

On the Death of Script at the Hands of Data* --©Pascual Delgado, July 2nd 2019

Since the invention of the Internet in 1969, and subsequent refinements using digital technology, we have arrived at a point in human history when the hemorrhage of worldwide ICT data is effectively annihilating the ability of script* to act as a proven means of enshrining continuous and harmonious relations between individuals, institutions and governments based on generally-accepted ethical principles.

Today, it has become almost impossible for democratic governments to enact legislation or regulatory safeguards fast enough to stem the tide of false, defamatory messages and/or propaganda circulating through so-called social media. Trolls and hackers –some under contract to the superpowers– have been interfering with electoral processes –as happened during the last presidential elections in the U.S.A.

One fundamentally-critical factor is the enormous disparity between transactional speeds when one compares the snail-like pace of the old print-based technology with that of the current light-speed electronic media. This disparity is radically transforming all human values and critical judgement in unpredictable ways. As Marshall McLuhan already foresaw in 1964:

“The ‘message’ of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs...

“All meaning alters with acceleration, because all patterns of personal and political interdependence change with any acceleration of information.”

–Pages 8 and 178-179, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*.

This digital revolution has toppled 4,000 years of ethical social and political behaviour. Starting with ancient covenants chiseled in stone, like the Decalogue and the Code of Hammurabi, the power of a manuscript or of an inscription was a guarantee that the laws and commandments inscribed therein would be generally followed by the respective peoples concerned, under penalty of incurring the wrath of the gods –or the axe of the executioner.

For example, in the Gospel of John, 1:1, we read: “*In the beginning was the Word, ...and the Word was God...*” And clearly, by the time John wrote it, the Word was already enshrined in a manuscript, therefore giving it the weight of permanency. Indeed, until the 20th century, the written or printed word was a guarantee of long-lasting commitment to the ideas expressed therein. Whether in law, trade or diplomacy, the existence of an official document duly signed and certified by the highest authorities always ensured the moral commitment of the parties to abide by the relationships enshrined in the text.

Ancient treaties such as the [Treaty of the Thirty Years Peace](#) (446 - 445 B.C.) –a treaty between [Athens](#) and [Sparta](#)– or medieval ones, such as the *Magna Carta* (1215), ensured years of peace between rival states or classes, paving the way to a slow process of constitutional transformation and eventual non-violent political change.

All modern state constitutions are in effect enactments of sacred covenants signed by the representatives of all the peoples living within the boundaries of a given geographic territory, pledging to abide theretofore by all the laws and regulations enacted by their founders or rulers.

Scarcely 100 years ago, all declarations of war or peace treaties were still carefully scripted and signed documents agreed to by all parties before the start or end of hostilities. A recent example of such formalities was the *German Instrument of Surrender*, the legal document which extinguished the Third Reich and ended World War II in Europe, ensuring relatively stable peace and cooperation between erstwhile enemies for the next 75 years. The definitive text was signed in Karlshorst, Berlin, on the night of May 8th 1945, by representatives of the three armed services: the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*, the Allied Expeditionary Force and the Supreme High Command of the Red Army.

Today's wars happen without declarations and tend to never end in any form of covenanted armistice. Witness the endless war in Afghanistan or the recent Russian invasion of the Crimea and Ukraine. Armies of phantom Photo-shopped contestants rise up or disappear as quickly as their Facebook pages can be coded (or deleted).

Another worrisome trend is the volatilization of money as it is distilled in the digital alembic.

Ever since the Renaissance, paper certificates have been issued as promissory notes, bills of sale, paper currencies, banknotes or bonds to signify that contracting parties agreed that a particular document was the equivalent of a specified amount of real wealth, measured in carat weight and purity (usually of gold or silver). A piece of paper currency usually inscribed the promise that the stated value printed therein was redeemable in an equivalent amount of gold or silver.

This contractual system was transformed completely in the second half of the 20th Century when the gold standard was completely replaced in most countries by "fiat money" – a term used to describe currency used because of a government's order, or fiat, that the currency must be accepted as a means of payment. A famous example of this was the Nixon administration's ending the convertibility of U.S. dollars to gold on August 1971. The so-called "floating dollar" created chaos in many markets.

Today, no paper dollar, pound or ruble is worth the same from minute to minute, relative to constantly changing exchange rates. The next step in the process has been the invention of cryptocurrencies such as bitcoins, the value of which change constantly depending on the giga-wattage generated by the speculators. As Chaos Theory explains, the flapping of a twitter's wings can create a financial tsunami thousands of miles away.

In the end, should we willingly surrender our ethical reins and democratic wheel to the sorcerer's wand of A.I.? Can the Cloud replace well-drafted covenants between conscientious equals?

My answer is self-evident: **Absolutely not!**

* For the purpose of this essay, the word "script" means any of the following: inscription, scripture, certificate, warrant, treaty, enactment, bill or contract inscribed on a solid and palpable medium; whereas the word "data" is any ephemeral graphic, visual or audio information circulating on a digital or analog platform including social media.