

Chapter 3

Towards Cultural Homogenisation

[T]his mode of consciousness [inherent in digital technology] makes a virtue of ignoring the forms of intergenerational knowledge and skills essential to the world's diversity of cultural commons that enable people to live less consumer-driven lives. It also makes a virtue of being rootless; that is, not being long-term inhabitants of place.

C.A. Bowers

'Do you mean to tell me that you're thinking seriously of building that way, when and if you are an architect?'

'Yes'.

'My dear fellow, who will let you?'

'That's not the point. The point is, who will stop me?'

The Fountainhead – Ayn Rand

Is There Digital Diversity?

There is a dominant value system evident in how the internet is organised and operates, which leaves little room for other differencing or opposing cultural beliefs and world views. With so much of the tech sector headquartered in Silicon Valley, the principles and rules of the web as we know it are being set there in California and by their politicians and leaders in Washington. Smaller nations and non-Western societies receive scant attention on the English-language-dominated internet diminishing their relevance and cultural significance for many in the digital age. But the importance of culture for individuals and communities alike lies very much in our sense of place and the close association with our general ways of thinking and living in that place. The cultural values that many people inhibit

**The Social, Cultural and Environmental Costs of Hyper-Connectivity:
Sleeping Through the Revolution, 39–54**



Copyright © 2021 by Mike Hynes. Published by Emerald Publishing Limited.

This work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence.

Anyone may reproduce, distribute, translate and create derivative works of this work (for both commercial and non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors. The full terms of this licence may be seen at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>

doi:[10.1108/978-1-83909-976-220211003](https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-83909-976-220211003)

form the basic principles of an individual's life, and in this way, culture has a significant effect on our personal and collective social lives and well-being. In this chapter, we will pose the following question: is modern digital information and communication (ICT) technology facilitating and promoting a singular dominant US-centric world view and way of understanding humanity and our effects on the planet, to the detriment of other cultures, values and norms that we may truly fail to understand and appreciate? And what have we lost, or are beginning to lose, from our own existing global cultural value set and what does this mean for all of us in the long term? A universal cultural homogenisation is already sweeping the world, dominated by United States and Western values systems and lifestyles, driven by a consumer-based, free market ideology and supported and promoted by the massive digital entertainment-industrial complex. Driven by digitalisation, a global monoculture may be about to permeate every corner of the planet, but what does that mean for existing offline cultures, societies and communities?

According to the Internet World Stats, the penetration rate of world internet usage stood at 59 per cent in the first quarter of 2020.¹ However, with an access and connection rate of just over 39 per cent in Africa and 55 per cent in Asia, there is incredible potential for expansion over the coming years and decades, allowing a particular digital culture to spread and seep into parts of the world that have, heretofore, remained insulated from such cultural assault. Digital ICT will play an important and critical role in the development of many countries in the global south in the coming decades but driven by what set of values, by whom and at what expense to their cultural survival? Homogenisation is understood to be the process of exchange of elements and the mixing of different cultures to propagate into one, and US-centric big media and technology are now seen to be playing a much bigger and domineering role in this process. The ascendancy of Hollywood, the vast reach of the US music industry, the extraordinary global coverage of the recent US elections and the presidency of Donald Trump are examples of this dominance in practice. Contemporary digital online culture is largely organised and driven by just a few US Western corporations and individuals who have seized control and been given carte blanche to promote and legitimise their own personal world view and free market values without any possibility of regulation or due oversight. These all-powerful companies and individuals are directly influencing the transformation and destruction of cultures, imposing and establishing a planetary cultural homogenisation that consolidates in a society where digital ICT and Western, white, male values dominant. For those of us interested in learning from other cultures and the different ways our own culture is exhibited – rather than simply through an online screen – and the value we place on artistic endeavour and general creativity in our lives, these are troubling shifts and we have important questions to ask before it's too late to turn back the clock and protect what may be lost forever sometime in the very near future.

¹World internet users and 2020 population stats. (2020). *Internet World Stats*, March 3. Retrieved from <https://internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>

The Rise of European Culture

Since the dawn of human civilisation Asia, South America and Africa have had significant cultural, economic and technological impacts on the world. There have been some exceptions, most notably Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire, but Europe, in general, lagged many of these civilisations for centuries. But the European colonial period from the fifteenth century saw colossal shifts towards that continent in terms of global power and influence. Historian Philip Hoffman estimated that by 1800, just before the Industrial Revolution, European countries had conquered and already controlled at least 35 per cent of the globe, and by 1914, they had gained control of 84 per cent.² What became commonly known as the First Industrial Revolution³; the subsequent era ushered in a rapid transition to new and formidable manufacturing processes in Europe and the United States and also led to an unprecedented rise in the population of these countries and regions.⁴ It also marked a major turning point in human history with almost every aspect of daily life being affected or influenced in some way. One of the major outcomes of the Industrial Revolution was that the standard of living for the general population in the Western world began to increase steadily for the first time. This period in human history saw a considerable increase in material wealth for some individuals in Europe and the United States; a restructuring of large parts of society; and the creation important new schools of thinking and philosophy about work, life, governance and power. The social and cultural impacts of industrialisation were profound as people began to work outside of the local immediate environs of their homes and villages for the first time. They rose each morning by the clock and travelled to their place of employment and work, often in a factory setting in a town or city that also began growing exponentially. The new technology and machinery of the Industrial Revolution was very large and sometimes required acres of floor space to hold the numbers needed to keep up with consumer demand and facilitate large numbers of workers, all of which led to urbanisation on a mass scale. With such increase in material wealth in the West came increasing life longevity and an acceleration in the growth of the middle class. It helped to create a modern and progressive world view that through the fruitful use of science and technology, a better quality of life could be achieved by everyone who worked towards a common goal.

Western culture sometimes equates to Western civilisation, Western lifestyle and values, or European civilisation. It is a term used broadly to refer to a heritage of social norms, ethical values, traditional customs, belief systems, political systems and specific artefacts and technologies that have origins or associations with Europe, in particular. In this way, Western culture is the set of literary, scientific, musical and philosophical principles which set it apart from other great civilisations of the world. Western culture has come to be applied to other countries

²Hoffman (2015).

³The manufacture of steel is often cited as the first of several new areas for industrial mass-production, which are said to characterise a Second Industrial Revolution.

⁴Hobsbawm (2010).

whose history is strongly marked by European immigration, such as the countries of the Americas and Australasia, and thus is not restricted solely to the actual continent or location of Europe. Historical records of Western culture in Europe began with Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome, which were characterised by a host of artistic, philosophic, literary and legal themes and traditions. The heritage of Germanic, Jewish, Celtic, Hellenic, Slavic, Latin and other ethnic and linguistic groups, as well as Christianity, all played an important part in the shaping of Western civilisation since at least the fourth century. Western culture is also a pretty fluid and loose term because it encompasses some of the central characteristics of democracy, rational thinking, individualism, Christianity, Capitalism, modern technology, human rights and scientific thinking. This was a specific and important feature of the Western world: a focus on science and technology and its ability to generate new processes, materials and material artefacts. The millennium between the end of the Roman Empire in the fifth century and the beginning of the colonial expansion of Western Europe in the late fifteenth century became known as the Middle Ages, and the first half of this period consists of the five centuries of the Dark Ages. Few records exist of this period, and it is often difficult to explain how particular innovations were introduced to many parts of Western Europe during this time. The problem is especially challenging because it is known that many inventions of this period had been developed independently and previously in other civilisations, and it is sometimes difficult, if not impossible, to determine whether something is a spontaneous innovation or an invention that had been transported by some as yet undiscovered route from other societies or regions of the world.⁵ There is little doubt that in its early centuries, at least, Western civilisation regularly looked to the East for many of its ideas and inspirations, and the trajectory of technological development would be slow without such influence. The West had previously suffered invasions from Africa, Asia and non-Western parts of Europe for many centuries. But by the 1500s, Europeans took advantage of adopting and developing new technology innovations in energy and construction, some gleamed for other cultures, to sail and adventure to uncharted waters and lands. They expanded their power and the Age of Discovery began, with Western explorers from seafaring nations like Spain and Portugal, and later France, Holland and England, setting out to chart faraway shipping routes and discover 'new worlds'. What was particularly novel about this age was the linking up through maritime exploration of the oceans of the world into a single system of navigation, and the ways in which this mastery of the sea became the basis for the eventual extension of European influence into almost every inhabited and uninhabited continent of the world.⁶ As these Western powers expanded, they also began to compete for newly discovered and conquered land and resources, and writers and thinkers as diverse as Adam Smith, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels saw these discoveries of the Americas and other continents as among the principle

⁵From the Middle Ages to 1750. (2020). *Britannica*. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/technology/history-of-technology/From-the-Middle-Ages-to-1750>

⁶Arnold (2002).

events in history and laying the foundations, economically and politically, for the modern world. Yet, in most parts of the world, these European explorers arrived to find not just lands that were new to them but also complex and long-established thriving cultures, traditions and societies very different from their own.⁷

The years following Britain's victory in the Napoleonic Wars was a period of great expansion for both that country and its former American colonies, which now went to make up the United States. This period of growth would help establish English as the dominant language, and a liberal ideology and British and Anglo-American culture as the dominant one on two continents and many other lands outside the British Isles.⁸ The British went on to colonise and govern roughly a quarter of the world's population, covering about the same proportion of the earth's surface and dominating its oceans, and this empire is the most commonly cited precedent for the global power now wielded by the United States.⁹ In many ways, over time, the centre of world power merely shifted from London to New York and Washington. With the transition to new manufacturing processes, a shift from hand production to machine, changes in energy use, socio-economics and culture, all heralded the Industrial Revolution in Europe and the United States. Average income and the population began to exhibit unprecedented and sustained growth signalling the emergence of many modern capitalist economies. The identifiable changes in the methods and characteristics of economic organisation included the widespread and systematic application of modern science and empirical knowledge to the process of production for the market; specialisation of economic activity directed towards production for national and international markets; the shift from rural to urban communities; the enlargement and depersonalisation of the typical unit of production to that of corporate or public enterprise; movement of labour to the production of goods and services; intensive and extensive use of capital resources as a substitute for and complement to human effort; and the emergence of new social and occupational classes determined by ownership of, or relationship to, the means of production other than land, namely capital.¹⁰ These features – economically, socially and politically – largely continued to define the capitalist economic system that still exists in most nations and states of the West. Despite two devastating world wars, the West as an economic juggernaut continued to lead globally, and as countries emerged from the second of these international conflicts, America now assumed a dominance that was to push them to the forefront economically and culturally for the subsequent decades and up to the present day.

The United States and Big Tech Takes the Reigns

Americanisation is defined as the influence American culture and economics has on other countries and regions outside the United States and includes areas such

⁷Arnold (2002, p. 2).

⁸Darwin (2009).

⁹Ferguson (2008).

¹⁰Deane (1979, pp. 1-2).

as media, cuisine, business practices, popular culture, technology and political approaches and techniques. This cultural, political and economic influence of the United States played an important role in the reshaping of modern Europe after the Second World War. In media and popular culture, Hollywood and the US television industry have proven extremely popular worldwide with many of the highest grossing movies over the recent past in many countries being US productions. American popular music has, likewise, had a significant international appeal and reach. Debates about Americanisation and cultural imperialism point towards a widespread anxiety about the over-influence that the United States has on the cultures and traditions of other countries, where a dominant American culture is also seen to challenge and erode ‘authentic’ local cultures.

Although there is no precise definition, the term ‘cultural imperialism’ appears to capture the idea that political and economic power is being used to ‘exalt and spread the values of a foreign culture at the expense of the native culture’.¹¹ There is little doubt that American-dominated mass media are constantly and quickly evolving and expanding in terms of technical power and penetration, coverage and representation of both public and private life in the West and beyond. To this extent, it is tempting to view the media as the central cultural reference point of modern Western capitalism. If this is so, then cultural imperialism ought to be seen as centring on media in two ways; either as the dominance of one culture’s media – text and practices – over another or as the global spread of mass-mediated culture as such.¹² While these two elements may have different dimensions of implication both involve the media as at the crux of modern culture. Into this sphere of influence and thinking steps the global digital tech giants, who now possess an extraordinary worldwide reach and appeal. In particular, there is growing concern about Americanisation and cultural imperialism brought about by the likes of Google, Facebook, Twitter and Amazon, among other American and Western-based tech media industry companies and organisations. Even in other English-language countries, there is a fight for relevance and meaning on the web and as expressed by Helen Lewis in *The Atlantic*:

sharing the internet with America is like sharing your living room with a rhinoceros. It’s huge, it’s right there, and whatever it’s doing now, you sure as hell know about it.¹³

Yet the argument prevails; are these US-based tech behemoths mass-influencing media companies or simple value-neutral tech platforms?

Writing in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Mathew Ingram has no doubt that Facebook has stopped being an innocuous online social network platform to now

¹¹Tomlinson (2012, p. 3).

¹²Tomlinson (2012, p. 22).

¹³Lewis, H. (2020). The world is trapped in America’s culture war. *The Atlantic*, October 27. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/10/internet-world-trapped-americas-culture-war/616799/>

being one of the most powerful forces in global media with more than 2 billion users and an increasing grip on the advertising revenue that formally underpinned most of the traditional media outlets.¹⁴ Facebook's relationship with traditional media has been a classic Faustian bargain, Ingram suggests. News outlets want to reach all these billions of users, so they put as much of their content as they can onto the Facebook platform and associated network. Some of them are then favoured by the company's all-powerful, and completely mysterious, algorithms giving them access to a wider audience to pitch for subscriptions or the derisory advertising revenue they receive from the platform itself. But Facebook also continues to move the goalposts when it comes to how their News Feed algorithms work, of course to their own advantage. Meanwhile, as advertising continues to decline as a source of revenue for traditional media because of the rise and business model and strategies of the likes of Facebook, media organisations are having to rely increasingly on subscriptions, but the readers they want to reach are all on Facebook consuming this content they have already created for free.

Indeed, how Facebook organises and distributes this, and other news content, is also highly contentious and problematic. In addition to more reputable traditional media outlets, other more dubious and sometimes malicious websites and portals are aggregated together to inform its daily newsfeed. The platform is designed in such a way as to encourage 'confirmation bias', which is the human desire to believe things that confirm our prevailing beliefs, even if they are untrue. When experiencing confirmation bias, individuals tend to unconsciously select information that supports their views while also ignoring non-supportive information. There is further tendency to interpret ambiguous evidence as supporting the individual's existing understandings. Facebook's newsfeed is, thus, designed to simply optimise engagement, and it does not matter whether the content is fact or fiction:

While Facebook has become enormously influential as a distributor of news, that sway hasn't come without pain. In the past decade, the company has been criticized for helping to spread scams, hoaxes, and fake news, all while becoming one of the biggest media companies on the planet.¹⁵

That Facebook and Google are such significant players in the contemporary news media landscape is also an extremely worrisome issue with respect to moves towards a singular monoculture largely based on Western ideals. These megacorporations are based on the world views, thinking and values of just a handful of

¹⁴Ingram, M. (2018). The Facebook Armageddon. *Columbia Journalism Review*, Winter. Retrieved from https://www.cjr.org/special_report/facebook-media-buzzfeed.php

¹⁵Ingram, M. (2018). The Facebook Armageddon. *Columbia Journalism Review*, Winter. Retrieved from https://www.cjr.org/special_report/facebook-media-buzzfeed.php

individuals operating with almost impunity. While their influence and reach in developed societies is of immense concern, resistance to such global power and influence may well be less in countries struggling against the economic and cultural might of the United States and other Western countries. For people living and working in the United States, Europe and other relatively prosperous regions of the world, access to the internet is a given. Even if an individual cannot afford a private, subscription-based fixed or mobile account, Wi-Fi hotspots offering free internet access are relatively ubiquitous in public squares, restaurants, cafes and coffee shops, public libraries and even on many forms of public transport, which lets everyone with a smartphone, tablet or laptop access the network. But many areas of the developing world – such as Africa, South Asia and South America – have sparse and poor network infrastructure and connectivity and thus limited access. As the world submitted to the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic in the first half of 2020, access inequalities were exposed as the World Economic Forum reported that almost half of the world's population – fewer than one in five people in the least developed countries – had no internet access at all.¹⁶ While access will, without doubt, have the potential to greatly enhance the everyday lives of many people in the developing world, the central questions must continue to be: on what and who's terms should access be provided?

Around 2014, Mark Zuckerberg launched Internet.org, a significant endeavour to connect everyone in the world to the internet. In an address to the United Nations' General Assembly, Zuckerberg made the case that the internet should be considered – like health care or clean water – a basic human right.¹⁷ As Board Chair, Chief Executive and the majority vote on Facebook's board, he can compel his own organisation to support him, and there are elements of altruism but also opportunity in what he told *Wired* magazine:

There's no way we can draw a plan about why we're going to invest billions of dollars in getting mostly poor people online. But at some level, we believe this is what we're here to do, and we think it's going to be good, and if we do it, some of that value will come back to us.¹⁸

But in this visionary zeal lies some crucial questions of understanding and equality. Many of these countries and regions require basic fundamental

¹⁶Broom, D. (2020). Coronavirus has exposed the digital divide like never before. *World Economic Forum*, April 22. Retrieved from <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic-digital-divide-internet-data-broadband-mobbile/>

¹⁷Hampel, J. (2016). Inside Facebook's ambitious Olan to connect the whole world. *Wired*, January 19. Retrieved from <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic-digital-divide-internet-data-broadband-mobbile/>

¹⁸Hampel, J. (2016). Inside Facebook's ambitious Olan to connect the whole world. *Wired*, January 19. Retrieved from <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic-digital-divide-internet-data-broadband-mobbile/>

health care, food, clean water, housing, peace and security before they can fully appreciate, embrace and enjoy the services offered by Facebook, Google, Amazon and other tech services on the internet. In fact, basic electricity is required as a fundamental human right before access and connectivity to the World Wide Web. More fundamentally, while Mark Zuckerberg may be well intentioned, is it his role to lead and drive the development of internet connectivity while disregarding what these societies wish for their own futures? Such futures almost definitely will include widespread network connectivity and internet access, but ownership and control over such vital backbone infrastructure must reside with the states and regions which it serves. The libertarian tendencies of many in the tech sector would leave ownership in the hands of the few, with strong Western values and propensities, which might initially find fertile ground but may well be harmful in the long term to many societies and cultures currently not driven by consumerism and free market values. There is a presumption in such a position that a homogeneous digital network experience is both fitting and desirable for everyone on the planet, a network run by the digital elite in Silicon Valley with little room for more authentic voices in the regions it will serve. There is evidence, for example, that African entrepreneurs are experiencing humiliation, discrimination, stereotyping and sometimes racism in their interactions with some of the world's most prominent tech investors.¹⁹ Global investment funds such as Goldman Sachs, Stanford University, Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, Andreessen Horowitz and Sequoia Capital have all invested more frequently in African start-ups with white founders involved than they have invested in firms led exclusively by black Africans. Of the top 10 African-based start-ups that received the highest amount of venture capital in Africa last year, eight were led by foreigners.²⁰ If we are to learn from the lessons of the past, then we will see this as a refined form of digital (re)colonisation of regions of the world, and the imposition of a Western viewpoint over other local and more sustainable cultures and value systems. The lasting implications of this 'digital colonialism' may be subtle but no less harmful to many highly organised communities in the developing world.

What Digital Wants Digital Gets

In his thoughtful book *The False Promise of the Digital Revolution*, C.A. Bowers discusses the connection between digital technologies and the growing dominance of abstract thinking put forward by Western philosophers, economic and social theorists, politicians and mass media personalities.²¹ He suggests that

¹⁹Madowo, L. (2020). Silicon Valley has deep pockets for African startups - if you're not African. *The Guardian*, July 17. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/jul/17/african-businesses-black-entrepreneurs-us-investors>

²⁰Madowo, L. (2020). Silicon Valley has deep pockets for African startups - if you're not African. *The Guardian*, July 17. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/jul/17/african-businesses-black-entrepreneurs-us-investors>

²¹Bowers (2014).

cultural commons are being undermined as more and more young people, in particular, come to rely upon texting, cell phones and computers; all of which reinforce abstract thinking over a reliance upon their senses and face-to-face communications that are the pathways of more grounded and complex information about relationships:

The media, including the thousands of images that equate consumerism with success, social status, and personal happiness, are a constant source of indoctrination. The reality of media construct is not based on the lives of real people but on an ideologically driven model of how purchasing certain products will transform people's lives. Face-to-face communication between people whose images have not been digitally enhanced does not always lead to smiles and the overcoming of personal problems, but is part of the cultural ecology that may include sources of injustice, efforts to reach out to others, addressing hunger and a sense of hopelessness, and a constant struggle to attain a personal goal. Like an ecology of weeds or flowers, the cultural ecologies are varied in their complexity, and ongoing in their development.²²

While pointing to the dominance of a Western value system in the digital online world, Bowers also seeks to explore other ways non-Western cultures are being threatened by a rush to embrace a single culture of the internet and a data, individualistic, consumer-dependent lifestyle. Digitalisation is reliant on print and other such systems of abstract representation, which continues to reinforce the Western form of autonomous individualism. But identity forming narratives and daily social interactions, as well as senses that are more attuned to what is being communicated through relationships, cannot be easily digitised. The high-status forms of understanding, and the ideology underlying scientific knowledge, present in the development of these new digital technologies lead to viewing cultural traditions as constraints that need to be overcome rather than embraced and in some cases outright hostility towards traditional forms of knowledge and cultural practices. For members of traditional and oral-centred cultures, the use of digital technologies is a constant reminder of their cultural amplification and reduction characteristics.²³ The dominant value underpinning digital technological innovation is one of increasing profits to advance the Western idea of progress, with little need for elder knowledge, for wisdom keepers or any understanding of the scared. Success in the digital world is measured in monetary terms, with its wholesome embrace of market liberalism and libertarianism, and all things, personal achievements and activities are valued in that way. The Western emphasis on personal ownership also contributes to the rising tensions between those who live a consumer-dependent lifestyle and those who carry forward more

²²Bowers (2014, p. 4).

²³Bowers (2014, p. 79).

community-centred values and sense of identity.²⁴ While we must remain vigilant about the effects and spread of digital ICT on other more sustainable cultures, digitisation is also having some profound impacts on the creative arts we know and enjoy in our own societies here in the West.

The work of artistic and original endeavour and expression has become commodified and degraded by abuses legitimised by digitisation, and value shifts from the content generating artist to big tech online platforms is leading to diminishing cultural creativity and imagination, even for Western societies. To be a young musician, filmmaker or journalist today is to seriously contemplate the prospect of entering a profession that the digital age has eroded, and continues to erode, beyond recognition.²⁵ The rise of digital oligopolies can be directly connected to the fall of the creative industries and the precipitous decline in revenue paid to content creators. This has nothing to do with the idea that people are reading less, listening to music less or watching movies and TV shows less frequently; all indication would suggest we are doing more of all these things. However, the value attached to such creative content, which once went to the writers, musicians, filmmakers and artists, is now sucked up by giant online digital platforms that pay pittance, if anything at all, to the people who generate and create the content. One of Google's guiding principles, for example, is to organise the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful to everyone. But this does not necessarily mean that they need or will ask permission from the content creators to use the results of that person's enterprise and creativity. In fact, they have been very deceitful about this and cunningly have somehow managed to make it the responsibility of the actual content owner to police these big tech platforms for copyright infringements. To this, we add the diminishing value of such content as mega-online corporations such as Amazon relentlessly drives down the price paid to artists and writers for their work:

More people than ever are listening to music, reading books, and watching movies, but the revenue flowing to creators of that content is decreasing while revenue flowing to the big four platforms is increasing. Each of these platforms presents a different challenge for creators. Google and YouTube are ad-supported 'free-riders' driven by permissionless philosophy. Facebook, with its libertarian financier's roots, takes much of the same stance towards content and advertising, but there are signs that its CEO has some real ethical questions about where the company is going. Amazon, whose founder, Jeff Bezos, embraces the libertarian creed but has not taken the 'don't ask permission' route, has instead opened a new front: a relentless push to lower prices and commoditize content (especially books), which presents a different danger.²⁶

²⁴Bowers (2014, p. 80).

²⁵Taplin (2017).

²⁶Taplin (2017, p. 103).

Taplin writes from experience. He was a former tour manager for Bob Dylan and the Band, as well as a film producer for Martin Scorsese and a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. He has witnessed the destruction of large swaths of the music and creative industries, largely based on US anti-trust laws that view the regulators role as one only concerned with whether costs to consumers are falling, a type of customer welfare focus. In this environment, monopolies not only form, they thrive. But vitality, originality and innovation need diversity, support, investment and an appreciation of what it takes to produce artistic and creative work. Without the space and time to create, and the financial wherewithal to support themselves and their families, prospective artists and content creators will continue to take other pathways in life, and we will be left facing into a more musical and artistic homogenised future. One of the tenets of digital economics is: given that price equals marginal cost, with information goods, the social and marginal cost of distribution is close to zero. Marginal cost, in this instance, means the cost of producing one unit of a good – perhaps a song – but once that song is on a Spotify server, for example, the cost of selling one more stream is zero.²⁷ Taplin argues that nowhere does the fixed cost to produce specific music of high quality, produce a really good video, an enjoyable book or game, get factored into this actual equation. Then how are musicians, journalists, authors and filmmakers going to survive in this zero-marginal-cost economy? Some, of course, will survive and thrive as they adapt to this consumer-driven economic model – normally the most popular and dominant with universal appeal – but the young fledgling writer, artist, musician or band producing innovative and imaginative content have little to look forward to. Andrew Keen echoed such concerns when he wrote; ‘old media is facing extinction, but what will take its place?’²⁸

Keen was deeply embedded in the early internet ‘gold rush’ setting up one of the original digital music websites, but after listening to fellow campers at a 2004 two-day event in Northern California, not far from Silicon Valley, he left that event a sceptic. He was most troubled that his dream of making the world a more musical place and the promise of using digital technology to bring more culture to the masses was being drowned out by conversations and the collective cry for a democratised media:

Media, information, knowledge, content, audience, author – all were going to be *democratized* by Web 2.0. The Internet would *democratize* Big Media, Big Business, Big Government. It would even *democratize* Big Experts, transforming them into what one friend of O’Reilly called, in a hushed, reverent tone, ‘noble amateurs’.²⁹

He argued that the free user-generated content produced by the Web 2.0 generation was decimating the ranks of our ‘cultural gatekeepers’ as professional critics,

²⁷Taplin (2017, p. 249).

²⁸Keen (2007).

²⁹Keen (2007, p. 14).

musicians, artists, filmmakers, journalists and other outlets of expert information were been replaced by amateur bloggers, hack reviewers, homespun filmmakers and bedroom recording artists.³⁰ These radical new business models, based purely on user-generated material, were sucking the economic value and lifeblood out of traditional media and cultural content. The real consequences of this empty promise of the democratised media, he maintains, is less culture, less reliable news and a chaos and avalanche of useless and trivial information and content.

Artistic content from previous generations and that created outside this digitised world is also being increasingly misappropriated online to the extent that the idea of original authorship and copyright has now been utterly compromised and such rights are now rapidly diminishing. In a 2019 report on the key challenges, collective insight and possible futures for the music industry conducted on behalf of The Creative Independent, the vast majority of musicians sampled professed that they cannot earn a living wage through music-related work.³¹ When asked which sectors of the music industry most in need of change, by far the largest percentage of industry professionals – 61 per cent – singled out streaming platforms. It was maintained that the unfairness inherent in streaming services' payment models and content curation perpetuates unfairness overall and creates a negative ripple effect across the entire industry. And the music now available on streaming platforms is effectively endless; when you get to the end of an album, the music keeps on going. The songs that follow are the result of a complex set of algorithms that takes what the streaming platform knows about you and your peers and turns this into recommended songs, but how recommendation algorithms work is an unclear process to the artist and general public.³² Such algorithms benefit platforms in maximising income from streaming, but they are a blunt instrument in a creative industry with emerging talent regularly losing out. A further issue with automated recommendations like these is that it takes away some of the humanity and chance moments of discovery and can influence what we listen to in unforeseen ways. Writing in the *MIT Technology Review*, musician, record producer, artist, actor, writer, music theorist and filmmaker David Byrne argues that recent digital technologies and innovation has been creating the possibility of a world with much less human interaction than heretofore.³³ The effects of minimising human interaction would tend to lead to less tolerance and understanding of difference, as well as more envy and antagonism. Digital online platforms are feeding us the same similar content that our friends and

³⁰Keen (2007, p. 16).

³¹Music industry investigation report. (2019). *The Creative Independent*, October. Retrieved from <https://thecreativeindependent.com/music-industry-report/>

³²Vox Creative. (2019). Man-made machine music. *The Verge*, September 23. Retrieved from <https://www.theverge.com/ad/20880077/fairness-for-musicians-artists-music-streaming-algorithms>

³³Byrne, D. (2017). Eliminating the human by. *MIT Technology Review*, August 15. Retrieved from <https://www.technologyreview.com/2017/08/15/149854/eliminating-the-human/>

family like – or, more importantly, paid for content designed to influence our behaviour – and while these technologies claim to connect us more, in fact the unintended consequences is that they also drive us apart from everyone else. Byrne argues that less human interaction enables us to forget how to cooperate and reduces those random, serendipitous moments of meeting and connecting and discovery: we are social species and we benefit from passing discoveries on and from our tendency to cooperate to achieve what we cannot alone.

Towards Musical Homogenisation

Of course, there are some who will point to increased revenue and argue that the music business is still very much alive, healthy and prospering in the digital age. But that is just the point; it's now merely a business dominated by a digital free market ideology and in the promotion of what sells best is largely still controlled by major record labels. Most of the streaming revenue ends up in the coffers of these music industry gatekeepers rather than the artists.³⁴ Convergence and the digitisation of music has radically changed the way we access, consume and listen to music, which in turn has led to the development of new business models based on music purely as a profit-making venture. The art of creating music based on iteration, experimentation and creativity is rapidly being replaced by standardised, formatted-for-profit music that follows a set pattern and design to 'success'. Music has become more and more dominated by styles or genres that sell, which works to suck the lifeblood out of diverse music creation. The energy, anger, dynamism of the punk era or the vogue, eccentricity of the electro music of the 1980s and 1990s is no longer possible in a standardised music business format. Simon Cowell and the democratisation of music epitomised by shows like X-Factor and America's Got Talent have seen to that. Because record sales can no longer support the artists – digitisation has seen to that – bands and musicians must tour to make a living in an ever-decreasing circle of music venues.³⁵ During the Covid-19 pandemic, even that revenue stream dried up. Of course, artist can upload their music to YouTube, Facebook and a host of streaming platforms – and they are actively encouraged to do so – but in effect, they are shifting the value and control over what they themselves have created to these mega-online streaming platforms.

³⁴According to a report by industry news outlet *Music Business Worldwide*, the three major music labels made \$6.93 billion combined from streaming in 2018. Broken down even further, the trio of labels generate nearly \$800,000 per hour just from music streaming services alone: see <https://www.musicbusinessworldwide.com/the-major-labels-generated-over-1-5bn-more-from-streaming-in-2018-than-they-did-in-the-previous-year/>.

³⁵For example, the UK's first live music census in 2018 found that a third of Britain's small venues outside of London were fighting to survive in the face of high business rates and noise restrictions. Measures put in place worldwide in early 2020 to slow the spread of the Covid-19 coronavirus brought the entire live music industry to a standstill.

Concerns over music streaming economies have been simmering for some time, and as the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic ravaged the music industry, platforms like Spotify began cutting royalty rates for songs in exchange for an algorithm boost.³⁶ This prompted the ire of musicians who have been protesting against the streaming service's payment rates to artists for some time.³⁷ Democratization of the music industry also opens the possibility of everyone, regardless of talent, becoming part of this new music business model. Anyone can now create a song track, and there are numerous digital platforms that will happily take your money to distribute that track, even if you are not that good. Such music is then made available online for anyone who wishes to pay the few cents to download or stream it. However, in most cases, music is quickly copied and illegally made available for free on big tech social media and audio- and video-sharing platforms. Digital piracy and illegal file-sharing have become the economic reality of the creativity industries in the digital age.³⁸ Many of these artistic endeavours have been demonetised, and as Andrew Keen suggests, the online Web 2.0 ideology of 'the cult of the amateur' has led to a deluge of often substandard content that threatens our values, economy and ultimately innovation and creativity itself and can drown out the voices and endeavours of the real creativity in a vast sea of mediocrity and insignificance.³⁹

Digital ICT has been widely celebrated for its disruptive capacities in the twenty-first century, but debates over the levels of such disruption or, indeed, if such disruption is either necessary or warranted have never truly happened. Instead, the digital tech sector and the industry's mass media cheerleaders have pushed a technological determinist agenda that acclaims novelty, amateurism and disruption and embraces an existing consumerist mindset that devalues other ways of viewing and interpreting the world around us. It is essential we appreciate that many different perspectives exist and that learning to understand the world from many different points of view enhances our overall knowledge and cognitive skills. The following chapter will develop this theme and explore some of the challenges posed to our essential cognitive abilities and mental well-being.

³⁶Jean, E. (2020). Streaming platforms aren't helping musicians - and things are only getting worse. *The Guardian*, November 13. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2020/nov/14/streaming-platforms-arent-helping-musicians-and-things-are-only-getting-worse>

³⁷The Union of Musicians and Allied Workers (UMAW) recently pointed out through its *Justice at Spotify* campaign - which has been signed by over 16,000 artists - that the current average streaming royalty is just \$0.0038, a rate that severely diminishes musician's ability to make a living from music: see <https://www.unionofmusicians.org/justice-at-spotify>.

³⁸In a study by LaunchLeap, 93% of millennials do not feel guilty about illegally downloaded or streamed content. This then begs the question: if people are comfortable with accessing illegal streams and content for free and without consequence, then how will they ever go back to being paying subscribers? The short answer is most probably they never will.

³⁹Keen (2007).

Our contemporary globalised world must be an amalgamation of different cultures and perspectives which go together to make up the diversity that enhances our very existence. Diversity teaches us to accept the differences we see in people and exposes us to elements that enrich our lives, something that is not possible in a homogenised world. The digital tech and mass media sectors frequently articulate and promote a singular world view mostly emanating from the United States and American-leaning countries and we are losing out on other important perspective that can enrich our lives. Unconsidered and thoughtless disruption for its own, the sake can end up being extremely damaging in the long run and an abdication of responsibility and leadership.

References

- Arnold, D. (2002). *The age of discovery, 1400–1600* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Bowers, C. A. (2014). *The false promises of the digital revolution: How computers transform education, work, and international development in ways that are ecologically unsustainable*. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Darwin, J. (2009). *The empire project: The rise and fall of the British world-system, 1830–1970*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Deane, P. M. (1979). *The first industrial revolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ferguson, N. (2008). *Empire: The rise and demise of the British world order and the lessons for global power*. New York, NY: Basic books.
- Hobsbawm, E. (2010). *The age of revolution: 1789–1848*. London: Phoenix Press.
- Hoffman, P. T. (2015). *Why did Europe conquer the world?* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Keen, A. (2007). *The cult of the amateur: How today's internet is killing our culture*. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.
- Taplin, J. (2017). *Move fast and break things: How Facebook, Google, and Amazon have cornered culture and what it means for all of us*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Tomlinson, J. (2012). *Cultural imperialism: A critical introduction*. London: Continuum.