The Divided Kingdom:
A Short History of Cultural Fracture

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Dr Ralph St Clair Wade[1] for BORKOWSKI Ltd
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Introduction

"You are old, Father William," the young man said,
"And your hair has become very white;
And yet you incessantly stand on your head-
Do you think, at your age, it is right?"

   You Are Old, Father William, Lewis Carroll (1865)

You don't need to be a Father William to remember a different United Kingdom. You don't have to be retired to remember the end of the government censorship (1968), or the decriminalisation of homosexuality (1967). To be older than Google (1998), or older than a shop that opens on a Sunday (1994), you don't even need to be thirty. We're not calling you old; we're saying that modern Britain is very new. That's true culturally, demographically, and technologically.

In **Section 1** we take a deep dive into a century of UK population change. That's the theatre for two big revolutions – both cultural and technological. In **Section 2**, we count the cost of this fast-paced change; we're saying that division is a major outcome. That's realised in close-knit generational cliques with different life experiences, different skills, and radically different economic realities. You've met these groups before: Boomers (c. 1946–64), Gen X (1965–81), the Millennials (1981–96) and Gen Z (1997–2013).

Above all, however, these generations are culturally divided – and that division centres around a certain progressive agenda. Its detractors call it WOKE. That's the heart of an anglosphere Culture War, and it creates a perilous corporate dilemma. How should businesses position themselves? Recent history is littered with remains of ill-judged corporate engagements; we'll pick over the wreckage of Pepsi's ill-starred BLM campaign and ask if Twitter or Nike fared any better.

Against the backdrop of demographic change and cultural division, **Section 3** looks at the future of Mass Media. We think it's too soon to write-off the influence of traditional print media; 97% of the UK may not read the Sunday Times, but experience tells us that most of Whitehall do. In the decade after Leveson, we're left asking whether news generated by AI language models might loosen the bonds of proprietorial influence. All revolutions suffer switchbacks; just because it's technologically possible, it doesn't mean that it's pragmatically acceptable. Artificial intelligence has never offered more – but the generation that should be deriving the most profit is switching back to vinyl, Nokia phones, and hard-copy zines. It's a backward-looking future.

Section 1: The Changing Demographic and Cultural Landscape

It's a truism that this is an ageing population. That's a pessimistic way to describe a momentous reduction in the UK's mortality rate. There were fewer deaths in 2018 than there were in 1901, despite our population having since doubled.[2] It's true that the birth rate has never been so low, but then the survival rate amongst infants has seldom been so good.[3] In 1901, 14% of all infants did not live to see their first birthday.[4]

It's not all about death. We know that births dipped at the start of both World Wars, and that both were, in turn, succeeded by baby booms in the early 1920s and late 1940.[5] We know, finally, that the 1960s saw a third, more extended baby boom.[6] It's easy to forget the knock-on changes to population structure. The infants of the 1960s arrived at child-bearing age _en masse_ in the 1980s, triggering a subsequent wave of births.[7] As the post-war boomers age, meanwhile, statisticians have announced that the number of those aged 85 years and over is set to double – from 1.6m to 3m.[8]

The simple demography of birth gets interesting when it intersects with cultural change. In the 1960s and 70s, the mean age at which women had their first child was around 24.[9] It is now 29.[10] If you factor in relationship status, the picture gets richer. As late as 1978, less than 10% of children were born out of wedlock; that figure now stands at 50%.[11] That's a striking comment on the radically different place of marriage in contemporary society, and on the legacy of sexual liberation. In 1968, 80% of twenty-five-year-old women were married; in 2018, 90% were not.[12] That's a revolution for you.

The Two Revolutions

This century of demographic change has been the theatre for two major revolutions; one cultural and one technological. The first is well-documented; a wave of social and sexual liberalisation that swept the country in the early 1960s. Its subtle political implications are less celebrated: the quiet end of hereditary titles; the unannounced termination of the aristocratic debutante season; and the end of theatrical censorship. At the end of the decade, across Europe, a wave of student movements destabilised the establishment, and in some cases the state. In France, the activists took their name from the year: the _soixante-huitards_ ('the sixty-eighters').

The cultural products of the age are legendary, but few remember the accompanying cultural battleground. 1963 was a debut year: the Beatles released _Twist and Shout_, and morality campaigner Mary Whitehouse sent her first letter of complaint to the BBC. You know you've lost the argument when you've been forgotten. Doubly so, when the argument itself has become irrelevant. But perhaps the morality campaigners have had a posthumous victory. Recent histories of sexual liberation and the incoming permissive society have been more cautious. Perhaps this is because they have been written by women, and with female interviewees. Virginia Nicholson's _How Was It For You?_ (2019) carefully weighed the price women paid for male free love: unwanted pregnancies, and an emerging catalogue of sexual assaults.[13] In the wake of the MeToo movement, and a contemporary understanding of consent, the Summer of Love (1967) has lost its sheen.

Our present revolution is technological. It's salutary to reflect on the rapid rise, and still faster obsolescence, of whole waves of technologies: pagers, mobile phones, Walkman, the digital camera, MP3, pedometers, GPS devices, the Satnav and the iPod. All have been merged into the voracious multifunctionality of the smartphone. So, too, Television. The first sets were sold or rented to the public for the Coronation of 1953; the last few will tune in for the Coronation of 2023.

The British public might have imagined, at the turn of the millennium, that this onslaught of new devices would continue indefinitely. The history of the future is an absorbing thing, principally because most conceptions of the future are collages of past experiences. Of his childhood conception of the future, Bill Bryson wrote:

> 'there was a real excitement… that we've just lost, about future possibilities. If you were a kid you really did expect, any day, that we'd all have jet-packs or be going on vacation to Mars…'

Nobody could foresee the internet. Its arrival was like the coming of steam power. It was not just a new technology, but the governing force behind every technology: steam drove cotton mills, the railways, modern sanitation, and mining. So too the internet, but its reach has been broader still.

The notable developments are now software driven. The hardware, if anything, is struggling to keep pace. The developments are new platforms, not new machines: Facebook, Google, Instagram, TikTok, BeReal, Snapchat and Twitch. Meanwhile, new software springs up to cope with the fragilities of the existing hardware, led by battery optimisation technology. At Cambridge University, research groups race each other to develop software that prolongs the limited life of the lithium-ion battery; a technology now over thirty years old. The right results attract attention and major investment; Cambridge's Dr Alpha Lee is one of Forbes' 30 under 30.[14]

If the physical hardware is struggling to keep pace, so, too, are the psychological capabilities of its users, and the society they constitute. The historians and sociologists are watching with bated breath. The last industrial revolution changed the world. In Britain, it began a process of urbanisation that redistributed the population and invented the modern city. That, in turn, demanded new structures of political representation – culminating in the Great Reform Act (1832). In short, the Industrial Revolution kick-started a long story that culminated in universal suffrage, and set in train a voracious hunger for resources that would have seismic geopolitical and environmental consequences. What will eventuate from all the rapid demographic, cultural and technological change summarised here? The future is not what it used to be.

Section 2: The Impact of the Culture Wars

We're saying that the outcome of this century of change is division; and division that sometimes amounts to conflict. When you line-up the post-war generations against a series of technological and economic milestones, it's easy to see where the basic fault lines fall. The result is a familiar roll call: the Boomers (c. 1946–64), Gen X (1965–81), the Millennials (1981–96) and Gen Z (1997–2013). Intergenerational friction is the newest old story, but we think that the generations have never been so clearly defined; so frequently rehearsed in everyday life; or had such a deterministic effect on social behaviour.

The Inevitability of Generational Reaction

At an individual and communal level, we have always revolted against the previous generation. Individually, we rise up to challenge the leaders of our pack. We challenge them for control, but also because – in conflict – we find a basis for self-identification. Could Punk have flourished without a rich repertoire of establishment symbols to protest? That new world, more than any other, was built on the ruins of old: on the image of Monarchy, on the uniforms of the dying establishment, and on the artistic practice of tearing – both fabric, and paper.

It's the same with the history of art. The Georgians found Tudor taste plodding, insular and bastardised. To the Victorians, the Georgians were vain, prissy and immoral – gripped with a classical aesthetic that suggested European political absolutism. The Victorians, in turn, were reviled for the muscular jingoism of their art. The twentieth-century modernists broke with national ornament entirely, and preferred an internationally applicable functionalism. Our own generation regretted the drab, leaky expanses of sixties concrete. Some rebelled, and the postmodern taste has brought us full circle, back to a world of historical references.

So What's New?

What is different about our own generational battle lines? Three things. Firstly, they're multilateral. In the past, there was usually an incumbent generation and a challenger. We have the Boomers, Gen X, Millennials and Gen Z. There's a hearty older demographic that will not give way, two middle generations in perpetual waiting, and a younger generation that is stereotypically disconnected, rather than in revolt. Secondly, there's a practical gap in commonplace skills. The Millennials and Gen Z, who are tech natives, are prone to accuse their elders of technological illiteracy. When in conversation with Gen X, it's usually a joke. But it's a more serious issue with the oldest tranche of society, who – research by Age UK finds – are being overwhelmingly left behind by the physical closure of bank branches, and the emerging cashless society.[15] Central governments have had to intervene; both by bringing high-speed internet to rural areas, and by stepping in to remind councils that cash is still legal tender.[16]

These, of course, are episodic examples of the sweeping, depersonalising effects of computerisation. Some are more conceptual. The internet, and internet bureaucracy, have tended to require information in strict, lateral sequence. You can go forward, and backward; 'next' and 'back'. But as one elderly learner was heard to ask: 'back to what?' Online services provide a completely different mode of data transfer; it's a far cry from a shop counter

conversation, where information is presented in organic exchange. Now it vanishes, in left-to-right sequence, into a void. These generationally defined levels of internet engagement will, as we'll see, spill into cultural viewpoint: anglosphere internet usage can leave its mark on thought process, if not on straightforward opinions.

Thirdly, these are economic battle lines, principally between the Boomers and the Millennials. It's about capital – although to Marxist historians, it always was. In the late nineties and early noughties there was an economic miracle. It's an old story: the one-bedroom London flat that was bought for forty, and sold for four-hundred, thousand. That's a tenfold rise not matched by stagnating salaries. There's a staggering wealth gap between those who boarded the British property train, and those who missed it. Recent YouGov polling suggests that one in five Boomers is a millionaire.[17]

Stay WOKE

The biggest fracture, however, surrounds a package of socio-cultural beliefs. It's a grouping that includes adherence to critical race theory, a commitment to post-colonial approaches and modern gender theory. They call it WOKE; a term first coined in the 1960s and 70s in the context of North American racial politics.[18] This grouping might once have included the liberation of the Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual communities, but that has now entered the northern-European mainstream.

It's no coincidence that the language connected with this unlikely package of beliefs – which range through sociology, history and anthropology – is not only in English, but American English. It's an anglosphere way of thinking, made easier in a language without noun genders. It's a word without many direct translations; the French talk about 'le wokisme', and – with derision – 'la cancel culture'. Not only is this peculiar grouping American – or rather, the product of north American campus culture – but so too, the very concept of the Culture War. Although the term originates in nineteenth-century German sociology (*Kulturkampf* – a struggle for culture), its English equivalent did not emerge until the 1980s.[19] Nor did it gain widespread attention until the early 1990s, with the publication of James Davison Hunter's *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (1991).

However all-encompassing the Culture War may seem, then, it's a contest between linguistically contingent package of beliefs. They've emerged in response to the specific challenges and requirements of the North American twentieth century, and they've found an uneasy equivalence in other English-speaking countries. The vector for transmission is the internet, of which nearly sixty percent is in English.[20] So this immersive, significant cultural movement travels via a medium to which access is generationally determined. That's why this is a way of thinking that has strong generational loyalties, particularly amongst the Millennials, and amongst Gen Z. There aren't many periods where social viewpoint is quite so generationally determined, and where the viewpoints on offer are so extreme.

Backing the Right Horse: Culture Wars in Business

Wars present the commercial world with a heady mix of challenge and opportunity. If you land on the right side, there's a fortune to be made. Take Graham Baron Ash (1889–1980), a Birmingham barbed-wire manufacturer who grew rich from the First World War. His neo-medieval fantasy house, Packwood, is still enthusiastically presented by the National Trust.

Not all wartime profiteers have escaped public notice so easily; the historic relationship of Hugo Boss with Nazi Germany was the subject of Russell Brand's infamous goosestepping protest at the GQ Awards (2013).

In today's cultural battleground, the stakes aren't as high – but you still have to back the right horse, and in the right way. Here, we look at the recent history of corporate engagement on the cultural battlefield. Perhaps it's no surprise that the academic case studies in this area centre on corporate engagement with the North American racial struggle. Scholars have, so far, written less on the same phenomenon within the sphere of trans rights. The major themes, however, are arguably similar: involve yourself successfully in the cultural struggle, and the commercial benefit is immense. Put a foot wrong, meanwhile, and the reputational challenges can be terminal; that's a fate that's befallen some of the UK's greatest national treasures, notably J.K. Rowling and Terry Gilliam. Here we argue that it's not just a case of jumping successfully – or unsuccessfully – onto a cultural bandwagon. It's clear that corporate entities have not just exploited social justice struggles, but have actually – in the case of Twitter and Black Lives Matter – collaborated with their leaders, and helped to shape them.

Recent history, however, is littered with the corpses of ill-judged advertising campaigns. Take Kendall Jenner's Pepsi campaign (2017), in which she attended a distinctly ornamental BLM protest. Its crowning moment sees Jenner defusing a standoff between protestors, and a suspiciously unarmed squadron of riot police, by distributing cans of Pepsi. The advert, which is now the subject of learned sociological discussion, was quickly pulled.[21]

Nike's contemporary effort enjoyed more success. Their 2018 campaign, featuring the Civil Rights activist and quarterback, Colin Kaepernick, won an Emmy (2019). In the aftermath of the campaign's success, the corporation claimed they backed Kaepernick because they believed him to be 'one of the most inspirational athletes of his generation'.[22] In fact, detailed investigative work by the New York Times revealed that the campaign had a turbulent history. Kaepernick was very nearly dropped, whilst Nike neurotically weighed the forces on both sides of the argument. Eventually, they decided that, in Yasmin Nair's words, 'that the NFL supporters – largely white, male, and older – were outnumbered by the [Nike's] brand loyalists – more diverse and younger'.[23] It was, in short, a mercenary and tactical question. Not 'in whose cause do we believe' but rather, 'which cause has more financial firepower'. A pity, then, that the campaign slogan was: 'believe in something even if it means sacrificing everything'.[24]

The corporate response to our present cultural division has been richly complicated. A casual observer might have expected a clear divide between the campaigning youth, and a complacent, established capitalism. Instead, major corporations have been keen to co-opt the fashionable language of protest for profit. That sounds like a parasitic relationship, but it's actually symbiotic. It's not just about Nike and Pepsi feeding on the suffering of minorities, but of a calculated (sometimes miscalculated) attempt to raise the profile of social movements. Recent scholarship has focussed on the close, apparently transactional, relationship between Twitter and the BLM movement. Jack Dorsey and DeRay McKesson stood at the heart of that exchange.

So who took what? There's a certain cachet for Twitter in the 'appearance of corporate progressiveness'.[25] Given Twitter's association with the democratic struggle in Iran (2009) and Egypt (2011), there's also a clear intention to demonstrate geopolitical influence, benevolent or otherwise. In that vein, Twitter adorned both its physical and digital premises with the iconography of political struggle. In August and December 2014, the company painted the #Ferguson and #BlackLivesMatter tags on a wall in its San Francisco headquarters. Their most debated initiative – a T-shirt bearing the legend #StayWoke – was famously worn by the activist DeRay McKesson at the scene of his July 2016 arrest.

What did the BLM movement take in exchange? The debt is considerable. The app was the principal conduit for both internal organisation, and public address. The scholar Dean Freelon called Twitter 'the predominant hub for BLM online'.[26] It shaped the whole profile and progress of the movement. It is telling that the very name, 'BLM', is itself a hashtag. It's clear, then, that these pacts have powerful consequences for both parties. Twitter lionised the BLM movement, and in turn the movement aggrandised Twitter's influence. That came at a cost. BigTech, suggest some, has begun to remake these social movements in their own image. Twitter provided a theatre for the naming of 'BLM', and even – by its T-shirt campaign – helped redefine 'WOKE'. That word belonged exclusively to the North American racial struggle, but it has now become the property of a whole community of socially liberal beliefs.

In short, we believe that a century of demographic change has created unprecedented generational division. Gone is the bilateral exchange between the old guard and the new. Instead, the Boomers, Gen X, the Millennials and Gen Z are locked in a multilateral battle, with different skills, and radically different economic priorities. That's the theatre – and these are the actors – in a complex cultural conflict. We're calling it a Culture War, and true to the American origins of the phrase, it's a product of the anglosphere. When the buying public draws up cultural battlelines, businesses take sides and form alliances. At their most sophisticated, they will only react to the existing conflict – but succeed in redefining it.

Section 3: The New Definition of Mass Media

What is the future of Mass Media in a society that is culturally and demographically divided? What will be the ongoing effects of the communications revolution? The first industrial revolution gave us cheaper print matter and pioneered popularly accessible newspapers. That in turn had formidable political consequences. The Times, for over two hundred years the voice of English court and people, came to prominence as the voice of the ascendent Victorian middle class. Is this truly the end of print?

The End of Print?

We're saying that it's too soon to write-off traditional print media. That's true in terms of both the quantity and quality of its audience. It's true that print circulation has generally dwindled. But even that shouldn't be overstated. Influential cult publications, like *Private Eye*, the satirical magazine that got there first on many of the century's most notable scandals, continues to be stable. Across the Channel, Private Eye's analogue *Le Canard Enchaîné*, has a minimal online presence, and continues to set the agenda.

Even where print circulation has foundered, the titles have emerged unscathed. In his testimony to the Leveson Enquiry, Viscount Rothermere – the beneficial owner of the Daily Mail and General Trust – was optimistic about the future. With 4.1m hits per day, MailOnline remains the market leader for English language news.[27] Again, however, news consumption is generational. Snapchat, which has undergone a demographic transformation as the primary messaging application for Gen Z, is a major conduit for news consumption. Gen X, similarly, access traditional titles through Facebook – itself, largely now reinvented as the network of the middle-aged. Snapchat differs, however, in providing a spread of traditional titles in largely unadulterated form – rather than the fragments of paywall articles that circulate on Facebook. All this is assuming that circulation sets the agenda – and not all media managers agree. Sure, 97% of the population doesn't read The Sunday Times, but most of the Cabinet probably do.[28] If you want something on the legislative agenda, the broadsheets still wield a disproportionate influence.

The Press Crisis and Leveson

That relationship, between government and the Broadsheet press – and the News UK titles in particular – has been problematic in recent history. The Leveson Enquiry (2011) brought the character of this political influence into public awareness. Amongst its most decisive revelations was the testimony of Sir John Major. Rupert Murdoch, he claimed, had openly asked him to renege on his pro-European policy – and, further, threatened the withdrawal of support from his administration. This unveiled threat, which was effectively the threat of removal from office, was all the more striking for Murdoch's failure to give the usual nod to editorial independence. That's a relationship that continued with News UK's unprecedented support for a Labour Government in 1997. Both Tony Blair and Alistair Campbell testified in support of the New Labour charm offensive that had allowed them to woo News UK – an arguable precondition of their election landslide. Murdoch, they said, liked to back winners. However, both Campbell and Blair conceded that – at times – they had gone too far.

The high-water mark of this relationship came with the electoral success of the coalition government in 2010. That cosiness found infamous expression in the activities of what The Telegraph dubbed the 'Chipping Norton set' (2012). It was around the scrubbed wood tables, and granite kitchen islands of the northern Cotswolds that political deals were done, over Krug and AGA–made Shepherd's Pie. Rebecca Brooks' famous text message to David Cameron, shown to Lord Justice Leveson, disastrously summed it up: 'We're all in this together.' That inculpation, it turned out, was more than a bit of gentle electioneering. Rapidly spiralling allegations of criminal behaviour culminated in the revelation that the *News of the World* had hacked the phone of murdered schoolgirl Milly Dowler.

There's a recurrent trend that sees threatened institutions attempting to represent systemic problems as regrettable one-off lapses. The Dowler Case provoked the Leveson Enquiry (2011–12), which reported widespread recklessness – and even criminality – amongst sectors of the tabloid press.[29] The testimony of Milly Dowler's bereaved parents, Bob and Sally, was one of the Enquiry's most harrowing moments. The failure of the Cameron government to act properly on Lord Justice Leveson's recommendations, has remained a bone of contention by campaigners.

The direction of more recent Conservative administrations has arguably failed to restore public confidence. The promised second part of the Leveson Enquiry – which had been delayed by the criminal investigation into *The News of the World* – was quietly shelved in 2017. The deathblow was delivered the following year, when Matt Hancock formally scrapped the project during his tenure as Culture Secretary. Meanwhile, the close relationship between politicians and senior press figures has continued to attract public attention. Even after his Prime Ministerial career had ended, Boris Johnson has reportedly continued to accept hospitality from Rupert Murdoch, notably accepting travel worth £11,000 in October 2022.[30]

Cabinet Office records, meanwhile, show a lively roster of meetings with media figures even during the Johnson premiership.[31] Between January and December 2020, a period overshadowed by the economic demands of the Pandemic, Johnson had no fewer than twenty-nine meetings with media figures, compared to three with the Bank of England.[32] Of those twenty-nine media meetings, there are some notably recurring names: Victoria Newton of the Sun, and Geordie Greig of the Daily Mail both met Johnson three times in one year. Despite the editorial independence of the traditional print titles, Johnson still saw a substantial number of proprietors, including Lebedev Holdings, Rupert Murdoch, the Barclay Brothers and Viscount Rothermere.[33]

It is perhaps striking that all of Johnson's meetings with press figures are classified as 'General Discussion' – notably the only Prime Ministerial meetings to be described in those terms.[34] Even meetings with a larger range of participants, and a wider agenda, include a more specific outline of what was discussed.[35] Johnson's attempts to appoint Paul Dacre as head of Ofcom (November 2021) have also been divisive, given the post-Leveson failure to reform press regulation. Johnson's continued attempts to give Dacre a Life Peerage – despite the nomination being initially refused by the House of Lords appointments commission – have been equally controversial.

AI-Generated Media

That's the old Mass Media. It's flawed, substantially unreformed – but still surprisingly influential. Would news generated by artificial intelligence be any better? AI Language Models, such as ChatGPT, are clearly capable of producing coherent news articles. In the course of this research, the platform has generated a convincing five-hundred-word story about a new species of sea slug. Connect ChatGPT to appropriate newswires, and most copywriters could be redundant. Perhaps, in time, the model might be able to select suitable news stories – based on the frequency of public or political reference. All this, seemingly without the influence of proprietorial agenda, or journalistic malice. News stories could be chosen based on statistically significant public engagement, rather than proprietorial vested interest, or editorial hobby horses. They could be written up with a complete, unswerving discipline: ChatGPT typically produces a three-point briefing, sandwiched by a short introduction and conclusion.

Sure, we'd have to ask searching questions about the vested interests, and implicit biases, that production companies inculcate in their artificial intelligence models. We'd have to be conscious that these language models are at their most developed with the English language. Nor could we dispense with traditional investigative journalism, which works by unearthing precisely what is *not* being talked about. So, too, these are programs with potential to run amok – a possibility made more salutary by the recent concern of senior industry figures.[36] Even so, it's hard to imagine even the most devious robot disgracing itself more than Glen Mulcaire or Clive Goodman. And we could, at least, excuse its inhumane lapses, as those of an insentient program.

What about the metaverse? It sounds like a buzzword, albeit one in which Meta has invested $36 billion.[37] That's a future which, like the SpaceX Mars Project, offers a new world – partly as an antidote to the failures of the old. As a computer-generated environment, in which users interact through avatars, it's prey to some basic discussions about ownership. It's taken a thousand years to democratise land ownership even in the most developed corners of the world. Even in the United Kingdom today, 50% of the land is owned by less than 1% of the population.[38] In a Guardian expose of 2017 ('*Revealed: the insidious creep of pseudo-public space in London*'), it emerged that even spaces we perceive as public are sometimes owned by private companies.[39] Take Paternoster Square in the City, or Granary Square in King's Cross. Likewise, the historical record has taught us to be wary of private companies controlling territory of any kind. The British learnt the hard way from the nationalisation of the East India Company in 1858, but the population of the subcontinent paid the highest price.

It's also about the body. We think that claims of the metaverse are an attack on the reality of embodiment, and of physicality. Our need for relational touch and for in-person interaction became glaringly obvious in the necessarily virtual world of the pandemic. This physical need is implicitly being recognised by tech companies. The haptic capabilities of the iPhone, which offers all kinds of satisfying clunks and buzzes, is one example. Perhaps there is something sinister in the fact that the most rewarding haptic buzz of all activates when the user makes a successful transaction on Apple Pay. In short, the tech world must stay physically engaged. The incessantly visual character of most tech, of the constant bombardment with images –

particularly idealised images of the human form – has arguably done enough damage already.[40]

Reactions against the New World

Even if the metaverse is a moot point, we've said that mass media has to be affected by the rise of AI Language Models. That's still a revolutionary change which, like all changes, must be subject to a counter-reaction. That reaction might be destructive, or constructive. When Britain first industrialised, the now-redundant weavers (soon branded 'Luddites') smashed as many mechanical looms as they could find. Equally, at the end of the nineteenth century, as mass production reached new heights, handmade goods – particularly those that bore the toolmarks to prove it – returned to the vogue. The Arts and Crafts movement led that charge.

So, what are the obvious reactions to expect against AI-driven media? We think there are at least two: the resurgence of long-form journalism; and the resurgence of tactile media. The instantaneous character of digital news, and the fast movement of the news cycle inevitably created a hunger for more substantial discussion; the Guardian led the charge with the foundation of its Long Reads in 2014. The format has lasted well, helped along by the podcast mania of the last few years. Long reads make for good, well-disciplined podcasts – something New Statesman has been quick to capitalise on with the start of their audio long reads in April 2022.

The other reaction is the resurgence of physical media. A growing number of users – particularly those members of Gen Z who have been scarred by premature exposure to mass media – are 'going analogue'. That means replacing the smartphone for a Nokia brick, and listening to music on cassette, or vinyl. It's a movement that's gathering pace amongst those in their early-20s. That's also led to a boom in independent print media; there have never been more Zines. These capture the mood perfectly: where the new mass media is charmlessly impersonal, Zines are intensely personal – even idiosyncratic. Where the new media is ephemeral, and fleetingly visual, Zines are tactile. That doesn't just mean that they're printed – which they are – but they rejoice in that physicality: different textures – plastic, card – with bits stapled on. It's a glorious counterattack against a necessary, if relentless, process of automation.

Conclusion

The current moment is a primordial soup, and we're living in it. In the heat of demographic change, and mounting cultural division, British society has changed radically. That's the theatre for the permanent technological and social change we explored at the outset. We've also picked over the cultural battlefield. The divisions are multilateral, and they're expressed in terms of a skills-gap, and an economic divide. That's helped cause a culture war. It's a conflict which has publicly chewed up and spat out some of its earliest freedom fighters; in the *Life of Brian*, Terry Gilliam all but brought down the British religious establishment, and he is no more. J.K. Rowling gave us Dumbledore, the first openly gay character in children's fiction, and she is gone too. Which cultural horse will you back, and how much will you wager?

AI Language Models will radically reshape mass media. Britain's leading universities are already counting the cost of ChatGPT, particularly in the context of open-book assessments.[41] The model writes with more discipline than many of Britain's brightest students; it probably writes better than most of your employees.[42] Where does that leave print media? In the troubled decade after the Leveson Enquiry, perhaps AI-driven news can moderate the idiosyncrasies of newspaper editors, and the malign influence of politically driven proprietors. As technology moves on, the youngest section of the population recoils – but the advances are here to stay. This is a moment of creative destruction. Old industries and ideologies may fail, but for the shrewd, the daring, and the open-minded the opportunities will be immense.

[1] Dr Ralph St Clair Wade BA MPHIL PHD FSASCOT is a cultural historian lecturing at Cambridge University. He is the founder of Cambridge Cultural Strategy.

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[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

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[10] Ibid.

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[12] Ibid.

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