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An Internet Idea Army

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Thomas Homer-Dixon's *The Upside of Down: Creativity, Collapse, and the Renewal of Civilization* paints a grim picture of our not-too-distant future. Global warming, scarce oil, and rigid political, social and economic systems are likely to foster terrorism and other forms of civil conflict.

Yet *The Upside of Down* is also a hopeful book. Homer-Dixon, the Victoria-raised director of the Trudeau Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, wants us to learn from ecology. He wants us to see human endeavour through nature's lens. Systems grow, mature, become rigid, and break down. If we accept that this is true for human systems, we will be better able to create less rigid, less dangerously interdependent systems to minimize potential domino effects, and we will learn to plan for renewal when things do break down.

Of course, many people can talk a good line about impending peril. The question is, what are they actually doing about it? Homer-Dixon places a great deal of faith in individuals, in their ability to collaborate, create consensus, and place that consensus squarely in the public realm in a manner that cannot be ignored.

He's fascinated by Wikipedia's ability to create an enormous, resilient document of human accomplishment through a collaborative, voluntaristic process where ego and experts aren't given much sway. And he wants to apply that model to key global challenges, like creating a truly meaningful and widely used measure of human well-being and creating useful solutions to energy and climate-change challenges.

In part two of a Tyee interview conducted recently in Vancouver, he had this to say about the inadequacy of existing political systems and how we can tap the Internet to foster useful change...

Blame it all on Westminster:

"I think we have to begin with the recognition that the system is failing pretty significantly. To provide for rapid adaptation, we need a world that is very different from the world in which our political institutions developed in the 18th and 19th centuries. We have practical and empirical circumstances that are very different. People have enormous analytical power available to them. Much more information, more communicative ability, they travel much more. For the most part, as citizens, we are more competent and powerful. Power has moved down the social hierarchy from institutions to individuals. But along with power comes commensurate responsibility. People aren't taking on the responsibilities that come with our increasing role in governance -- self-governance.

"I think we can tweak existing political institutions in some ways, but I'm not sure that's ultimately the direction we need to go. I think proportional representation is a valuable change. I wouldn't want to see a wholesale shift to PR. One or other of the houses could have a PR election. That would make a big difference. That would increase voter turnout. I'm really concerned about the decline in participation in the democratic process. But I honestly think there are deeper causes of our malaise -- the architecture that institutionalizes competition and conflict between political actors. What you get in question period is people shouting at each other. It becomes institutionally required for an opposition party to oppose. Its identity is as an oppositional party, instead of trying to constructively solve the problems we have. The general public understands that we're always butting heads.

“The culture of the Westminster political system of parliamentary democracy is very deeply ingrained. I think maybe we need to develop some parallel democratic institutions that are grounded in a more voluntaristic and collaborative approach to problem solving. The devil is in the architectural details. Tweaking things like this can make a big difference.”

Let’s all get together and save the world:

“We need a place where people can go that is less egocentric, where people can focus on solving the problem rather than accumulating power. I think that you could create, as we’ve found with Wikipedia, institutional architectures that encourage that kind of thing. You can kind of socialize people into that. I think what happens with Wikipedia, watching it from the outside, is that people as they participate in the process adopt the norms, they become socialized into the culture and the assumptions of the place. There is an ethic and an etiquette to doing this.”

After we’ve kicked out the noisy nutjobs:

“There are four challenges in creating what I call open-source democracy. It’s possible that they are insurmountable. But let’s go out and do the research and try some things. The four challenges are what I call winnowing, accumulation, hijacking, and refining the role of experts.

“Winnowing is a matter of shifting the signal-to-noise ratio in a favourable direction. There are a huge number of ideas and suggestions and comments. We need to funnel it down to a smaller number of the best ideas that people can concentrate on.

“The second is accumulation. Once you’ve identified the ideas you want to work on, you want to work on them over time. What’s really interesting about the Wikipedia process is that the entries really do improve over time. What surprises me, is even with contentious entries in Wikipedia, even when there are significant value or even power issues associated with the interpretation of the issue, the debate is taken off to the side. As consensus is reached in certain areas, the consensus is brought back into the central entry. You can’t squash debate. You can’t deny people the opportunity to try and figure things out, but it has to be done in a way that doesn’t disrupt the accumulation over time, moving in the direction of better ideas.”

And after we’ve marginalized powerful crackpot vested interests:

“The third challenge is hijacking. Power and values are the big problems that open-source democracy, which deals with our largest challenges, like energy and climate change and wealth differentials, is going to confront. There are enormous vested interests, and very deep differences about value orientation. The problem is we aren’t having a values discussion. I see [an open-source problem-solving] environment as a place where we can at least begin trying to work out a rough-and-ready consensus on the direction we want to go in terms of ‘the good life,’ the ‘just world for our children.’

“The problem is there are crackpots, extremists who will try and hijack the process. They are very loud, they are very co-ordinated, they will capture the space and squeeze other people out.

“I’m watching very closely what Wikipedia is doing to try and deal with this. They will shut down conversation in certain entries for a period of time. They will tell people that they can’t participate. If two people are engaged in this rapid-fire correction and re-correction of an entry, they will take them offline.

“Architecturally, there may be some procedures you can use that people will agree to consensually that will reinforce tolerance and open-mindedness, which are absolutely essential in this kind of community. You have to listen, you have to be prepared to change your views if someone is presenting an alternative argument. There has to be some kind of underlying desire to come to some kind of consensus. If people aren’t buying into those basic values, they’re out of the community. There are lots of people who will. The extent that you select into the community people who buy in, and select out people who don’t, the community as a whole is going to become more and more powerful over time. It’s an evolutionary process and a fitness process. The fanatics are progressively squeezed out. This is about creating collective action for non-extremists.”

And after we’ve humbled the experts:

“The fourth issue, and it’s one that has really hung up Wikipedia, is the role of experts. Experts want special status. It’s all embedded in the concept of experts. There are procedures for establishing who is an expert and who isn’t. Wikipedia hasn’t given them any special status. Experts have a role, but it’s important that the lay people involved in the process of discussing, say, energy and climate change, which are very technical, be informed. Ideally what you want to do is break down the barrier between experts and lay people, and move as much knowledge as you can from the experts to the lay people so the distinction levels out a bit. The more you reinforce expert privilege, the less that distinction is going to level out. That’s going to be tricky, but again I think it’s an architectural issue.

“What the Internet does when it’s working well is it imposes enormous reputational costs. If you’re inclined to be deceptive you will learn very quickly that you will get caught. Everything is so public. I don’t see a deal-breaker with these four problems. I think they’re tricky, but they can be managed, and that’s something I hope to work on for the next few years.”

In the beginning, there will be values and measures:

“I want to take a couple of tough problems and do some beta testing. I don’t think funding is going to be an issue. People are going to jump on this. There are lots of people out there who are thinking in similar terms. We have a little project at the Trudeau Centre that we thought would be a seed for open-source democracy beta testing. The project is trying to develop better measures of social well-being -- alternatives to GDP. We did a survey of the 120-odd alternative social well-being indicators that are out there. I have a wonderful researcher, Karen Frecker, who developed a metric by which you could evaluate the paradigm, and identify the best 12, and do a close study of those 12.

“Let’s start the conversation about creating a new kind of index that, instead of being produced by a bunch of technocrats, is produced potentially by a conversation among thousands if not tens of thousands of people, because as soon as that happens you’ve got people who are going to use it, potentially, all over the world. You automatically create a constituency for the product, and you create legitimacy for the product.

“You have the United Nations human development index, or the World Bank. A lot of these indexes are good, but it’s just a cacophony of different proposals. What you want to do is rip off a bit here, a bit there, and create something around which experts and lay people can reach consensus. If we develop a social well-being index that is too complex for people to understand, then that is not a good index. That’s why lay people have to be involved; they are going to be the ultimate end-users of this.

“The idea would be to develop the index but also test out some open-source architecture.”

Creating space for “exuberant experimentation”:

“In the areas of energy and climate change, there are lots and lots and lots of problems to be solved, micro and macro. [We need] real space for “exuberant experimentation,” as [ecologist] Buzz Holling would call it -- this environment can be a place where experiments are thought up, planned for, reported and analyzed. And then the information is transferred within the community.”

Emergency planning on a global scale:

“What you want to do is the kind of thing that was done prior to the Orange Revolution in the Ukraine and prior to the overthrow of Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia. There are civil society groups that did enormous amounts of work ahead of time to plan for various eventualities, to put resources in place, to develop communication networks so they could respond quickly when something happened, and they were waiting for opportunities to move. Without that planning, things would have gone very differently in both of those places.”

Charles Campbell is editor of Tye Books.