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Universal Dead-end in a Global Wormhole

The Need to Regulate Modern Communications

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It seems to me useful to underline, at the very onset, that this text is not directly devoted to the problems of the South Caucasus or Central Asia. But at the same time, everything that it discusses certainly applies to those parts of the world. Moreover, it is especially applicable there due to their rapid development. Perhaps what I describe and suggest will be interesting for people specializing in the problems of what some call Eurasia and others call the Silk Road region.

A summary of my thesis—its lead paragraph, as it were—could be understood thusly: today, those who must deliver accurate and unbiased information often claim to be masters of minds. As a result, modern man is practically deprived of the opportunity to consume more or less reliable information. This modern man is an object of manipulation in the interests of one or another political or social force. And the impact of this situation is being felt far and wide. And this same impact could represent a grave and growing danger to the future of this same modern man.

Indeed, we face what is perhaps the main challenge of our time: our inability to use information. We talk about fake news, informational confusion, and the cognitive dissonance experienced by a large segment of the population due to the inability to distinguish truth from lies; but this, for all its significance, is just the tip of the iceberg. With respect to information and communication, the current situation in the world resembles the one in which humanity found itself when nuclear weapons first appeared. The power and destructiveness of new communications are comparable to the power of nuclear energy.

Oddly enough, nuclear weapons, which are able to destroy humanity, have become a kind of guarantee of human survival. The fear of total annihilation has played an important role in keeping the peace. New communications and the rapidly emerging new world of information technologies has turned out to be a fantastic weapon of power.

More than 70 years ago, mankind needed to regulate the use of nuclear weapons; this system of regulation gradually led to the prohibition of ground-based nuclear tests and of the deployment of nuclear weapons in space as well as to the limitation of the proliferation of such weapons. Today we are faced with a new, albeit somewhat similar challenge: there is a need to regulate

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The evidence of this threat is endless. The recent elections in the United States, the Second Karabakh War, trade disputes, and much else are all immersed in a new information and communication space. Back in Soviet times, there was a joke about how various historical figures would stand on the platform of Lenin's mausoleum on Red Square, the traditional vantage-point of the head of the Soviet Union, during the annual November 7th parade: Genghis Khan, Alexander the Great, and Napoleon. Genghis Khan admires the armored personnel carriers, saying that if he'd had them, he would have been able to take all of Europe. The conqueror from Macedon is delighted with the missiles: if he'd had them, he'd have

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taken the whole of Eurasia. Napoleon, for his part, reads *Pravda* and notes that with such a media outlet, no one would have known about his defeat at Waterloo. Napoleon really understood the role of the press and actively used it. But today, the most daring desires of the great Corsican have been surpassed dramatically. The world is completely confused about what is truth and what is falsehood. And this is combined with modern technologies, including military ones, which bring us all to the edge of survival. New threats can turn the existing information chaos into general chaos.

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Arabian Nights

The most striking example, however, is not the aforementioned election or various wars, but the COVID-19 pandemic. It was hard to imagine that all of us—from ordinary citizens to the most influential people in the world—would be forced to wander practically in the dark, unable even to understand what certain doctors,

epidemiologists, politicians, and public figures were saying. It is difficult to find any reliable information, for example, about the effectiveness of masks or gloves, to mention nothing of vaccines.

The stories about the methods of treatment are reminiscent of the eight-volume collection of the *Arabian Nights* fairy tales, in which a new Scheherazade appears on every page, knowing nothing about the previous one. Recently, the British magazine *The Spectator* noted that the number of allegedly scientific publications on the coronavirus has grown 60 times since last year, but only three of them attempted to understand the effectiveness of masks; and there was still no clear answer. However, I will make a reservation right now: masks definitely need to be worn, if only because there is little harm from this whilst there can be a lot of benefits.

The situation with vaccines is even more striking. It seems that in the media, especially the more popular outlets, all kinds of bloggers are trying not so much to

help us deal with this and related issues—by providing us with the information we need to make the right decisions—but rather to confuse us, to compromise any positive expectations. As soon as some encouraging information appears, we hear irritating cries that everyone is being deceived, that nothing can be trusted, that dangers are ever-present, and that honest media warn about them.

Alas, this often leads to completely monstrous consequences, like the killing of millions of innocent minks. To be honest, I feel sorry for the minks. But still, I wonder what kind of fraud did the minks fall victim to? Inaccuracies in information? Or is there a conspiracy of manufacturers who deftly manipulate public opinion in favor of certain fur entrepreneurs? Lord knows; but it is certain that we're facing either irresponsibility or callousness, which only benefits certain traders in pelts and the like. Prices have quadrupled as of this writing.

Actually, I am not against—and I am even "for"—an approach rooted in this sort of criticality, for this is, after all, one of the roles of the media. But it is worth remembering that such criticality is a tool for finding out a more or less reliable picture of the world—that, in other words, this criticality is a means

and not an end in itself. Later in the text we will have cause to return to what is happening with the modern media. But for now, let us turn to COVID-19, which clearly revealed, in my opinion, a much more important, even fundamental thing. The world has not only changed, it has bifurcated, as it were, if not multiplied in a more complex way.

Double Reality

So what had to happen, happened. Humanity has moved to a new world. More precisely, it turned out that now we live in two worlds at the same time: a real, physical one in which we act through our corporeal bodies; and a cyber or virtual one in which our physical presence is minimal—reduced to the effort necessary for the manipulation of an electronic device. Something like wiggling a finger or giving a voice command. There are, of course, prerequisites for integrating a computer directly into the human brain, but this is still the stuff of gimmickry. In theory, this is possible, but still doubtful, if only because, so far, we have been unable to cope with the pandemic, not to mention cancer, strokes, and heart attacks—despite all the enthusiasm regarding the possibilities of extending life. Biology is still an elusive area of regulation.

My point is that COVID-19 ignited what can be called the emergence of the virtual world. Of course, a clear border between these worlds will not appear in the foreseeable future, but it is already obvious that virtual reality has shifted from being a "dessert" to a proper communication system, becoming something quite comparable to the world of relatively "real" communications.

Virtual space today plays the same role that physical territory used to play in the past.

Columbus discovered new lands in the Americas. Then, centuries ago, it did not matter fundamentally whether one grew bananas or tobacco. Land was a universal commodity, "flexible" and adaptable to whatever was in demand. Frequencies play that role today. It doesn't matter which ones, by the way. The digital solution is universally applicable to everything that people use for communication, no matter whether they exchange real goods or services.

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In general, the emergence of the virtual world has become a fact. And this means that we need to reproduce a certain set of institutions regarding human communication in the virtual world. However, everything is already there—shops, cinemas, factories, and so on. The "experience economy," as it is being increasingly called, is only a part of this virtual world; it makes no sense to consider it outside the new double reality or new globality. The success and despair of the Internet of Things is a perfect illustration of this duality.

If we assume that the idea of the emergence of a parallel virtual world is correct, then a lot of questions arise. First, how can we regulate those relations—those subjects that arise in the virtual world? At the same time, how do we compare regulation in the "real" world (let's call it world-1) with regulation in the virtual world (let's call this world-2)?

In the "real" world, for example, it is not quite so easy or devoid of consequence for people to insult

each other, for no one is anonymous in world-1. In world-2, relative anonymity is fairly common. Of course, with some effort, identities can be easily exposed. But still, efforts need to be made, which not everyone can do. World-1 has a huge number of institutions—police, courts, national jurisdictions, and so on. At present, there is nothing like this in world-2. And although theoretically the subjects of world-2 (whether they are people or institutions) are reachable with the help of the institutions of world-1, this is achieved with significantly greater difficulties and obstacles. And in some cases, the institutions of world-1 are not at all able to cope with the new challenges as, for example, in the field of copyright, defamation, and so on.

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In the Virtual World...

If we proceed from the model of parallelism and the alignment of virtuality with reality, we need to reproduce in the virtual world something like internet citizenship and internet taxes in order, for example, to fund from the public purse the maintenance and availability of what is in the public domain—reference and educational sites, libraries, and so on. And we also need to figure out how to organize and finance something like an emergency alert system. And all this without even getting into questions regarding judiciary and executive power in the virtual world.

Moreover, in the virtual world, we also need an information hierarchy. In conditions where fake news predominates, and amidst the simple lack of reliable information, we need to maintain trustworthy information institutions. At one time, when the first electronic

media appeared, about a century ago, for example, they did so in the form of "public service broadcasting," with the BBC playing a vanguard role. The goal, then, was extremely simple—to create a source of information controlled by society, independent of advertising and other private interests, a source whose task was to broadcast the most reliable information to the whole of society.

It is clear that in the virtual world this kind of media cannot be reproduced. But one might think about how to do something similar. For example, a kind of news aggregator controlled by society and maintained at the expense of internet users, for example, paid for with an imposed general tax on each user. The management of these taxes, incidentally, would be completely transparent.

the various communities of people involved in the creation and distribution of content are turning into a separate social group, a kind of mediocracy. And this rather large group claims its own role in society. This is somewhat reminiscent of the partocracy in the Soviet Union.

In my opinion, the problem of reliable information is especially important, because under the influence of "virtuality" and new competition, we have lost the distinction between what is called the media and what is called, for example, a community, a party, a corporation, and so on. The general mediatization that has taken place in which any supermarket is a media that releases news about sausage and cheese has led to a situation whereby the media—whose purpose is to provide the public with accurate information—is drowning in a sea of pseudo-media with the goal of promoting their views or products, which, in a sense, are the same thing.

Evidently, a mutation has begun within the seemingly professional media. Huge human markets for the consumption of all kinds of information, as well as political competition, have resulted in many media outlets becoming a kind of political party or branches of parties. There can be no talk of any impartiality; CNN, for example, is the mouthpiece of the Democratic Party in the United States.

Moreover, the various communities of people involved in the creation and distribution of content are turning into a separate social group, a kind of mediocracy. And this rather large group claims its own role in society. This is somewhat reminiscent of the partocracy in the Soviet Union. In that time, people who were supposedly called upon to serve society turned into its masters. Today, those who must deliver accurate and unbiased information often claim to be masters of minds. As a result, modern man is practically deprived of the opportunity to consume more or less reliable information. He is an object of manipulation in the interests of one or another political or social force.

Getting Worse and Worse

In general, it should be noted that the problem of the relationship between virtuality and reality is completely non-trivial. Already now, the conflict of the coexistence between reality and virtuality is obvious. For example, problems of borders and sovereignty arise. The formal limitlessness of virtuality is unequivocally contradictory to nation-states and jurisdictions.

I want to emphasize that we are not talking about what is better or worse: virtuality or reality. Rather, the question is about interaction and coexistence. Endless talk about interference in internal political processes, elections, and so on have their roots precisely in the contradictions between the ways people behave in these two worlds.

There has been a lot of talk about the rules of such mutual interference, which boils down to the fundamental problem of the relationship between the "old" and "new" spaces. In the very near future, this state of affairs will only get worse thanks to a combination of things like the emergence of global broadband internet (Elon Musk's Starlink), automatic linguistic translation that makes use of elements of artificial intelligence, and the strengthening of the Internet of Things. All told, such developments will be able to change significantly the balance of forces in the man-society-state system. Things won't end there. This will affect many aspects of life and the global economy, which by construction will affect all our national economies as well.

In addition, since it will never be possible to separate world-1 and world-2—at least unless or until artificial intelligence destroys humanity—it will be necessary to understand and then manage the changes that the "new" world brings to the "old" one. Much has already been mentioned, but the impact will go much deeper.

For example, problems arise with respect to applying laws in the virtual world. A person lives and dies, eats and drinks, sleeps and does sports physically, in the real world. Consequently, the virtual world becomes a tool for influencing the real world. The transformation of the media into political parties and communities has already been mentioned above. But there is also the opposite. For example, NEX-TA—a Belarusian public organization based in Poland—is trying to present itself as a media outlet, although it is in truth a fully-fledged mechanism of manipulation, controlling the behavior of the masses in favor of certain political forces.

In other words, the subjects of the virtual world are trying to change the real world. And since these same subjects live in that same real world, it becomes possible or tempting to change the hierarchies of world-1 according to their own ideas.

Of course, social media networks are champions at rebuilding the modern world. There is no need to draw attention to the gross manipulation by Twitter, Facebook, and less mainstream players. The recent American elections are replete with examples of manipulation. Even the President of the United States is subject to

censorship, not to mention ordinary individuals, or certain points of view.

It turns out that this is very characteristic: virtual spaces that seem to have been created for free communication have suddenly turned into information ghettos; any attempt to escape from them is punishable by ostracism—an old, even ancient way of getting rid of those with whom one disagrees. It seems to me that the sphere of social media should be civilized and transformed from wild information prairies with the rule of a strong moderator who for all intents and purposes, serves the owner of said social media, into some sort of socially regulated space. By the way, I would like to note that, in general, the obvious arbitrariness of the owners of social media should be regulated not only by laws in relation to social media themselves, but also by the equipment manufacturers with the help of which these social media are operated.

Society and private citizens should have the right to both create any virtual community they wish and have access to networks controlled by society as such. One could say that we need antitrust laws for the internet. In some respects, it is not a bad idea to recall the example of plumbing. One apartment building cannot have

100 water pipe systems at once. Therefore, this issue is not a matter of pure competition.

In one way or another, the largest modern social networks, which are sometimes called the Big Five, have become a very serious and dangerous tool for the rule of the minority over the majority, a way of imposing new hierarchies and crudely manipulating consumers in favor of often-unknown patrons. At one time, the inhabitants of a still-young Soviet Union could witness with their own eyes how a cultural, anti-hierarchical revolution was taking place, the end of which turned out to be so bloody that it absorbed most of those who were involved in the anti-hierarchical coup itself.

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Hierarchies and Wormholes

Humanity lives in a world of hierarchies. Often they are probably not entirely fair. But this is what makes the existence of people sustainable. In culture, by the way,

this is especially noticeable. Leo Tolstoy or Charles Dickens or Rabindranath Tagore are at the top of the cultural hierarchy. Columbus' merits are significant. But today, as many times in the past, an attempt is being made at a global revision of hierarchies. Incidentally, we see this taking place in the United States. But in contrast to past years, those who are seeking a place under the sun have a new, previously undeveloped instrument. Virtuality allows for both the construction of new hierarchies and for them to be implemented through the impact of virtuality on reality.

Physics uses the concept of quantum wormholes: something that connects different universes together in a nonlinear way. In this sense, the virtual and real worlds in which we now live are also connected by what could be likened to wormholes. In essence, these wormholes are people and their associations; they connect human civilization into a kind of complex, intricate structure solely by laying the aforementioned wormholes. And this makes the current situation

extremely interesting, but at the same time terribly dangerous. Hundreds of millions of sites, aggressive and manipulative social networks, attempts at establishing mediocracy carried out by numerous supposedly journalistic communities, and new technologized and ideologized communities striving for power (and much more) all make the virtual world a competitor and a threat to the real world. But in essence, this is a fratricidal struggle—the most dangerous amongst all possible types of war.

In some general sense, this has happened before, for we are facing an extremely alarming challenge: the challenge of a global conflict, a kind of global civil war. It would be impossible in a direct form without a new virtual world—a world in which there are no rules yet, no boundaries, no established hierarchies, not even a single language. But the development is rapid, and we may not be able to keep up with it; and this will lead to chaos.

There are a lot of challenges. Here you find the political state of countries and the world, and mutual influence. Here you find war: real,

actual, physical wars. It is obvious that a part of all this has successfully moved into the virtual world, and that from there strikes out at real, living people and turns them into corpses. There is also a terrible challenge to private life, the consequences of which are not yet fully understood. For example, what will happen to sexual relations in the near future? How much will they be mediated by virtuality? And what will constitute violence in the virtual world?

In general, I repeat, there are a lot of questions. But the most important challenge we face, from my point of view, is the disintegration of information hierarchies, the chaos of the space in which humanity lives. This can lead to terrible shocks, to wild violence and, in the future, to the degradation of civilization.

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In my opinion, there is an urgent need for the most decisive approach to establishing principles of regulation of this already-existing virtual world. Otherwise, we will in fact become like moles, and blindly, chaotically make holes in the world in which we live. And this can easily come to be done so badly that everything collapses.

At the beginning of this essay, I compared the power of modern communications with the energy of nuclear weapons. And the threat of nuclear weapons, for all its reality and riskiness, ultimately turned out to be a means of preserving global peace. New communications are, of course, a great blessing too. They can and are already providing incredible benefits. The truth of this statement

is so evident that there is no need to talk anymore about it in detail. But everything in the world is dual-natured and ambivalent. If we miss the moment, especially given the aggressive and contradictory nature of human beings, we could engender a destructive evil instead of harnessing great good.

The peaceful coexistence of all worlds is necessary. BD

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