[LONGREAD] ZOOMING TOWARDS A UNIVERSITY PLATFORM

Zooming towards a University Platform

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George Packer, journalist, novelist and a frequent contributor to *The Atlantic*, acidly concluded in a recent polemic that the "coronavirus didn't break America". Rather, the virus simply "revealed what was already broken".[1] For Packer, the global pandemic in all its relentless fury actually laid bare Trump's dysfunctional government within an already corroding and ailing society. The Covid-19 rampage, hence, was more messenger than the message.

Online education, likewise, should be seen as a portentous messenger of things to come and not the message in itself. Even before the physical classroom and face to face academic interactions were deemed a viral hazard, the contemporary university system was already down with a high fever and looking for ways to cool off from their dependence on brick and mortar teaching.

The boom in *Zoom*[2] or the shift to the virtual, consequently, is not a hurried Band-Aid response. The big moves for online teaching can, in fact, be contact traced to

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[1] George Packer, 'We Are Living in a Failed State', *The Atlantic*, June 6th , 2020 [advance copy] https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/06/underlying-conditions/610261/

[2] Taylor Nicole Rogers, 'Meet Eric Yuan, the founder and CEO of Zoom, who has made nearly $4 billion in 3 months as usage of his video conferencing software skyrockets amid the coronavirus pandemic', *Business Insider*, Apr 2, 2020. https://www.businessinsider.com/meet-zoom-billionaire-eric-yuan-career-net-worth-life

evolving developments within the education technology sector (EdTech), which, frankly speaking, has been chomping at the bit for more than a decade now. For EdTech enthusiasts, online teaching is and has always been but the 'front paw' for their already imagined revolution. A revolution that first begins not by overthrowing the university administration but by rebooting the idea of the student.

It bears remembering here that the first students of the modern university ─ birthed in early nineteenth century Europe ─ were primarily prepared and inspired for the roles of citizenship. And in the expectations of one of its founding visionaries, the Prussian philosopher and diplomat Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), the public university was to cultivate a national culture while occupying a space between the state and the market.[3] The student of higher education, hence, above all else, was the product of nation-making.

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, economic globalization, neo-liberalism and aggressive market logics combined to gut the Humboldtian university ideal. In country after country, like falling dominoes, public universities were toppled and higher education was surrendered to the corporate university, which lost little time in substituting the student-citizen with the customer-consumer.[4] The immediate fallout: ever rising student loan debts (SLD). In the United States, the most exemplary possible example, the SLD for 2019 stood at $1.5 trillion, owed by 45 million borrowers.[5] In India, in the opening year of 2000, loans amounting to roughly ₹3000 million (Indian

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[3] For a discussion on Humboldt and his ideas on education see David Sorkin, 'William von Humboldt: the theory and practice of self-formation (*Bildung*),'*Journal of the History of Ideas*, 44, 1983, pp.55-74.

[4] This transformation is well documented in the writings of Stefan Collini, *What are the Universities for?*, Penguin: London, 2012Margaret Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities,* Princeton University press: Princeton, 2010.

[5] Zack Freidman, 'Student Loan Debt Statistics In 2019: A $1.5 Trillion Crisis', *Forbes*, February 25th , 2019. https://www.forbes.com/sites/zackfriedman/2019/02/25/student-loan-debt-statistics-2019/#722b071d133f

Rupees) were disbursed for higher education. By 2016, higher education loans hit the mark of ₹720,000 million.[6] But in November of 2019 a sudden drop to approximately ₹669,020 million in the SLD occurred. This slight fall, however, remained well within the curve of the market, brought on by the fact that banks were losing their appetite to lend in a context where student loan defaults were escalating in India.[7]

The sordid saga of exploding student debt, however, is not the only tremor that is destabilizing higher education. In recent years, the metrics for university rankings have rapidly gone from bizarre to banal. Added to which is the alarming rise in faculty attrition, caused by competitive pressures for publishing and turning the quest for tenured positions into gladiatorial contests. [8] Increasingly, the corporate university model, the world over, is fraying and becoming unsustainable.

 Clearly, it is hard to ignore the fact that online teaching in the time of Covid-19 has walked into a pre-existing condition. But can such a crisis-condition be sorted out by what Evgeny Morozov describes as 'solutionism' − deploying technology to avoid politics ? [9]

In a recent interview, the Noble laureate Abhijit Banerjee opined in an even handed manner that online teaching was here to stay and its successful diffusion mostly

[6] Pushkar, 'It Makes Little Sense to Blame Students for India's Growing Loan Default Problem' , *The Wire*, 31st July, 2017, https://thewire.in/education/serious-indias-student-loan-default-problem. Also see Karthik Manickam,'The Dangerous Myth of the Student Loan', *The Wire*, November, 2019, https://thewire.in/education/student-loan-jnu-protests

[7] Dinesh Unnikrishnan, 'Why have Indian banks stopped lending to students?' https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/economy/policy/why-have-indian-banks-stopped-lending-to-students-4862821.html

[8] Benjamin Ginsberg, *The Fall of the Faculty: the Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why it Matters,* Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2011; Jerry Z. Muller, *The Tyranny of Metrics*, Princeton University Press: Princeton and Oxford, 2018; Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber, *The Slow Professor: Challenging the culture of Speed in the Academy,* University of Toronto: London, Buffalo, Toronto, 2016.

[9] Evgeny Morozov, 'The tech 'solutions' for coronavirus take the surveillance state to the next level' , *The Guardian*, 15th April, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/15/tech-coronavirus-surveillance-state-digital-disrupt [accessed, 12th May 2020].

depended on how quickly professors could be encouraged to give up their 'prejudices'.[10] The professor as an inherent 'technology laggard' or a natural suspect, against the online, in fact, appears so convincingly self-evident.[11] In a second type of solutionism, on the other hand, the argument runs in reverse. Given that the online will mostly bypass the less privileged and the poor, the struggle for education also becomes a vigorous demand for internet inclusion and bandwidth capacity.[12]

But if a magic wand did indeed solve all problems of access, could we still side step the complexities of power, politics, manipulation and control that are baked into digital infrastructure? Here, it is critical that we decode the Edtech vision and the notion of the platform university.

Platforms are Here to Stay

The platform heralds a significant strategic shift in contemporary capitalism. The big four of Amazon, Google (Alphabet), Facebook and Apple, for example, not only make up the leading platform firms in the world today[13] but when combined their wealth, power and domination over our everyday living is most certainly unparalleled

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[10] Uma Vishnu, 'Prejudices about online courses, but healthy to lose some of those: Abhijit Banerjee' https://indianexpress.com/article/education/abhijit-banerjee-coronavirus-lockdown-schools-online-classes-6395781/, May 6, 2020 [Accessed May 22nd 2020]

[11] Yatti Soni, 'As Higher Education Goes Online, Professors Struggle In Adapting To The Digital', *Inc42,* https://inc42.com/features/as-higher-education-goes-online-professors-struggle-in-adapting-to-the-digital/ , May 11, 2020 [Accessed 11th May 2020].

[12] Juhi Sidharth and Chaitanya Ravi, 'TIF - Why Online Learning Cannot Be A Transformative Force in India', *The India Forum,* www.TheIndiaForum.in , June 5, 2020. And Himanshu, 'Education During COVID-19: Online Education Is Classist, Discriminatory And Impractical', May 7th 2020. https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2020/05/why-online-classes-and-examination-not-a-feasible-option-in-indian-higher-education-perspe/

[13] Somewhat comparable but nowhere near in terms of global reach are the Chinese BAT firms: Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent. See Michael Wade and Jialu Shan, 'The Chinese digital giants – coming to a store near you!: Europe and North America beware of the BATs – Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent', *IMD*, December 2017, https://www.imd.org/research-knowledge/articles/the-chinese-digital-giants-coming-to-a-store-near you/#:~:text=Tencent%20is%20best%20known%20for,businesses%20are%20performing%20astonishingly%20well. [Accessed, May 28th 2020]

and unprecedented in recorded history.[14] Platforms, for Nick Srnicek, simply put, refers to the digital infrastructure that serves to 'intermediate between different user groups'. A type of intermediation that, unlike traditional business models, is profoundly based upon the extraction and control of data. The platform, hence, essentially boils down to the 'ownership of software (the 2 billion lines of code for Google or the 20 million lines of code for Facebook) and hardware (severs, data centres, smartphones etc.).[15]

In a more pointed elaboration by media studies scholars Dijck, Poell and Waal, the platform's architecture is described as being 'fuelled by data, automated and organized through *algorithms* and *interfaces*, formalized through *ownership* relations driven by business models and governed through *user agreements'*.[16] Rigged and programmed thus, the platform then steers 'User interactions' towards generating 'data exhaust', which is the digital trail that Cukier and Schonberger, in their best seller titled *Big Data,* refer to as being the 'byproduct' that people leave in the wake of their online interactions .[17] Data exhaust, hence, is the raw material that is extracted from the User by the platform.

For Shoshana Zuboff in her much acclaimed and authoritative *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, data exhaust is conceptualised as 'behavioural surplus', which is extracted through online interactions to feed the production of 'machine intelligence' or what is often referred to as 'Artificial intelligence' (AI).[18] The AI by being able to automate a huge number of correlations and patterns can then essentially

[14] Scott Galloway, *The Four: the hidden DNA of Amazon, Apple, Face book and Google*, Corgi Books: London, 2017.

[15] Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism,* Polity Press: Cambridge, 2017.

[16] Jose Van Dijck, Thomas Poell and Martin De Waal, *The Platform Society: public values in a connective world,* Oxford University Press: UK, 2018, p.9.

[17] Viktor Mayer-Schonberger and Kenneth Cukier, *Big Data: a revolution that will transform how we live, work and think*, John Mayer: UK, 2013, p.113.

[18] Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*: *the fight for the future of the new frontier of power,* Profile Books; London, 2019. Pg. 8

be purposed to anticipate and predict User behaviour. Prediction, in effect, enables the modification and control of the User's behaviour through a vast range of techniques such as the 'nudge, coax, tune' and the herding towards outcomes. We as the User, consequently, are the 'objects from which raw materials are extracted' and therefore become, as Zuboff argues, the *'means to others' ends'*.[19] The platform, in other words, does not simply connect the service provider to the User nor does it naively set about organizing digital interactions. Rather, it is fundamentally wired up as 'machine intelligence' that is programmed through a suite of algorithms to extract, modify, steer, modulate and inevitably control human behaviour.

The persuasion that EdTech as a platform holds for its advocates, investors and enthusiasts, hence, goes much beyond trying to develop capacities for online teaching. The online teaching platform, more pointedly, intends to be a 'disruptive technology'. Its grand scope is no less than trying to 'Uberize' higher education by delivering a death blow to the remaining detritus of the Humboldian ideal and by fatally downsizing a wobbling corporate university model.

The many Persuasions of EdTech

EdTech, in fact, on the surface, offers both a convincing critique and a compelling set of solutions to the crisis that now engulfs higher education. [20] It correctly understands that student debt has not only become unsustainable but is also eroding the corporate university's initial claim that markets could help 'massify' higher education by broadening access.

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[19] Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism, pg.94.*

[20] Increasingly one notes how regular the failings of the corporate university are being written about. See, for example, Elizabeth Farrelly, ' The decline of universities, where students are customers and academics itinerant workers', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 30th May 2020, https://www.smh.com.au/national/the-decline-of-universities-where-students-are-customers-and-academics-itinerant-workers-20200528-p54xbd.html
[Last Accessed June 1st 2020]

There is a growing disconnect, moreover, between the degree that was paid for and the actual financial returns on the jobs that are available. In sum, degrees from the corporate university are not only pricing themselves out of the job market but in the context of rapid technological change the very notion of competence and employability are undergoing significant shifts: the demand seems to beveering towards the need for a regular upgradation in skill-sets rather than from an intense three or four year degree programme.

EdTech has the capacity to radically cheapen higher education. For starters, the online can entirely side step the huge costs involved in maintaining brick and mortar legacy infrastructures such as libraries, dormitories and lecture halls. Tens of thousands of students can be simultaneously connected to an online module, as opposed to a relatively miniscule number that can be packed into a single class room. In a similar vein, virtual instruction can dramatically abandon the need to maintain an expensive student-teacher ratio by carrying out instructions via pre-recorded lectures, interactive Apps and with on demand digital content.

In 2012, two Stanford computer science professors Andrew Ng and Daphne Koller assembled an online teaching and e-learning platform called *Coursera*, which they designed for offering massive open online courses (MOOC). The Coursera strategy involves partnering [like Uber] with existing universities, colleges, governments and corporates and as of December 2019 their total number of collaborations are listed as comprising roughly 200 across 29 countries.[21]

According to Dijck, Poell and Waal, the Coursera and the MOOC in general are aimed at entirely upending existing academic conventions and designs. Instead of the curriculum-based diploma or degree programs, the platform offers the 'course ─ a single unit that can be "unbundled" and "rebundled" into an online "product" '. That is, instead of the current focus on completing a comprehensive two or three year program that is made of several linked and connected courses, the User-student can now simply

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[21] See the Wikipedia page on Coursera https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coursera

partake of a slice of the education experience by attempting a single course. Akin to what, as the author's tell us, Facebook and Google have done to the newspaper industry by un-packaging them in a manner that allowed the circulation of single articles, feature pieces and news feeds. These unbundled courses, furthermore, can be accredited by the award of certificates of completion and proctored exams ─ versions of micro-degrees or nano-degrees that can be earned for acquiring specific skills.[22]

The Edtech platform as a decentralized, virtual and low cost higher education model, however, already reveals inherent dangers. For one, the User-student's data (behavioural surplus), generated through digital interactions, can be repurposed by the platform for a range of unstated outcomes. An individual's learning curve, emotional states, psychological dispositions and learning abilities, for example, could be minutely mapped and tracked through the trail of data exhaust. Every digital indent, in the form of a like button, emoji use, a quiz, a survey or a simple click, could be graphed to sized up as a behavioural analysis that, in turn, could be then be conveyed as a score to a potential employer or authority.

Secondly, by dispensing with the '*aura*' of classroom solidarity, the online grinds away at attaining individualized and personalized outcomes. The gradient for learning is thus individual centric and steered by predictive analytics ─ algorithms that can replace the teacher's professional judgement with 'learnification'. The learnification paradigm is the 'idea that learning can be managed, monitored, controlled and ultimately modified in each student's personal mind.' In effect, the User-student will be encased within a filter bubble, a self-referential niche that will be digitally reinforced by corroding social solidarity, public value and knowledge through collectives. [23] In sum, the undermining of political citizenship and the devaluing of democracy.

[22] Jose Van Dijck, Thomas Poell and Martin De Waal, *The Platform Society: public values in a connective world,* Oxford University Press: UK, 2018, pp. 117-36.

[23] Jose Van Dijck, Thomas Poell and Martin De Waal, *The Platform Society,* pp.124.

We don't' need no Learnification

But how will the loss of the Humboldtian ideal and the corporate university actually play out? The impacts of EdTech might, in fact, be far more perverse with the platform university consolidating a new type of social and economic hierarchy that is built around different levels of educational inequalities. The prescient and future-facing, Scott Galloway, Professor of Marketing at the prestigious NYU Stern School of Business, in a stock taking interview on the future of higher education in a post Covid-19 world, offers us an unnerving assessment. For Galloway, the shift to the platform university will first begin manifesting as:

> …a dip, the mother of all V's, among the top-50 universities, where the revenues are hit in the short run and then technology will expand their enrolments and they will come back stronger. In ten years, it's feasible to think that MIT doesn't welcome 1,000 freshmen to campus; it welcomes 10,000. What that means is the top-20 universities globally are going to become even stronger. What it also means is that universities Nos. 20 to 50 are fine. But Nos. 50 to 1,000 go out of business or become a shadow of themselves. Ultimately, universities are going to partner with companies to help them expand. I think that partnership will look something like MIT and Google partnering. Microsoft and Berkeley. Big-tech companies are about to enter education and health care in a big way, not because they want to but because they have to… The strongest brands are MIT, Oxford, and Stanford. Academics and administrators at the top universities have decided over the last 30 years that we're no longer public servants; we're luxury goods.[24]

Clearly, the Galloway prophecy is that higher education of the pre-Covid-19 world will become virtually unrecognisable in the not too distant future. The big brand universities are going to gobble up the small guys, online education will massify access and, finally, expect a defining role for Tech giants such as Google and Microsoft in shaping the platform university. Despite this dramatic churn, however, Galloway still believes that the four-year liberal arts-campus experience might survive, but only because it will be populated by the really rich. Brick and mortar higher education,

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[24] *James D. Walsh,* The Coming Disruption Scott Galloway predicts a handful of elite cyborg universities will soon monopolize higher education. *INTELLIGENCER,* MAY 11, 2020
https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2020/05/scott-galloway-future-of-college.html

hence, will spur a caste system, the triumph of aristocratic entitlement over malodorous merit.

In all likelihood the coming years will see the continued frictions, tensions and abrading wars between the Humdoltdian ideal, the corporate university and the EdTech driven platform. Three souls will haunt and agitate campuses: that of the student-citizen, the customer-consumer and the User-student. The winner, for sure, will not take all.