a craving for ‘burning it all down’ can emerge. Its most iconic scene, at least to me, is when the Joker asks a talk show host on live TV: “What do you get when you cross a mentally ill loner with a society that abandons him and treats him like trash?” And then shoots him.

Over the past few years, myself and two colleagues, Mathias Osmundsen from Aarhus University in Denmark and Kevin Arceneaux from Temple University in the US, have been trying to understand the desire to ‘watch the world burn’, how it can be measured scientifically, how it emerges and, most importantly, how it affects current politics. The *Joker* movie is chillingly accurate, not just in its portrayal of the dynamics that propel an individual towards this ‘need for chaos’ but also in its description of how widespread the need is. A key difference between the two films, *The Dark Knight* and *Joker*, is that in the first film our antihero is a one-of-a-kind figure. In the second, he is not. He is just one of many, and they are all completely fed up with society as it is.

A journey into darkness

Our research journey into the darkest corners of the political mind began by examining the circulation of conspiracy theories and other ‘fake news’ on social media. In 2016, the US presidential election and the UK Brexit referendum made it clear that some citizens were actively sharing stories on social media that painted highly negative pictures of political elites and were also, plainly, false.

A prominent example was the so-called ‘Pizzagate’ set of stories that were circulated in the lead-up to the US presidential election. This conspiracy theory argued that leaked emails from the Democratic Party contained evidence that leading Democrats were running a paedophilia ring from the basement of a pizza place, Comet Ping Pong, in Washington DC. The stories were widely shared and prompted a man, Edgar Welch, to drive from his home a couple of hours from Washington to Comet Ping Pong to investigate. Welch had brought his automatic rifle with him; he entered the restaurant and released a shot before the authorities were able to arrest him.

In our research, we were interested in understanding why people shared these conspiracy theories on social media. To this end, we conducted a number of surveys in the US and Denmark, thereby studying both a country with more and a country with less political polarisation. We presented participants with a series of political conspiracy theories that we had identified ▶

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“The root cause of the need for chaos is the clash between status aspirations and thwarted opportunities”

on extreme political forums from both ends of the spectrum: from the alt-right to Islamist forums and those of the Antifa. For each conspiracy theory, we asked our participants whether they were motivated to share the story on a social media platform.

We found that many people were not particularly motivated to share conspiracy theories. But, at the same time, there was a hardcore of people who were very eager to share, and they did not care whether the specific story impugned the left wing or the right wing. They were motivated to share them all. This group of promiscuous sharers were all highly engaged in politics. Yet, when we probed the characteristics of the group, they did not conform to the stereotypical picture of a partisan. They were not particularly likely to donate money to a cause or to follow a politician on social media. Instead, they scored high on measures of political activism that we had borrowed from the literature on radicalisation. They were willing to fight the police, participate in violent demonstrations and use threats to silence political opponents.

Our next step was to understand why these violent political activists were motivated to spread conspiracy theories. In another survey, we presented American participants with a list of conspiracy theories and asked them to pick the one they were most motivated to share. We then asked why they had picked this

particular story. Was it because they believed the story was the most accurate? Was it because this story was the most amusing? Or was it because the story was most likely to mobilise the audience against a group they despised? Violent political activists tended to say “no”, “yes” and “yes”. That is, these people disregarded truth and, instead, favoured stories that incited hatred; and they found these stories funny. This was when we began thinking about the Joker.

Who needs chaos?

Our goal became to measure this psychological syndrome directly. While super-destructive motivations like this had escaped the interest of social scientists, there were plenty of references to such a syndrome in popular culture. The Batman movies are one example, but an equally strong statement can be found in the book, and later film, *Fight Club*. Films like these became our starting point for formulating the questions that constituted our ‘need for chaos’ scale. The scale asked participants to agree or disagree with a series of rather extreme statements, such as “I think society should be burned to the ground” and “Sometimes I feel like destroying beautiful things” (the latter statement being based on a quote from *Fight Club*). With our measure, we marshalled a range of surveys in the US. We found that the need for

chaos – this ‘Joker syndrome’ – was not only measurable and highly stable over periods of several months, it was also the best explanatory factor we had seen of motivations to share conspiracy theories.

“Chaos isn’t a pit. Chaos is a ladder,” says Petyr Baelish in *Game of Thrones*, another pop culture phenomenon filled with chaos-seekers. What Baelish hints at is that those who stand to gain from tearing down the hierarchy are those who want to climb the hierarchy but cannot. Instead, as a strategy of last resort, they can try to destroy it all and hope that something better awaits in the aftermath. We found that people with a high need for chaos were also more lonely and saw themselves as lower in society’s hierarchy. In line with the Joker’s explanation from the beginning of this article, a need for chaos emerges when society ‘abandons you and treats you like trash’. But, as per the Joker’s explanation, there is also another component to the explanation: the personality of the individual. While the Joker argued that it takes “a mentally ill loner”, it would be wrong to equate mental illness with a need for chaos. Instead, our data shows that it takes someone who is obsessed with status. A need for chaos emerges when a personality that craves status is also experiencing social marginalisation.

Why we live in an age of chaos

Those who have a high need for chaos are a minority. But it is a sizeable minority. When we measured the need for chaos in a representative sample of Americans, we found that 30% did not reject the statement “I think society should be burned to the ground”. And 40% of the sample did not reject two other political statements from the chaos scale: “When I think about our political and social institutions, I cannot help thinking ‘just let them all burn’” and “We cannot fix the problems in our social institutions, we need to tear them down and start over.” These numbers are stunning.

In the US, the sociologist Zachary Neal has shown that polarisation in Congress is not a new phenomenon but has been on the rise since the early 1980s. Meanwhile, the Russian-American scientist and author Peter Turchin has documented a similar rise in a number of indicators of political instability in the US since the 1970s, including in incidents of politically motivated violence. Many of the current-day factors that preoccupy pundits, politicians and many social scientists – the circulation of ‘fake news’, polarised media environments, echo chambers on Facebook, populist politicians – are symptoms rather than root causes.

To understand the origins of the age of chaos, we need to look beneath the surface at the deep forces at work that are operating across western democracies. Turchin says that the most significant factor in this regard is rising inequality. According to the OECD, the richest 10% earn on average nine times more than the poorest 10% across OECD member countries, and this difference has increased in the past few decades.

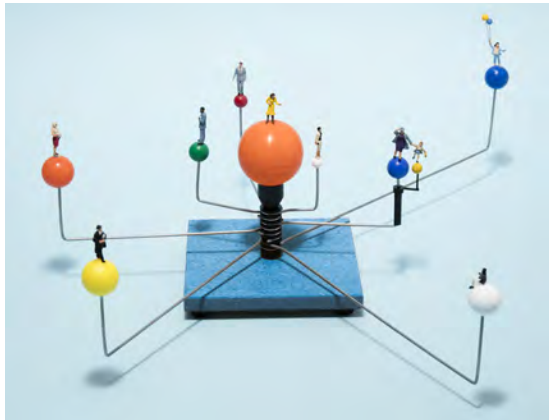
Inequality as a root cause fits our findings about the need for chaos perfectly. Inequality not only generates marginalisation but also fuels competition for status. Inequality stretches the status hierarchy, leaving fewer positions on each rung of the ladder. In this regard, it is important that our own research shows that individuals who have a strong need for chaos are not poor, but in fact report having an income that is higher than average. The age of chaos is not just the poor competing against the rich. Everyone is competing against everyone else.

Stemming the tide?

Because pundits and politicians – and many social scientists – are preoccupied with symptoms rather than root causes, their proposed solutions are also focused on symptoms. Related to the spread of ‘fake news’, for example, people call for more fact-checking. This assumes that the culprits actually care about truth; according to our findings, they do not. Instead, the root cause of the need for chaos is the clash between status aspirations and thwarted opportunities. To stem the tide of chaos in an enduring way, politicians need to address the latter component.

We can get inspiration about how to do so by examining how different countries are affected by chaotic motivations. Although we live in an age of chaos in western democracies in general, there is variation. According to the political economists Torben Iversen and David Soskice, two factors explain this variation. First, how much a given country is investing in public education. Second, how much the mainstream political system in a given country has embraced populist parties.

The essence of their findings is that educational investment generates opportunities for the marginalised and that the embrace of populist parties secures their political representation, in turn de-radicalising the parties and their constituencies. The issue, of course, is that in a polarised world the last thing many people want is to reach out to their chaos-mongering opponents. Yet, to do so in a way that takes their frustrations seriously and, at the same time, stands firm on democratic principles is the key challenge of our time for any mainstream politician. ■



NETWORK LEADERSHIP

We need to revisit how leaders – local, national and global – get things done

by Mike Peckham and Dr James Whitehead

🐦 @Myke_P

🐦 @PSATraining

In 1754, William Shipley, an artist and merchant, convened a group of 11 like-minded individuals at Rawthmells coffeehouse in London's Covent Garden. These passionate social reformers brought about the genesis of the RSA.

Our work with leaders across sectors has helped to identify Shipley as what is now known as a 'network leader', the likes of which we need more than ever. In the modern world, the challenges we face – from global warming to terrorism and inequality – flow through interlocking webs of connection and causation, leading to volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. Simultaneously, the power of networks is growing. In science, technology, health, environment and civil society, networks are becoming a way to uncover the hidden architecture of complexity and unlock people's capacity to think and act in different ways.

But, as the American lawyer and political scientist Anne-Marie Slaughter observes in her 2017 book, *The Chessboard and the Web*, we do not yet know how to handle this networked world at the strategic, operational or tactical level. The network provides a metaphor, not an analytical tool, and we need to understand how to connect for specific purposes.

So, what skills do network leaders need? First, they need to *understand social systems*; this helps identify the cliques, silos and gaps in connectivity, which can improve productivity and responsiveness, smooth channels of communication, and spur change and innovation. Through this understanding they acquire the ability to connect and energise a network around what they are trying to achieve.

Second, they need to have *convening power*. Network leaders know that they do not have all the

answers and therefore adopt a more expansive style of leadership. They recognise that the only way to prosper in turbulent times is to draw on a wide range of good ideas, no matter what the source. Third, they *lead beyond their formal and positional authority*. Leadership in a networked world is more about enabling than directing, more about influence than control and more indirect than direct. It is leadership understood first and foremost as a social process that creates direction, alignment and commitment.

Finally, they possess *the power of restless persuasion*. Network leaders have a clarity about what they want to achieve, have a positive energy that attracts people to them, and are unafraid to combine this and their connections to make things happen.

In today's world of networking and collaboration software, big data, analytics and AI, managers simply cannot continue to assume a static, hierarchical model of the firm for the convenience of seeing how to manage it. Traditional models of hierarchical leadership are no longer appropriate; they need to be replaced by those that see organisations as shared processes, and harness the social capital of formal and informal networks to get things done.

The people at that first meeting in Rawthmells were the network leaders of their time. Today, the network leaders among the RSA's global fellowship of 30,000 people need to reflect on how they use their skills in pursuit of making the world a better place. ■

— A longer version of this article can be found at RSA Comment: www.thersa.org/discover/publications-and-articles/rsa-comment

Mike Peckham is Managing Partner of Gadhia Consultants, Managing Director of PSA Training and Development, and Chairman of Airbox Systems

Dr James Whitehead is a Senior Consultant at PSA, having previously been a Learning Development Officer in the British Army

DEMOCRACY DAY IN THE TEES VALLEY

The RSA Tees Valley Network has kickstarted a year of encouraging democratic engagement among young people

by David Cresswell, Jon Elphick and Paul Ingram

🐦 @djwcresswell @elphick_jon @ingrampix



The RSA Tees Valley Network came together last summer, a group of Fellows united by a shared commitment to making a difference. Further inspired by Matthew Taylor's annual lecture on deliberative democracy, we wanted to take up the challenge of democratic participation, starting with local schools. We hoped to develop a mindset for democratic action among young people in our communities and to find a way for students to experience how ideas and thinking can change the world.

We successfully applied for an RSA Catalyst Seed Grant, and spent the best part of this year developing Democracy Day, which took place as part of National Democracy Week in October. Sixth-formers from schools across the region convened at Barnard Castle School. Experts inspired us with models of democracy new and old, and Fellows and teachers helped the students to create 90-second film manifestos for 21st century democracy. The winning video was compelling in the simplicity of its call to action: "The power is in your hands".

Democracy Day was the launchpad for a year-long programme of democratic action. Students are now working with Fellows to develop School Democracy Action Plans. In November, they will meet in Middlesbrough Council Chamber as the Tees Valley Sixth Form Democracy Council; in March, they will meet again and select who will represent the Council at an event in June at RSA House. We are meeting with RSA Scotland to explore the potential for similar activity there and responding to interest from RSA Academies.

It is much too soon to know if this Fellow-led action is able to have a lasting positive impact on

local democratic participation. But we feel we have successfully laid the foundations for a programme that could make a real difference for sixth forms across the north-east, the RSA Tees Valley Network and perhaps the RSA more widely.

The challenge now is to not let the buzz of the day fizzle out. We are helping students to create a manifesto for a new democracy, but also now realise we are in effect experimenting with a fresh manifesto for RSA engagement. The enduring challenge has been delivering something great with such a diverse group of volunteers. We have found it important to be patient and persuasive, and to remain focused on outcomes.

This programme simply would not have happened without the RSA. The diversity, enthusiasm and ambition of the Fellowship is inspiring and we have been stunned by the energy that is generated by a small group of people who simply would not take no for an answer. ■

David Cresswell is an MFL teacher and Deputy Head at Barnard Castle School. He is passionate about giving students a voice

Jon Elphick is a control systems engineer who has spent 20 years working in the rail industry, and supporting schools as a governor

Paul Ingram grew up with nothing on Teesside and has since worked in education, business, industry and the arts

Top tips

- Make sure you have enough Fellows on board with enough time between you to stay the course
- Keep listening to each other and have regular chats (we did this weekly on Zoom)
- Do not lose sight of your overall aim and do not get bogged down in other motivations or institutional concerns

Marriage



Wedded union is viewed as the pinnacle of self-expression but, as marriage rates decline, are we increasingly trying to find meaning elsewhere?

by Mandy Len Catron

🐦 @LenMandy

We are living in a strange moment in the history of the institution of marriage. Pro-marriage researchers point to declining marriage rates as a sign of impending social collapse. At the same time, a high-profile celebrity wedding can hijack the news cycle for days. Depending on who you ask, we are either obsessed with marriage or totally over it. But maybe there is something else going on.

Take, if you will, the weddings of the pop-rock trio the Jonas Brothers. Back in May, Joe Jonas and Sophie Turner made headlines when they got hitched at A Little White Wedding Chapel in Las Vegas. The 15-minute ceremony was officiated by an Elvis impersonator and followed by photos on a pink Cadillac. And, in true 21st century style, it was broadcast live on Instagram by the DJ Diplo.

Compare this to the wedding of Joe's younger brother Nick, who married actress Priyanka Chopra in not one, but two, massive ceremonies, one in North Carolina with his family and another in India with hers, both extensively documented in *People* magazine. The *New York Times* reported that, "When it comes to weddings, each Jonas brother has a style."

Such effusive wedding coverage may be the norm but it reflects a distinctively modern ideology of marriage. We have not always thought of weddings as a means of individual self-expression. My parents, for example, had a double wedding with my mother's sister and her fiancé. When the ceremony ended, they walked downstairs and cut the cake in the church basement. It makes for a sweet story but it was

ultimately a pragmatic choice: two weddings for the price of one.

These days, we want much more than pragmatism from our weddings, and the marriages that follow. Just as we view the modern wedding as a means of self-expression, the modern marriage is a means of becoming the best version of yourself. Here is someone who will talk politics over breakfast, share a subscription to the *New Yorker* and help pay off the rest of your student loans! Together, you will take up rock climbing and never forget to send flowers for your mother's birthday.

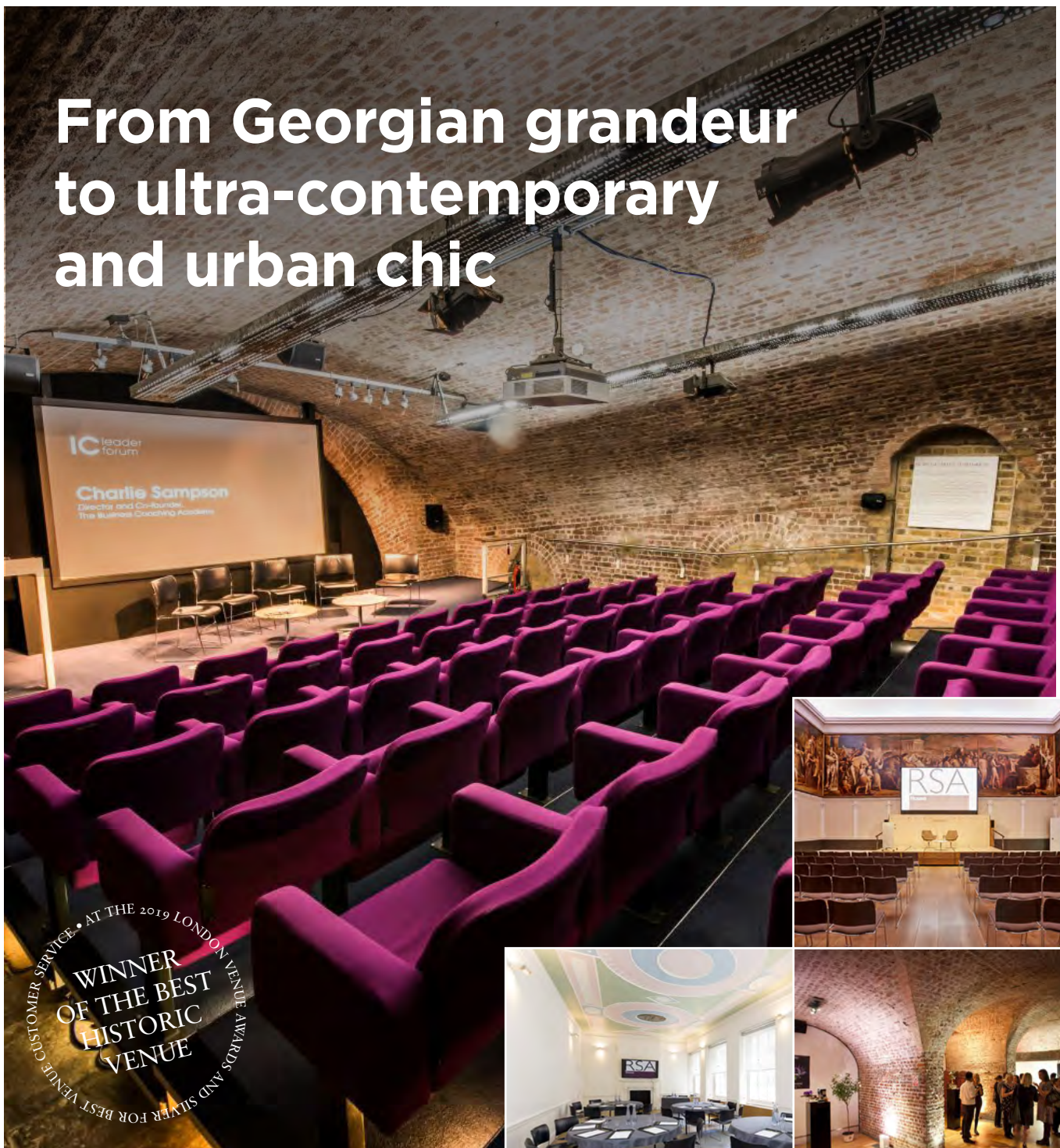
This version of marriage sounds good but it comes with a hidden cost. Psychologists and sociologists observe that, increasingly, we look to our marriages to meet almost all of our emotional, social and financial needs, needs we once expected an entire community to fulfil. But many people lack the time and energy required to achieve this kind of marriage. It is hard to schedule regular date nights when you are busy caring for children or working a second shift. It is hard to make time for self-actualisation when you are focused on making the rent. In truth, this modern marriage does not fit with how many of us live our lives.

Looked at this way, it seems declining marriage rates and our obsession with celebrity weddings are both intrinsically linked to our sky-high expectations for marriage.

The institution of marriage is not going away any time soon; but we should not be surprised that so many people are finding other ways to make a meaningful life. ■

Mandy Len Catron is an author and journalist. Her most recent book is *How to Fall in Love with Anyone*

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