

Nov 04, 2016 by *John Worne*

#wethepeople ^[1]

For me, three long-term drivers of relationships between the peoples of the world are access to opportunity, access to information, and access to technology. And of course they are completely intertwined.

Humans are good at reacting to shocks and events, but not as good at spotting trends or predicting futures. So I guess our challenge here is to think about what is changing – and what stays the same – in human relations in the middle distance. At the British Council, we have a lively group of external public policy, tech and networking thinkers, which we call our ‘Provocateurs’, to challenge us with new ideas for our medium term strategy.

And when I asked them about this they said:

- Watch out for tech hubris – jet packs and personal hovercraft are less likely than an ongoing need for ‘connection’ and ‘authenticity’ aided, but not replaced, by connected devices.
- Don’t underestimate the lasting impact of symbols, institutions and ‘national moments’: the Olympics, the Royals, our global cultural institutions (the BBC, universities, museums and theatres, and the Premier League) plus London as a world city, and the British Council around the world – all these create a sense of connection and attraction to things ‘UK’, way beyond our borders.
- And, finally, encouraging the search for ‘meaning’: Many young people are searching for more authentic experiences, that exhibit ‘live performance’, craft, and quality; but real world demographics and youth unemployment are huge issues here.

So what can governments do in today’s world? Mitt Romney says it’s jobs, Obama says it’s values – I’m sure they’re both right, but I think a big driver of change readily available to us, is more positive engagement and interest from ordinary people – because in the digital age everyone is a potential citizen diplomat.

And the idea of government, authority, and diplomacy operating in a ‘protected’, ‘moderated’ or ‘orderly’ space, I think, is long gone. We had a delegation over from China on Monday to talk about press and social media – and it was clear to all of us that pretty much anyone anywhere can see or find pretty much anything they want – if they have ingenuity and access to a smartphone, tablet or laptop. How governments and countries behave in the future will be increasingly influenced by the unruly, uncensored, viral, and unforgiving world of ‘always on’ social media. YouTube sparking riots amply demonstrates this. As *The Economist* asked ‘how long before a tweet starts a war?’

I think a number of governments – including those in America, the United Kingdom, and Sweden are adapting very well to these opportunities and challenges. But my theme for this evening is what can ‘we, the people’ do to help?

For the UK I'd offer:

1. Up the number of people in this country who travel, study and work overseas and increase foreign language education;
2. Continue to be a welcoming, open country to those who would visit, study, work, and create art and content here;
3. Keep investing in our world-class presence around the globe – especially our diplomatic presence, our contribution to international development and our commitment to sharing English education and British culture.

As our 'Provocateurs' said: beware predictions of ambassadors – cultural or traditional – who drop in wearing virtual jet packs. Face to face contact, getting up close and personal, and making a difference on the ground will still matter. But people meeting people online (and off), helping, sharing and learning together is even more important in the Digital age, because the world is watching – mostly on Facebook and YouTube.

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