Aspects of globalisation

Mobility, exchange and the development of multi-cultural states
Another phenomenon that was very visible on Twitter – and in which Trump was also highly involved – revolved around the Ebola epidemic in West Africa, and the ensuing ‘Ebola scare’ in the United States between 2013 and 2015. When a Liberian man who carried the virus, but was not yet experiencing symptoms, entered the United States in the fall of 2014, Trump tweeted: ‘The Ebola patient who came into our country knew exactly what he was doing. Came into contact with over 100 people. Here we go – I told you so!’ (3 October 2014, @realdonaldtrump). This is just one of a few hundred tweets Trump posted about Ebola patients, whom he claimed were streaming into the country via a “highway” from Africa, and were actively invited by the Obama administration.

The way in which Trump attributed agency and malign intentions to the Ebola patient – who, did not at the time of travel know he was infected – fits seamlessly into a pre-existing tradition of what Priscilla Wald has termed ‘outbreak narratives’. Trump’s suggestion that Ebola patient ‘knew exactly what he was doing’ imagines a
‘Patient Zero’, who is not a victim, but a criminal who deliberately brought his own deadly virus to the United States. Pinpointing a Patient Zero creates a reproachable guilty other, and constructs a narrative within which that person owes their social exclusion to their own behavior.

Once you believe there is a culpable Patient Zero, it is no longer morally problematic to exclude, isolate, or deport that person. Trump cast the man he referred to as a criminal or, even, as a zombie-like figure.

Striking about many American tweets and other social media messages about the Ebola epidemic – not only from Donald Trump – is that they mostly employ conceptual metaphors, which activate a network of cultural narratives and associations. The Trump tweet quoted here, for instance, about the patient who came into contact with as many people as he could so as to infect them, fits into a far broader discourse, in which Ebola patients are likened to vermin. Undead creatures, whose purpose it is to spread their own objectionable disease, and thereby to produce more copies of themselves. The zombie metaphors have very little to do with Ebola, but understanding Ebola as a zombie threat neatly fits into a pre-existing American cultural fascination and anxiety. There are many even more outrageous examples of conceptual metaphors engaged in tweets that use the word Ebola or the hashtag #Ebola. Ebola patients, in American tweets from late 2014 or early 2015, are often compared to vermin, criminals and slaves.

Apparently the epidemic in West Africa sparked associations among groups of American Twitter users with cultural images and narratives that were not directly connected to Ebola, but which the news of the outbreak did trigger. Some – obviously manipulated – images of Ebola patients supposedly arisen from the dead ‘went viral’ on social media, to such an extent that they seemed more contagious than the virus itself. That says something about the cultural context in which the news of the epidemic was received, but it also says something more general about how events in the world find a place within the fabric of pre-existing narratives, and how those events in turn can bring particular, previously dormant discourses back to the forefront.

Although intertextuality – the ‘conversation’ between older and newer literary works – has been studied extensively, the process of how events in the present can revive discourses and narratives from the past has not been studied a great deal. Particularly in the field of social media historical analogies and metaphors that crop up often seem very far-fetched, or even random, but they are nonetheless very powerful. The same mechanism is visible in social media discourses elsewhere, for instance with regard to the current refugee crisis in Europe. Expressions like ‘a tsunami of refugees’ and other flood metaphors suggest that the refugee situation is like a natural disaster, in which Europeans are at risk of drowning. Such images, and the narratives based on the frame suggested by the metaphor, have real political implications for the way in which individuals, institutions, and the international community respond to events in the present.

The NWO Rubicon project, which I am currently conducting at the University of Giessen, maps these Ebola metaphors and narratives on Twitter, and figures out how they work. I first aggregate tweets that mention ‘Ebola’, from the period that the Ebola scare in the US peaked and then let a computer sort these tweets based on the other words in the tweet. This shows what the most prevalent combinations are, and many of these are indeed metaphors that contribute to particular narrative frameworks.

For instance, an often retweeted ‘joke’ – “What did your last slave die of? Ebola” – creates a baffling connection between two seemingly completely different issues. It suggests that Ebola specifically targets Black West Africans, as did transatlantic slavery centuries ago. Most enslaved African Americans in the United States had originally been captured or bought in West Africa, where the Ebola epidemic occurred in 2013-15, but there is obviously a massive time gap between the abolition of slavery in 1863 and the Ebola epidemic. The seemingly illogical association between dying of Ebola and dying as a slave is only legible if we accept the notion that, like slavery, Ebola can only afflict West Africans. This frame implies that the white Twitter user, who is posing in the tweet as a slave owner, is protected against the disease by their whiteness. Other tweets that refer to slavery go even further, suggesting for example that the threat of an Ebola epidemic is a form of revenge from West Africans to punish the United States for its slavery history. Or they urge African Americans to be grateful for their transatlantic slavery past, because they would otherwise have contracted Ebola.

While I am sure such tweets – especially if they have had a wide reach – are telling about what could be termed the cultural imagination of particular groups and networks in the Unites States, it is hard to assess precisely how to weigh them and how to understand Twitter expressions in general. It is tempting to see Twitter as a giant repository of often crude, off-the-cuff thoughts and comments, allowing a peak into the collective unconscious. But even leaving aside the question whether such a thing exists, Twitter is also a medium that, like other media, influences what is communicated through it. It invites particular observations or jokes more than others, and its elusive algorithms steer what is seen most often. While it is called a ‘social’ medium, it really is – like other supposedly social media – a commercial medium with its own commercial, and as part of that hidden, logic.

However, in the now emerging Trump era, it is crucial both to understand Twitter as a medium, and to grasp the ways in which it reflects, and perhaps generates, cultural narratives around events in the present that re-

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had discovered the ancient city's industrial zone! The study of the pottery from the site revealed several local varieties – as well as imports from Mesopotamia and from as far away as India. Finally, the construction of the buildings made use of gypsum, a whitish-gray mineral related to salt.

The language of ancient Thaj and its inscriptions

Several inscriptions in a local variety of the Ancient South Arabian alphabet – termed Hasaitic by scholars – have been discovered at Thaj. All of these so far have been gravestones, containing the names and lineages of the city’s elite. The language of the ancient city remains a mystery, as the short texts are rather formulaic and contain few examples of grammar. Nevertheless, clear evidence of Aramaic influence can be seen and in fact a few bilingual Hasaitic - Aramaic inscriptions have been discovered, agreeing with the claim that Gerrha was settled by Chaldaean refugees, who may have brought Aramaic with them. The team this year excavated a well containing one such inscription. The text was badly damaged, having spent so much time under water, but what can be clearly made out are the lines containing the date, which reads: year one of ??? the king and may he prosper. Was this a local king of Gerrha? Only future discoveries will tell. The presence of a local writing tradition must have been used more widely than just for gravestones. We expect to find in future excavations texts commemorating the construction of buildings, votive, religious inscriptions, and if we are truly lucky, the city’s archive.

Surrounding sites

The team surveyed surrounding sites as far away as 40 km to the north and south in an effort to understand the relationship of the hinterland to the ancient city. About ten kilometres to the south of the site are three mountains stretching north to south called the Battils. The northern and southern mountains are relatively bare, containing a few prehistoric burial mounds, tumuli, and modern Arabic graffiti. The middle Battil was quite different. On its summit was a great concentration of pottery sherds, numerous as sand, as well as a few burial tumuli. The pottery is identical to that of Thaj and suggests a connection between the two. High places such as these are commonly used for religious rituals in the ancient Near East, and it is possible that the middle Battil was the location of some religious significance to the inhabitants of ancient Thaj. Perhaps more enigmatic is the major mountain to the north, called Jebel Quwaysiyat by locals. The mountain contains the ruins of a fortification along its middle terrace, and some cairns, possibly graves, lie on its summit. Pottery similar to that found at Thaj is abundant at the site. 40 km northwest of Thaj, two more fortified mountains, one with clear ruins of structures, were discovered. The relationship between these “high” places and the site of Thaj is not yet understood and will be a goal of subsequent seasons.

Moving forward

TAP’s first season reveals a site remarkably similar to descriptions of Gerrha – the ancient city of Thaj was a large and wealthy metropolis involved in international trade. It had a sizable residential area within the defensive perimeter and an industrial zone outside it. Its wealth is demonstrated not only by its size and its impressive construction but also in the burial offerings discovered by the Saudi excavation of a tomb. Its inscriptions reveal a meeting point between Mesopotamian and Arabian influences, perhaps alluding to a Mesopotamian component in the population. Its buildings made use of gypsum, a whitish-gray mineral very similar in appearance to salt.

All of this evidence strongly qualifies Thaj as the lost capital of Gerrha, but conclusive proof remains elusive. In the next season, the team will excavate a massive structure revealed by the geophysical survey in the centre of the ancient city. This may very well be the main temple of the site, which may contain inscriptions indicating the name of the town. We also plan to excavate a tomb, which will shed more light on the identity of the city’s ancient inhabitants.

Finally, the well containing the bilingual Hasaitic - Aramaic inscription is constructed from finely hewn stones, the types usually employed for the carving of inscriptions, and may have been constructed at a later period from the ruins of ancient Thaj. We plan therefore to dismantle the well to see if the hidden faces of these rocks bear writing. One of these hidden stones may hold the key to the mystery of Arabia’s lost city of salt.