

# **Accompanying Youths in their Journey to the Stars: Understanding and Embracing the Signs of Times\***

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*We're entering an era in which our enemies  
can make anyone say anything at any point in time*  
(Jordan Peele as Barack Obama)

At first, viewers of the video are inclined to believe that the words quoted above belong to Barack Obama, the 44<sup>th</sup> U.S. President.<sup>1</sup> To their surprise, the video later revealed that those words were actually uttered by a creative movie director named Jordan Peele. The video was produced with the specific purpose of demonstrating the ease with which a person can now fabricate fake videos of real persons. Utilising “deepfakes” – the latest developments in artificial intelligence known as deep learning – fake videos, including fake pornographic videos, of real persons can now be easily made by anyone with access to the Internet. Let us now pause for a moment to imagine such an incident happening to our politicians, public officials, journalists, and even to ordinary people like us who possess no political leverages.

At a time when many of us are still unable to recognise hoaxes in the forms of texts and images spread through various social media platforms, we must now prepare ourselves to grapple with a far more difficult challenge. In the near future, “deepfakes” technology will allow anyone to manipulate reality in such a meticulous way that identifying its resulting video as a deception will become an arduous test for even the

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<sup>1</sup> “You won’t believe what Obama says in this Video,”  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cQ54GDm1eL0>

most tech-savvy persons. Communities whose members care less about fact-checking or referring to trusted sources of information are more susceptible to its consequences. Such a formidable task, unfortunately, is only one of the many challenges brought about by the revolution of digital technology.

The transformations initiated by digital technology ranges from political-economy to education, religion, and family life. Conventional business models, which had stood tall in the past, must now cope with the disruptions brought about by *techpreneurs* who promote revolutionary business models. The young are especially prone to such disruptions since they must anticipate the competition provided by robots equipped with artificial intelligence.<sup>2</sup> Within ten years, various skills and business models will become obsolete. Hundreds of millions of workers around the world will need to acquire new set of skills to be able to work in jobs that are not yet present.

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Throughout history, the emergence of new technologies has always caused panic and confusion, particularly when it involved new mediums of communication. Johannes Guttenberg (c.1398-1468) realised this when he sought to conceal the technology behind the printing press. Understandably, he failed. In less than a century, various cities in Europe had owned its own printing press. Thousands of books and pamphlets spread across the continent.

Guttenberg's invention took place during the Renaissance. It is a time when West European scholars enthusiastically rediscovered the treasures of ancient Greek and Roman thoughts. Although this is not the only factor that triggered the shift from the Medieval Period to the Modern Age, mass reproductions of texts within a short period of time accelerated the growth of knowledge and culture. The literacy tradition, as well as

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<sup>2</sup> World Economic Forum (16 Jan 2020), <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/01/hundreds-of-millions-of-workers-need-reskilling-where-do-we-start/>

learning processes, underwent rapid transformations. Books and texts became the preferable medium to win favours from the literate and educated class.<sup>3</sup>

These printed texts soon became the catalysts of the religious reforms, scientific revolutions, and democratisations of the political arena that occurred during this period. Access to ancient texts allowed scholars to compare copies, acknowledge different interpretations, and identify false claims. Alternative texts emerged and threatened the authority of both religious and secular rulers. Authoritarian measures began to be exercised to control the spread of information, as well as to curb the emergence of new scientific theories. Censures and the burning of books were ordinary measures back then, exercised in a manner not too dissimilar with the way digital authoritarianism in the virtual world is now employed by political rulers.<sup>4</sup>

An ambivalent attitude towards technology tends to repeat itself. With the advent of digital technology, however, an array of hitherto unprecedented transformations has taken place. One of the most remarkable features of this technology is the possibility of connecting virtually two-thirds of the global population through hand-held devices. At the present rate, the Internet welcomes one million new users every day.<sup>5</sup> As people interact in this simultaneous yet divergent platform, new patterns of relationships and novel socio-political, economic, and cultural phenomena continue to emerge in ways that cannot be predicted using older historical patterns. As a result, liberal democracy, which in the twilight of the twentieth century attained global recognition as the political system par excellence, is currently shaken to its core.<sup>6</sup>

Raw emotions now flood the public sphere. Certainly, this is not entirely new. National anthems and political rhetoric had been used for centuries to incite public

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<sup>3</sup> See the classical work of Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

<sup>4</sup> Adrian Shabaz dan Allie Funk, "Freedom on the Net," Freedom House <https://www.freedomonthenet.org/report/freedom-on-the-net/2019/the-crisis-of-social-media>

<sup>5</sup> World Economic Forum, *Global Risk Report 2020: Executive Summary*. <http://reports.weforum.org/global-risks-report-2020/executive-summary/>

<sup>6</sup> Dieter Fuchs & Hans-Dieter Klingemann, "Globalization, Populism and Legitimacy in Contemporary Democracy," in *Democracy under Threat: A Crisis of Legitimacy*, ed. Ursula van Beek, Challenges to Democracy in the 21st Century (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019)

sentiments. In the digital age, however, the raw emotions of people located in distant geographical places come together in one arena known as social media. Its volatile nature has provided politicians with authoritarian tendencies with a powerful instrument to score electoral victories.

Within this new milieu, the vanguards of political contestations are trolls (or bots) who are professionally hired by populist political elites to incite and manipulate public emotions. As the people's perceptions of reality are altered to suit the populists' political agendas, the fate of democracy is now in peril. As various studies have shown, democracies wither mostly not because of military *coup d'etat*, but mainly through the abuse of democratic mechanisms.<sup>7</sup> It is thus not a surprise that in various parts of the world for thirteen consecutive years, political freedom – an essential ingredient of democratic politics – has steadily declined.<sup>8</sup>

A paradox thus emerges. On one hand, digital technology applies advanced technological rationality. Its success comes from the technical brilliance of effectively turning various ideas and facts into binary numbers coded into specific algorithms that ensure efficiency, reliability, consistency, and predictability. Such is the wonders of proven computerised rationality. On the other hand, this rational technological paradigm apparently does not in and of itself lead to the rational uses of the technology.<sup>9</sup> Quite the contrary, digital technology provides the space for the public outpouring of even the most illogical human expressions. Its simple user interface allows users to flood the public arena with emotionally charged messages that disregard conventional norms of respect towards others.

Nevertheless, one must refrain from making hasty judgements, particularly towards the millennials who currently stand as the most active users of digital technology. Born between 1981 and 1996, millennials are digital citizens who open their

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<sup>7</sup> See Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (E-Book Version) (New York: Crown Publishing, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Freedom House, "Democracy in Retreat", <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2019/democracy-in-retreat>

<sup>9</sup> W. Neville Holmes, "Rationality and Digital Technology," *IEEE Computer*, vol. 37, no. 9 (2004), 114-116.

cell phones “one minute after they wake up”.<sup>10</sup> In popular perception, they are perceived as a generation who only care for “food, shelter, and connectivity”. Their motto is “I take a Selfie, therefore I Exist” (IDN Research Institute 2019). From this generation we witness the birth of novel professions, such as Celebgrams and Youtubers. To the awe of their parents’ generations, they generate massive incomes through their creative use of digital technology.

Perhaps, we are inclined to believe that given the amount of time they spend online, they are the ones spreading false news and disinformation. Are they not the ones populating social media with their average of four-hour of daily engagement? Surely, they must be the ones spreading hoaxes.

The truth, however, tells a different story. According to the Indonesia’s Ministry of Communication and Information, people over 45 years old are in fact the ones who are most likely to spread hoaxes.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, a research conducted in America reveals that hoaxes are prevalent mostly amongst people over 65.<sup>12</sup> Even though further research is required to determine why older people are more susceptible to hoaxes, it is quite likely that due to their continuous engagements with the digital world, millennials have stronger intuitive sensibilities vis-à-vis the digital world that in turn enable them to distinguish truth from falsehood.

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We are gathered in this meeting in order to find ways to live in the midst of the challenges raised by “the millennial world”. Such a question, in truth, needs to be asked first and foremost to the millennials themselves. Perhaps, they may be able to offer an

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Dimock, “Defining generations: Where Millennials end and Generation Z begins,” Pew Research Center (17 Januari 2017), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>

<sup>11</sup> “Kominfo: Penyebar Hoaks Berkisar Usia 45 ke Atas” (16 Nov 2018), [https://www.kominfo.go.id/content/detail/15381/kominfo-penyebar-hoaks-berkisar-usia-45-ke-atas/0/sorotan\\_media](https://www.kominfo.go.id/content/detail/15381/kominfo-penyebar-hoaks-berkisar-usia-45-ke-atas/0/sorotan_media)

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Guess, Jonathan Nagler, and Joshua Tucker, “Less than You think: Prevalence and Predictors of Fake News Dissemination on Facebook,” *Science Advances*, vol. 5: 1 (09 Jan 2019), DOI: 10.1126/sciadv.aau4586

alternative interpretation to the order once given to Elijah, “Leave here, turn eastward ...” which serves as the theme of our meeting.

Maybe, they will be inclined to say, “Embrace change or risk being left behind!” Their words may be harsh. But it is actually a genuine invitation to walk together in a world that is vastly being transformed by rapid scientific and technological innovations. To walk with them, we need to really understand who the millennials are.

Surveys presented in the media tend to offer us with stereotypes. Quite often, they are characterised as “connected, confident, creative” (IDN Research Institute 2019) or “confident, connected and open to change” (Pew 2010). They appear to be highly educated, quite well-off, and suitable to work in the technological or creative industry. These surveys utilise reliable scientific methods. As such, their results are commonly seen as accurate depictions of the millennials.

Nevertheless, the real world is not always as neat as a survey report. Such surveys may obscure details and variations between individuals, cities and rural areas, developed and developing countries. To be able to understand the millennials, however, these details are of paramount importance. Otherwise, we will make the mistake of seeing all of them as middle class, urban millennials.

Let us take Indonesia as an example. In Kalimantan (Borneo), only 7.9% of the population are exposed to the Internet, whereas in Bali-Nusa and Papua the numbers are 5.63% and 2.49% respectively (APJII 2018). In a report published by *The Jakarta Post* on January 23, 2020, the data provided by the Wittgenstein Centre for Demography and Human Capital reveals a similarly bleak picture. Only 14.4% of Indonesian millennials have the opportunity to experience post-secondary education and only 0.38% have graduate degrees. In Jakarta, the nation’s epicentre of development, up to a decade ago around 25% of men and 38% of women from the millennial generation only have junior high school diplomas or lower. Furthermore, according to the National Bureau of Statistics, (BPS 2017), only 1.4% of Indonesian millennials are managers and merely 7%

of them work in the professional sectors. The rest are blue-collar workers who work in sales or service jobs.<sup>13</sup>

The majority of Indonesia's 82 million millennials, therefore, do not have higher education or the technical skills required to navigate the challenges presented by the millennial and post-millennial worlds. Their feelings, thoughts, and experiences are surely a far cry from what most surveys tell us about the lifestyle of urban millennials.

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Each generation certainly has its particular outlook on life. This is why we are not unfamiliar with the term "generational gap". Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that generational conflicts often arise from the tendency to see and judge the present using past social norms. The fact, however, is that one cannot choose the era to which he/she belongs. One is simply born into history. None of the millennials asked to live in a time when access to pornography is so easy and when the Internet is designed in such a way by techno-capitalist to induce addiction. They never desire to be born in a time when the world is marred by increasing religiously motivated violence, massive socio-economic inequalities, and widespread ecological destruction.

Many millennials try to make the world a better place. They know that the world is suffering from so many problems. Many amongst them blame the baby boomer generation. Born between 1946 and 1964, baby boomers, particularly the ones living in the developed world, are the most affluent generation in the history of mankind.<sup>14</sup> In the eyes of many millennials, their opulent lifestyle is the one of the culprits for the ailments of today's world. As socio-economic inequality within and between generations continue

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<sup>13</sup> Karina M. Tehusjarana, "Underprivileged Millennials: Being Young, Poor in Jakarta," *The Jakarta Post* (23 Jan 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Steven Brill, "How Baby Boomers Broke America," *TIME* (17 May 2018). See also Greg Jericho, "Generation Y have every right to be angry at baby boomers' share of wealth," *The Guardian* (11 Dec. 2014); John Elkinton, "Will Generation Zero clean up the Baby Boomers' environmental mess?," *The Guardian* (27 Juli 2011).

to widen, social mobility for millennials continue to stagnate.<sup>15</sup> Hope itself becomes scarce.

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Suicide is a tragedy that defies simple explanations. Nonetheless, we cannot allow ourselves to ignore the reports released by the World Health Organization (2014) and Our World in Data (2020). Sadly, suicide is now a main cause of death amongst young people. The world is in crisis not only because of the aforementioned socio-political and economic problems, but also because our young people are losing hope.

Against this backdrop, allow us to now propose our answer to the question “How should we live in midst of the challenges of the millennial world?”. For us, the answer is a sincere willingness to accompany young people as they journey towards adulthood. Such an answer demands older generations to be willing to see the world from the perspective of the millennials. Surely, abandoning one’s perspective is never an easy task. Nonetheless, it is never also a merely hopeless act. This genuine belief is offered by Pope Francis in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Christus Vivit* (2019). When asked about what he sees in a young person, his reply is so profound and eloquent:

I see someone who is searching for his or her own path, who wants to fly on their two feet, who faces the world and looks at the horizon with eyes full of the future, full of hope as well as illusions. A young person stands on two feet as adults do, but unlike adults, whose feet are parallel, he always has one foot forward, ready to set out, to spring ahead. Always racing onward. To talk about young people is to talk about promise and to talk about joy. Young people have so much strength; they are able to look ahead with hope. A young person is a promise of life that implies a certain degree of tenacity. He is foolish enough to delude himself, and resilient enough to recover from that delusion (*Christus Vivit*, no. 139).

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<sup>15</sup> See OECD’s annual report (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development): *Growing Unequal?* (2008), *Divided We Stand* (2011), *In it Together* (2015), *Broken Social Elevator* (2018), and *Squeezed Middle Class* (2019).



Youthfulness is a very special stage in human life. Our young people are currently in the midst of a journey towards a more meaningful, creative, and fruitful life which will allow them to offer their services for our countries and the world. Yet, as we know, the path is never straightforward.

Indonesians perhaps can still hear the echoes of Sukarno's fiery speech, "Give me ten young people, and I will make the world tremble" (1961). As the founding father of this archipelagic nation, Sukarno himself was only 29 when he courageously stood before the Dutch-Indies court in 1930 to proclaim a new world order freed from colonialism. With the help of scores of other Indonesian youths, fifteen years later he proclaimed Indonesia's independence (1945). In a different part of the continent, Mary Kim (1891-1944; a teacher at Martha Wilson Seminary) was only a fresh graduate when she became involved in the Korean independence movement in the first half of the twentieth century.

We can also learn from stories presented in the Sacred Scriptures. King David was chosen while he was still a young boy. His son, Solomon, was confused when he had to replace his father because of his young age. Ruth, a young woman, showed deep generosity in choosing to remain with her mother in law during difficult times (*Christus Vivit*, no. 9-11). Jesus himself spread the Gospel and changed the world at such a young age (*Christus Vivit*, no. 13). It was those with old hearts who feared the change he brought and decided to crucify him.

Young people are full of great courage. Novelties that may feel alien to older generation are for them essentially space of exploration and discovering new dreams. This is precisely why they can help older generations in understanding this complicated world. Nonetheless, a reflective attitude filled with wisdom is not their forte. In a world in which technological advances can easily lead to superficiality, but also to the promise of building a more hopeful world, they need companions. The greatest challenge for the older generations, therefore, is to accompany them as true companions who can help them achieve their dreams with a reflective and critical attitude.

Again, this is not an easy responsibility. Young people tend to seek solutions that appear foreign to older people. What may seem as courage and initiative for younger generations can easily appear as oddities and rashness for older generations. What may seem as hope for young people may appear as delusions for the older ones who have experienced the upheavals of life.

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A millennial once complained, “Older people only make negative comments whenever they see us using our smartphones. In truth, they do not know what we are doing with our phones.” This article offers such an example when the second author asked it to be done in “the millennial way”. The first author – born in the late 1950s – worked with her laptop, whereas the second author – a millennial – used his smartphone. They live in different cities, yet with the help of the Internet, it was possible for both authors to see in real time the writings and comments of each other.

For older people, the principal obstacle in accompanying young people is entering into a state of being trapped in their own fears that they can no longer listen to the fears of younger generations. Such a fear prompts them to offer normative solutions formed by past historical patterns. In the eyes of many young people, these solutions can easily appear too ahistorical and impractical. What they need is a listening attitude of people who are willing to help them discern the unpredictability of today’s world.

Young people today yearn for their seniors to renew their youthfulness. “At every moment in life, we can renew our youthfulness.” (*Christus Vivit*, no. 160). Youthfulness is a state of the heart. It is a heart that is ready to welcome even the most shocking change with an attitude that is filled with love and not judgement. The combination of a life shaped by profound experiences and a youthful heart will allow older people to help young people in cultivating the art of discernment. This will provide the foundation for them to face their problems in ways that are creative and imaginative according to the challenges of the time.

We can witness this youthful heart in Mary, our Mother. Once out of worry, Mary went to approach Jesus. When the people told Jesus that His mother and brothers went to see Him, He gave them a shocking reply, “Who are My Mother and My brothers?” (Mark 3:33). As in other stories about Mary, she did not say a word. She had always been silent and reflective ever since her youthful days (*Christus Vivit*, no. 43-48). In the aforementioned story, Mary as a mother gave Jesus the space He needed to perform His ministry. She stepped back and stopped playing a dominant role. She did not stick around with the attitude of a worried mother but accompanied Him from afar. She was patient with all the processes that her Son had to go through, including His crucifixion.

We can now ask ourselves. Do we have the patience to bear the processes that our young people have to undergo? Do we dare to see their glittery world without making hasty judgements? Can we become lifelong learners together with our young people?

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Perhaps, some of you are still curious about the solution to the challenge raised by “deepfakes”? Apparently, according to a research conducted by a team at Cambridge University, one of the most effective ways to counter disinformation is by inviting people to play an online game that allows them to be a world-class hoax creator. Such a solution is surely beyond the imagination of senior generations.

Have a go at that online game. When you play the game, you will be given a guide to create fake stories, inciting emotions, moving bots to multiply followers, and create chaos.<sup>16</sup> By participating in that game, we can learn how disinformation and misinformation fill the real world. Most importantly, we will be invited to see how the devastating consequences of our need to be popular, which quite often drives us to forward messages without fact-checking them.

The challenges of the millennial world can easily flood our hearts with anxieties. Nonetheless, we must never lose our hope in the potentials of our young people. To end

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<sup>16</sup> “Bad News: From Fake News to Chaos!” <https://getbadnews.com/#intro>

our reflection, we would like to once again do it in the millennial way. Let us now watch an animated movie titled “Soar” (Alice Tzue, 2015).<sup>17</sup> It tells the story of Mara, a young girl, who encounters a tiny pilot who falls from the sky. His plane is broken and yet, he needs to immediately return to the sky to join his friends. Mara tries everything to help the tiny pilot. In the end, she was rewarded with the most beautiful experience of watching the night sky lightens up with the stars of night.

Each and every one of our young people carries his/her own stars. Are we willing to accompany them in their journey to discover their stars?

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<sup>17</sup> See <https://soarfilm.com/>