Mystery Cities and Contested Terrain of Knowledge

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This paper focuses on the importance of social capital in terms of shared and accumulated knowledge, and how the 21ˢᵗ century has created new opportunities, as well as new problems, in the way this capital is accumulated.

About 30 years ago, Alvin Toeffler predicted a third revolution in humanity – after the Agricultural and Industrial – involving an explosion of information. That revolution has happened, carrying with it promises of a better life for all.

Presumably, the information can be picked up and transformed into knowledge, which enters into the pool of social capital of shared trust, knowledge and skills, rapidly accumulating and helping to move societies forward.

Questions have been raised about this information revolution, about both the quantity and quality of the information moving around, and the ways in which that information is transformed into knowledge, or mis-knowledge.

What I would like to offer are some reflections on this process, mainly emphasising how today's landscapes of knowledge are not just changing, but are in fact contested. I will offer two cases – cargo cults and mystery cities – to illustrate how these landscapes are navigated and contested, and then draw insights from the two cases as to how we might move into the future.

But before daring to talk of the future, it will be useful to look briefly at the past, at the historical context of this current information revolution. I feel that what we have today is actually rooted as far back as the 13ᵗʰ and 14ᵗʰ centuries, what historians sometimes call the early modern period.

It was a period sometimes described as the Age of Discovery, itself a misnomer because it reflects the view that only the western powers were moving around "discovering" the "Orient". In reality, this was a period where people were moving around everywhere – Arab traders had reached Asia, bringing Islam. The Chinese admiral Zheng Ho headed a naval fleet that reached Africa. The trading was massive, and the markets and trading posts became marketplaces for ideas as well, a robust exchange of information that saw the "foreign" becoming indiginized, incorporated into language and lifestyles.

It is important, as well, to recognise the perspectives that were used in this exchange of information.

Generally, the Europeans looked at the Orient as the "other". There was a tendency to exoticize, one that found parallels with distance, the "Far East" being far more mysterious than the "Near East" for example. The chronicles of western adventurers, explorers, traders emphasised difference and eventually laid the basis for notions of race, of Western Manifest Destiny and imperialism.

The historian Anthony Reid (1999) points out that we, "the other", in the Orient, did not quite exoticize the west. China saw itself as the centre of the world (Zhongguo) and while curious of the outside world mainly in terms of trade opportunities, did not see the need to bother with the barbarians. Southeast Asian countries were more open, stimulated by trade contacts with the Chinese, Indians, Arabs and, eventually Europeans. The elite, in fact, look on to the west often with great fervour mainly in a feverish importation of western luxuries.

Unfortunately, as Reid points out, the emphasis was on an importation of technologies, rather than on knowledge. Reid describes some exceptions, such as an aristocratic family in Indonesia, Karaeng Pattingallong, who had an extensive library of Spanish and Portuguese books. It is not clear, however, if such books were used to generate knowledge.

Today, the tempo for information exchange has increased exponentially. I need not go into details describing the Internet and cable television but it is certainly important to emphasise how the world has, for better or worse, indeed shrunk. On the darker side, the world can watch in horror as terrorists attack, and wars unfold. On the brighter side, viewers throughout the world could, through cable, usher in the new millennium as it dawned in each time zone in the world, from the South Pacific, moving westwards.

We have to be careful, though, about avoiding the temptation to credit all this information exchange to the virtual environments of the Internet or to television. The tempo of information exchange has increased as well because of greater mobility of people, for reasons of work as well as for pleasure.

The movement is massive. If we look at the tourism alone, Thailand had some 10 million tourists last year, many from the west. But, unnoticed by many, a growing number of tourists are coming, too, from China. Everywhere, from Bangkok to Paris, tourist agencies speak of a new market.

This movement impacts on the way people look at themselves and at other people, and how they transform the landscapes of knowledge. Just last night I was having dinner with a Vietnamese friend, who tried in vain to convince the Vietnamese waitress that he was a compatriot. As far as she was concerned, a fellow Vietnamese would not be eating out in a restaurant in Thailand, so she insisted that he was a Thai man who had a Vietnamese girlfriend, who in turn had taught him fluent Vietnamese. When my friend insisted he was Vietnamese, she then speculated that he was Korean or Japanese.

The case of my Vietnamese Korean Japanese Thai amalgamated friend shows how the skewed power relations in fact determine the landscape of knowledge. A "visitor" to Thailand must be someone from an affluent country, not just western but possibly now, Chinese, Singaporean, Japanese or Korean.

Our perceptions are shaped by new knowledge, but that knowledge comes to us skewed. First is unequal access to information, not just between developed and developing countries but, within countries - developed or developing – between the rich and the poor.

Second, the direction of flow remains skewed, more from the North to the South rather than from South to the North, and certainly, still far too little of South-South exchanges. This has far-reaching consequences, the Filipino's knowledge of even a neighbouring country such as China, filtered through the lens of western media, mainly, these days, CNN and, horrors, Fox TV.

There are important insights to be gained from the way information flows in our times, and in the way information is transformed into knowledge and social capital. I wanted to cite two contrasting cases to underscore the dilemmas we face today in this process of knowledge formation.

First there are the well-known cargo cults of Melanesia. The cargo cults first emerged in the 19th century with the arrival of western colonial powers. The cults generally revolve around the theme of a future where there would be great wealth for the natives, wealth similar to those of the western colonisers. There were variations as to how that wealth would be acquired. One variation had ancestors returning to drive away the colonial masters. Another talked of the colonialists sharing their wealth, or knowledge about acquiring wealth.

The name "cargo cults" referred to these groups' fixation on the material affluence of the colonisers, and the way they thought this prosperity could be transferred. Seeing the material riches being brought in through ships and, later, planes, the cargo cult members thought that the way to bring that wealth in was to build wharves and airstrips. There were other ways through which the natives tapped into the technological trappings of western affluence. One cargo cult, for example, put up sham telephone lines through which they could communicate with ancestors.

The case of the cargo cults reflect "knowledge" in a complex political and cultural context, of outsiders coming in (including, in Irian Jaya, Indonesians), resented yet envied for their wealth and knowledge. The cults become a terrain to contest the knowledge, simultaneously invoking tradition, as in the desire for a return of ancestors, as well as "modernity" in terms of ports and airstrips.

Let us leave the cargo cults for now and look at a second case of mystery cities. There is a town in Samar, one of the most impoverished provinces in the Philippines, where residents talk not of wealth coming in but of wealth already existing, in a city described as "hidden" or "mysterious". It is a parallel world, residents say, with people that look like us. But this mystery city, even given a name, is affluent with paved highways and hospitals and schools and gas stations and shopping malls. In other words, the mystery city has everything the impoverished town does not have.

The belief in the mystery city has spread to an adjoining town, which says they too have such a parallel city, a kind of suburb, they say, of the bigger and original mystery city. It too, has all the trappings of modernisation.

The residents know where this mystery city is, pointing to a plot of vacant grassland. There is nothing there, on the surface at least, but when residents pass through, they either fall silent, or begin to engage in nervous banter and laughter.

The residents say there have been people, of our kind, who have gone off to the mystery city, but have never returned. But those who disappear are said to occasionally send letters which eventually find their way into the real world.

The case of the mystery city is different from that of the cargo cults. Here, the wealth and affluence is feared. This conceptualisation of the mystery city is, in fact, an extension of older concepts – found in many parts of the Philippines – of the engkanto, the enchanters. In this older complex of beliefs, the engkanto live in a parallel world, but they are the ones who venture into our world, usually to court young girls. If the young girl falls for these engkanto –

described as having Caucasian features – and follows him into his world, she will fall ill, to be cured only by native healers.

The metaphors are clear: a desire for wealth is dangerous, and if one is seduced, salvation comes only from home.

I cite the cargo cults and the mystery cities for two reasons. First, both cases show how, in the 20th and 21st century, the landscape of knowledge is tortuous, with many unexpected sharp curves, twists, turns. Second, and more importantly, the two cases are iconic, reflecting our attitudes today to the information revolution. The two cases remind us that the Internet and other information portals are not mere channels for information but are in fact contested terrain. These terrain need not be virtual – Melanesia's cargo cults and Samar's mystery cities objectify these terrain.

In our daily encounters, in the virtual world of the Internet or in real world, reading newspapers, watching television, or listening to papers in a SEAMEO/SPAFA conference, we are, as individuals and as communities, constantly processing and contesting the information. We do this with our own culture-specific filters, and in contexts of power.

The cargo cults and mystery cities offer us insights into our own "modern" contestations. In many ways, we too have our own versions of cargo cults and mystery cities. We presume, like the cargo cults, that simply having the computer, or wiring up our homes and schools into the Internet, will automatically bring in new knowledge and generate social capital. Taken a step further, we presume that an imitation of the west, in terms of its technologies and infrastructure, will automatically bring in wealth. I suspect the libraries of Asia's elite in the 17th and 18th centuries served similar purposes, a kind of magical invoking of knowledge even as the books were untouched. Alas, we know that like the cargo cults, it can be a long wait for nothing. And that is being optimistic. In other cases, the "knowledge" that comes in is in fact picked up but does nothing for society.

The mystery cities offer another extreme scenario. The mystery cities are surreal terrain, or perhaps I should say, are arenas where knowledge is heavily contested. There is curiosity but there is fear about coming in contact with this knowledge. Wealth, like knowledge, is perceived to be corrupting. There is security and safety in staying home, impoverished as that home may be.

The dilemma then is adopting a perspective between the cargo cults and the mystery cities. I am actually more inclined to the mystery city model. There is a fascination there with the trappings of modernity, and, rightly, a mild yearning for it, as reflected by a collective fantasising of an entire parallel city, together with accounts of people who enter that parallel world, or of mail arriving from that hidden city. At the same time, there is a fear that in entering that world, one becomes engkantado or enchanted and therefore trapped forever.

There is in fact a third metaphor that we might want to invoke, a bolder extension of the mystery cities. In many societies, the process of becoming a healer, as well as the healing process itself, involves trances and altered states of consciousness. One enters another world, or rather one dares to enter another world to acquire not just knowledge but power to use that knowledge. The journey is acknowledged as perilous and yet it is necessary. The shamans that engage in these pursuits of powerful knowledge are in fact seen as subversive, as people who are not satisfied with received knowledge, and therefore dare to venture into new terrain, where one struggles to acquire new and more powerful knowledge.

The challenge then today is not just one of navigating the changing landscape of knowledge but to dare to go beyond the existing guidebooks and guideposts, and to explore, with the naked eye and with new lenses – preferably ones we build ourselves – for new knowledge. It is daring to challenge conventional wisdom, even as we built out of it. It is, in fact, daring to demystify the mysteries, not just in hidden cities, but in the "real" world we live in.

References

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