

## *A letter from the IR pandemic “zoomroom”*

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The turmoil caused by the worldwide pandemic will be felt and debated for years, also in the International Relations (IR)<sup>1</sup> discipline. It has already started. Some journals dedicate to it special issues; opinion pieces proliferate<sup>2</sup>. Even new books begin to roll off the press.<sup>3</sup> Which IR approach will be validated, defended as more useful than the others? What will happen to globalization? Is globalization now in the ICU, as Steve Walt claimed?<sup>4</sup> Do we face a new Cold War, a nuclear war? Or, judiciously avoiding these questions are we continuing to slide into the fragmentation of middle-range theories, hypotheses testing, which some scholars see as the end of the IR discipline<sup>5</sup>? Remember the arguments after the disintegration of the Soviet bloc and the end of the Cold War: the “end of history”? the “clash of civilizations”? “BRICS”? “Globalism”? The debate about the world after the pandemic threatens to be much

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<sup>1</sup>The standard usage is that International Relations (IR) is spelled with capital letters when it refers to the IR discipline (also International Studies) and in lower case when it relates to world events. Stanley Hoffmann referred to this distinction as the “state of the world” in contrast to the “state of the discipline,” i.e., the “world” and the “discipline,” Stanley Hoffmann, 1977 “An American Social Science: International Relations,” *Daedalus*, vol.106, No 3, Volume 1 (Summer, 1977), pp.41-60.)

<sup>2</sup>For samples of the literature range, e.g., Seth A. Johnston, 2020, “The Pandemic and the Limits of Realism, The foundational international relations theory has been revealed to be far less realistic than it claims.” *Foreign Policy*, June 24; Amitav Acharya, 2020, “How Coronavirus May Reshape the World Order,” *The National Interest* April 18. <https://nationalinterest.org>

<sup>3</sup>Fareed Zakaria 2020 *Ten Lessons for a Post-Pandemic World*, Simon & Schuster (October 6)

<sup>4</sup>Steve Walt, 2020, “The Realist’s Guide to the Coronavirus Outbreak,” *Foreign Policy*, March 9

<sup>5</sup>Peter Marcus Kristensen, 2018, “International Relations at the End: A Sociological Autopsy,” Forthcoming in *International Studies Quarterly*.

Maximilian Benedikt Mayer 2017 *The Unbearable Lightness of International Relations: Technological Innovations, Creative Destruction and Assemblages*, Bonn, <https://bonndoc.ulb.uni-bonn.de/xmlui/handle/20.500.11811/7052>; Stephane J. Baele and Gregorio Bettiza 2020 “‘Turning’ Everywhere in IR: On the Sociological Underpinnings of the Field’s Proliferating Turns,” *International Theory* Final Draft Accepted for Publication

more confusing and controversial. However, this is a moment of great opportunity for the International Relations field. Student demand for IR classes is on the rise: who does not want to know what is going on in the world? IR knowledge, students think, might be useful for any career whatever it might be. Its title alone, sometimes called Global Politics, International Studies or World Affairs, promises a holistic, big picture, an insight into the frighteningly complex world.

One often neglected dimension of the pandemic crisis is now coming to sharp relief. In the greater order of things, it might appear to be a small detail. It has been on my mind for years, and I know of others equally worried. I refer here to what we do in the IR classroom: I address here some issues that I can influence, unable to influence anything much else.<sup>6</sup>

The Covid closed down the university classrooms, even in the “hybrid” modality, albeit allowing some limited “in-person” contact. Have we, the teachers, been prepared? Were there no warnings? What, if anything, is being done to adjust to the new way of teaching if the zoom is here to stay, challenging the very existence of university invented in Medieval Europe? What are we learning about the new “distance” form of teaching and learning, which some predict is here to stay, should stay, or indeed, might have to stay in the Digital Age which the pandemic brutally thrust upon us. What is happening to university education?

There were some prescient warnings about the future of university education. Some years ago, I watched the former Bennington president Dr. Liz Coleman’s *TED Talk* “On the crisis of American Higher Education” (2009)<sup>7</sup>. (And note the date of her talk – the major events of the Digital Age as well as, of course, the pandemic were still to come.) She decried the passivity in the academy, mainly social sciences and humanities, her field. She accused faculty, all of us, of having no ideas, seeing perhaps crises but not complaining and, more importantly - doing nothing. Liz Coleman delivered a call-to-arms for radical reform in higher education. We had moved, she said, light-years from the passions that animated higher education in the past, making the US education the best in the world. She blamed faculty for “lack of effort, innovation, imagination, the flexibilities of mind, the ignorance of multiplicity of perspectives, lack of ideas.” She talked of “continually narrowing the focus, learning more, and more about less and less.” Despite the evidence all around us “of the interconnectedness of things...[we fail to provide] learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change”. The education should give students a broad knowledge of the wider world and in-depth study in a specific area of interest. But “subject matters are broken up

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<sup>6</sup>V.Kubáľková “Reconstructing the Discipline: Scholars as Agents,” in *International Relations in Constructed World*. eds. V. Kubáľková, Onuf, N. G., Kowert P. Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe. 1998.

<sup>7</sup>Bennington president Dr. Coleman’s *TED Talk* on the crisis of American Higher Education (2009). May 31, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=syqScVtnKuU>

into smaller and smaller pieces, emphasizing the technical and the obscure. Who allows it? A bare minimum of *cultural literacy* [my emphasis] eludes vast numbers of our students.” It is not the students’ fault, as some works claim.<sup>8</sup> It is ours. The Information Technology (IT) experts whom universities hire in large numbers come with new methods of “delivering” the knowledge. Still, the literacy, the knowledge, is what they do not deliver. That is our task.

She is right as far as the IR discipline is concerned. IR has been sliding into a very narrow empirically-based discipline, claiming a rigor of natural sciences and explanatory and predictive capability. Based on these premises, IR has avoided or indeed excluded reflection on how we produce knowledge. Questions of the philosophy of science and the foundation of knowledge have been taken for granted and given. It has, therefore, become impossible to engage the late modern revival of ethical and philosophical concerns.

That raises curricular issues: what to include, what to exclude, and the qualifications of teachers. I remember my Ph.D. supervisor Professor Reynolds<sup>9</sup>, after E.H.Carr, he was the second holder of the Woodrow Wilson Chair in Aberystwyth. He is credited for building the department into a leading center for IR. Although he became the Vice-Chancellor of Lancaster University, he insisted that he teach two courses every semester: the Introduction to IR and the IR theory’s senior class. He claimed this his responsibility, not to be relegated to junior faculty or Ph.D. students. Stanley Hoffmann cautioned against the danger of IR curricula becoming a “flea market” of unconnected courses. And Liz Colman concludes her TED talk even more bluntly and directly: “If a change in higher education does not occur and higher education descends into a crisis, what will I say, years from now, when people ask, ‘Where were you?’” It is with these words that she concludes her challenge: the words “where were you?” come originally from the refrain of the famous Easter hymn. It is an appeal to do the right thing, a call to moral responsibility, to conscience. Are all these comments inapplicable to the Digital era?

Like Liz Colman, today’s senior professors’ generation must have noticed the dizzying speed of innovation as soon as the Digital/Information Age arrived, not noticed by the younger faculty. We learned how to write with a pen dipped into a bottle of ink. We wrote dissertations on rachitic manual typewriters, whitening and retyping errors, having to renumber – all by

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<sup>8</sup>E.g., Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa 2011 *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, the University of Chicago Press, claiming that the US undergraduate students do not read more than 50 pages a week.

<sup>9</sup>P.A. Reynolds, CBE, who after E.H.Carr became the second Woodrow Wilson professor of international politics at the University of College Wales, Aberystwyth to become later a professor and the vice-chancellor of the University of Lancaster. Richard Little “Leading light in the academic evolution of international relations Philip Alan Reynolds, historian, and university administrator” *The Guardian* Wed September 30, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2009/sep/30/philip-reynolds-obituary>

hand - all hundreds of footnotes should one be lost. Unimaginable today. I recall seeing with disbelief the first Xerox machine, a welcome change from copying everything by hand. While at Stanford, I received across continents a facsimile from Australia. I wouldn't say I liked the first personal computer, inflicted on us by the department's chair (to save money on secretarial support, which we never got back). The first word-processing was incredibly user-unfriendly. I remember the first email I received - green letters on the black. The dean wrote to us: "Welcome to cyberspace." Little did we know what it might mean. These developments were happening still in slow motion, with often long pauses between them. Until the arrival of the internet and smart phones<sup>10</sup> with the simultaneous rise of social media platforms. The Information/ Knowledge/Digital Age has arrived with a bang.

The millennial and the "alphabet soup" named generations X, Y, etc., now our students were born with, and into the Digital Age, almost physically inseparably attached to it. A smartphone in everybody's hand, the internet in everyone's pocket with access to the knowledge "democratized," its volume astronomically immense. The generation of our students would not notice or be surprised<sup>11</sup>. However, the question for me is: Can I teach the same way I was taught in the Gutenberg era - taking notes, catching every professor's word since he/she - and the text - were the only authoritative source of knowledge? The professor had privileged access to archives, libraries, unlike ordinary mortals. We now teach about globalization, the global reach, interconnectivity, the compression, acceleration of everything, the digitalization of information. But have we changed our way of teaching? Have we thought about compressing, condensing, accelerating the learning process, predicated of course on deciding what counts in IR as general literacy? IT technician cannot be its judge.

Universities started some time ago exploring possible palliative or transformative use of Information Technology, turning to IT for possible help. Most universities have increasingly sophisticated Blackboard or other (lower cost) platforms, with every course automatically provided with its website. Alas, most social science/humanities professors have used the vast range of such facilities only sporadically: only to upload a course outline and some reading materials. Most faculty do not use the enormous range of facilities which come certainly with the Blackboard: wikis, discussion boards, a possibility for students to create their own websites (called Portfolio), debate among themselves, share information, meeting in real-time—learning, if faculty encourages it, many useful technical skills distracting them (hopefully)

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<sup>10</sup>iPhone introduced on January 9, 2007, see Craig Simon, "Internet Governance Goes Global," in *International Relations in a Constructed World*, in Vendulka Kubalkova, Nicholas G. Onuf, and Paul Kowert, eds. New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1998.

<sup>11</sup>Moore's law observes that the number of transistors in a dense integrated circuit doubles approximately every two years when technology becomes obsolete every five to seven years.

from the ubiquitous social media.

Universities do not seem to mind the changing textbooks market: publishers add (password protected) audiovisual sites to otherwise unchanged printed (and thus even more expensive) textbooks. Using them requires relatively little or no on-campus expertise and labor, simple prefabricated tests that can be automatically graded by the computer enabling an illusion of asynchronous learning and teaching requiring no qualifications to offer courses using such textbooks.<sup>12</sup> The zoom era raises new issues: universities record all lectures, claiming they own copyright, and using the recorded materials – without the faculty into the future. What would Professor Reynolds say.....

If you have read this letter this far, you might well ask what its point is. I began with the statement that this is a moment of great opportunity for the International Relations field. Then I proceeded by critiquing IT's use in IR so far, laced with a great deal of nostalgia. I kept my point to the very end - other people might take a different path. Or none.

When I heard Liz Colman call to arms, I already started reading around, worried about not understanding the tremendous changes all around me. There is so much IR literature to keep up with and now to add reading in other fields, communications, neuroscience<sup>13</sup>, education, IT, all implicated? I decided to learn what my role as a professor in the digital age and in the digital classroom might be. I noticed the change in students, the undergraduates in particular. Perhaps I should also try to do something differently.

I read Antonio Damasio, but also George Lakoff and particularly Marshal MacLuhan. I kept asking questions to the IT director at my University, Bill Vilberg, as to what software to use. I took a few short courses for faculty at the UM school of engineering –realizing that the new era has its own language.

What did I learn? As cognitive scientists point out, new generations raised in the Information Age and Digital Age are bombarded with visual signals. They are not less smart; their intelligence is different. Their brains are wired differently, and they process visual signals differently and more readily than deciphering the text. Years ago, Marshal MacLuhan pointed

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<sup>12</sup>There are the controversial Massive Online Open Classes (MOOCs) at the other end of the modest spectrum. Some leading US universities film prominent faculty members delivering a series of lectures. No instructor is ever physically present, and there is no interaction at all. Thus tens of thousands of students can access these lectures for no cost and no credit. Some commentators refer to MOOCs as a new form of cultural imperialism since they have a global reach. Some joke about having a nightmare about the entire world watching simultaneously - the same MOOCs video, the same "talking head."

<sup>13</sup>the 'neurobiology of human rationality' includes Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1994); Antonio R. Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Putnam Books, 1994); and Antonio R. Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1999).

out that deciphering texts and receiving audiovisual signals produce different literacy forms.<sup>14</sup> So why bombard students just with the image of the talking professor, online, over the zoom, perhaps showing a list of his talking points but nothing else. IT thus tends to replicate and mimics the traditional format. So do the zoom classes. It is only an Ersatz for the conventional class; nothing is added. Why not try to animate the subject? Many in IR agree that IR is based on metaphors easy to visualize. I have experimented with letting images drive the text, which is what experts on teaching and learning recommend.

Also, we teach that globalization means interconnecting, accelerating, condensing. We say it is happening in the globalizing world, but we do not condense, accelerate as we teach. Also, the introduction of IT to teaching has not been designed to augment the volume of covered materials without lengthening the process of learning. And thus, the issue becomes what and how to condense, to make a place for other topics. This is where seniority comes in. I am more likely to see what to skip, what to caricature. None of this has been easy. My first bunch of over a hundred videos<sup>15</sup> are quite obviously not made in a Hollywood studio and for that matter in any studio but on a kitchen table, with - technically speaking- rough edges. But when a Hollywood studio catches up, it will be the way to go.

I am grateful to one of the peer reviewers of this letter's draft for pointing out that I became too carried away, emphasizing that the senior faculty absolutely has to adapt to the new, post-Gutenberg era, which the COVID crisis brought to the forefront. I was also afraid that my "Academia letter" was already too long. Thus I might have misled. I do not propose to go all zoom/digital and make ourselves, the faculty, and the university redundant.

On the contrary, the professor's role in the information Age (and university) is now more critical than ever. We have two inseparable tasks:

First, we have to cooperate with the IT to "digitalize/ animate/ visualize" our subject matter in an interesting, even fun way to compete against and wean students from social media, which

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<sup>14</sup>"Images, only images, are what counts. The written word has already submitted to/succumbed to the real power these days: the dynamo of representations, most of it derived from the movie industry. McLuhan, Marshall. 2003 (1974). *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Edited by W. Terrence Gordon. Critical Edition. Berkeley, CA: Gingko Press a communications theorist." It is impossible to understand social and cultural changes without a knowledge of the workings of media." The most incredible aspect of McLuhan's claims was that they were made nearly 40 years ago, in 1967, before social media, the world-wide-web or the internet even existed. His prediction of an international, interconnected, interactive global village is now an actuality. In different ways, Marshall McLuhan emphasized communications technology changes as the central force in the historical process. The presumed annihilation of time and space. The telegraph seemed capable of annihilating space and time, media as the prime mover behind the historical process, social organizations, and changing sensory awareness. Printing became the dominant medium of Western civilization and remained so pervasive that one can hardly comprehend the environment it created

<sup>15</sup>See V.Kubalkova, *International Relations and Me: An Introduction to an IR Videobook*, forthcoming

is what the new generations of students are addicted to. We have to be inventive, as Liz Colman so powerfully said. We have to package the facts that students had to write down in the Gutenberg era; now, access to them is different. Thus to repeat, by no means would I advocate for the education's change into an impersonal series of YouTube movies rendering us and university redundant. We have to try to find an enjoyable way to teach via IT (not just talking heads and PowerPoint talking points).

We then, which is my second point, freed from just pouring facts into students' heads – even back in the normal classroom, we have to be “professors.” We have to guide students, we have to inspire them to develop curiosity and passion for learning. We can't deprive them of philosophy and history basics. We have to make them literate in our subject-matter, in our culture and sensitive to others. We have to teach them not what, but how to think. We have to teach them to question and never accept that the current era is the era of post-truth.

Education is not a commodity, quantifiable in some numerical scores. Nor is it just a path to a job. It is a gift from one generation to the next. The beautiful thing about what you know and experience – as my parents taught me - is that nobody can take it away from you. When we return from the zoomroom to the classroom, and I look forward to it – it will be a different experience.

Finally, something along the lines will have to be done for another reason. Existing debates in IR are still Western-dominated, neglecting non-Western voices, experiences, and agency. But that has been changing. IR is no longer an initially AngloAmerican discipline, then primarily American, but it is now Global. International Studies Association claims its members hail from 110 countries where IR is now studied and taught. There is now a new Section of ISA being discussed with support from 56 of those countries. The space for their voices will have to be made by condensing others. The Global IR is possible in the Digital Age<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup>For information about it see <https://bit.ly/GlobalIR>