Before the Ebola Factor: Instability of Technological Infrastructure amidst Potential for Healing

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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Introduction: Energy-industry infrastructure analysis as the origin of this exploration

What I have to say may, to some, appear fanciful or harsh. My analytical generalizations and criticisms are not conventional consensus. Nor do they lend themselves to tables or graphs, nor offer many research-citations.

But what follows is nevertheless an analysis, born out of long experience, independent observation, and interaction with leading experts and activists. It started with my first career, that of data-gathering on the price and supply of petroleum and alternative fuels, leading into policy issues. It was hardly for our precious environment, but rather for the growth-agendas of the major oil companies, utilities, government agencies, investment banks, and the corporate news media. I ran Lundberg Survey, publisher of the Lundberg Letter, known in the 1970s and '80s as "the Bible of the oil industry."

My decades of oil industry analysis, ending up as unorthodox, were initially loyal to the dominant paradigm. This was followed by serious contemplation of and resistance to the paradigm. After 9-11 and the Iraq invasion, many a disenchanted corporate or academic individual became an inspired political critic and communicator. Their impassioned blogs were often entertaining, if not attentive to the bigger picture or the way the petroleum infrastructure really functions. I was relegated to being just another voice on oil, oil wars, and global warming.

To many critical commentators, the main ideas that follow are most likely over the edge, focusing on the big-picture system as the context for everyday objects and sensitive topics. In my career an almost unforgiving cultural critique came to catch up with the analysis and eco-activism on transportation and land-use. This accounts for my dispensing with condemning the usual targets, such as the bad guy du jour, in order to see the forest through the trees.

My anti-transnational corporate journey, originating from the pinnacle of respect in the corporate/government world, veered 180 degrees toward reformist and then more radical activism. After organizing protests, printing the Auto-Free Times magazine, and running sustainable living projects, my team and I crystallized the ideas appearing in Culture Change, starting in 2001. Public health and the role of technology-proliferation were part of our scope. This is highlighted today with the Ebola phenomenon. Now as before, an analysis and an advocacy regarding any important world issue must be based on energy reality -- or least not neglected. I hope you can use this wide-ranging but fairly simple synthesis. - JL

The role of high-tech disempowerment in health and sustainability

Much has been written, albeit unnoticed by what should comprise a large audience, on the risks to the stability of the

electric grid. Warnings and remedial plans are based on government investigation into vulnerability to sabotage, natural disasters and occasionally energy supply. Never is total dependence on the grid or on electricity openly considered to be a serious vulnerability in itself. Nor is this vulnerability, nor the greenhouse-emissions aspect, openly discussed as being a negative state of affairs that nevertheless can be bypassed or dealt with successfully in short order by radical conservation and curtailment.

At least the tenuousness of complete reliance on this key, centralized and complex technological system is already admitted and shown, for anyone interested. Beyond the widely acknowledged climate issue among scientists and a respectable readership/activist base, the full consequences of the reliance and pervasiveness of the entire technological complex still need to be appreciated and disseminated.

Meanwhile, we take what we can get in terms of seeing attention for these critical issues: what may ensue from socioeconomic collapse or depopulation, possibly triggered by Ebola, has until very recently been mostly the domain of fiction-writing and sci-fi films. Their nail-biting suspense often relies on frightening, technological failure stemming from totally misplaced trust in complex, artificial systems. The fictional societies' cultures turn out to have invited disaster sometime back.

I have increasingly sensed that mass consumption of high-tech communication devices mostly disempowers people, especially the young. This is because they have no memory of what was simply and easily used by previous generations rather sustainably. The young consumers of high-tech are actually sold helplessness and hopelessness under the guise of independence and mastery. The glamour of the advertising and corporate social pressure offers the false and unobtainable: a life without nature and its light and darkness, its warmth and cold, life and death, decay and rebirth.

"Hyper-connection equals isolation after all." - Roger Cohen, New York Times op-ed columnist writing "A Climate of Fear" on Oct. 27, 2014. [this quote added 10 days after publishing this Culture Change article]

Few young people take interest in emancipating themselves from the electrical grid or -- more critically -- the corporate food system. A silver lining is that car-buying is not quite the be-all-end-all that prior generations of young U.S. adults went along with. Guarding against collapse and creating the alternative of sustainability is still low on almost every consumer's list. A manifestation of this was noticed at peak oil preparedness meetings that were populated almost completely by middle-aged and senior citizens, mostly white males.

The Ebola Factor

How bad is this disease?

"Ebola is indeed scary and has a potential of wiping out too many people for me to imagine. This is the time that low-tech medicine—finding and isolating those infected and protecting the caregivers—can and should prevail. But it is not a given. It is interesting that Cuba has sent 150 doctors and other caregivers to West Africa. We [the U.S.] should do more. We were too preoccupied with other crises to pay attention early on." - David K. Cundiff, MD, author and past director of a major hospital's AIDS and hospice program [1]

One of the factors in the anticipated collapse of the Consumption Civilization is the human inability to always and forever maintain the vast, complex distributive and technological systems. Sudden failure can happen through added stress arising in a range of sectors, such as the food-supply system breaking down, related civil unrest, financial house-of-cards meltdown, and natural disasters. As to petrocollapse: peak oil has been thoroughly analysed, although misconceptions and delusions about oil reality and energy alternatives are still rife. Peak oil as a movement peaked around 2006, eclipsed by other threats to society and the planet. World conventional-oil extraction peaked in 2005.

Now taking center stage is a long-anticipated but heretofore murky contributor to massive human -- rather than technological -- malfunction or failure: deadly, contagious disease as widespread plague. It would be nothing new in human history since people crowded into cities. Today most people live in big cities and cannot go back to the land. Urbanites and many rural populations are dependent on centralized, complex systems including the entrenched subculture of Western Medicine and its technology. Why emphasize this? Because, it is thought to be the best defense against public-health threats. This is despite its checkered track record and high cost, neither of which have stimulated much of an alternative approach except among the marginalized and rebellious few.

A plague has been anticipated for today's overpopulation, apart from religious Apocalypse, by some scientists who see our species as possibly "a virus on Mother Earth" (the Gaia Hypothesis).
Die-off may be almost guaranteed from something, or a combination of unforgiving global pressures, what with

• climate disasters and refugees,

• deteriorating water supplies,

• unnatural, not very nutritional diets dependent on petroleum-oriented agriculture,

• mounting environmental toxicity, and

• knee-jerk toxic prescription-drugging.

[What would be entirely new is nuclear winter, more devastating and infinitely longer lasting than plague. But let us save that for another report.] 2

Although it is officially soft-pedaled, Ebola or other resilient organism could wipe out a huge portion of today's human population. Do the math: Ebola is highly contagious, not so easy to detect in large, dense, fluid human populations, and the death rate is 70%. Yet, since the body's immunity -- greater in some than others, for discernible reasons -- determines health (barring, for example, getting hit by a truck), the question of whether or not a most dire scenario hits must depend on how resilient health is in the individual and in communities. The role of natural immunity or resistance in an organism (e.g., a human) that can vary greatly from person to person, must be applicable at all times. The immunity factor in our level of vulnerability to Ebola has more of a scientific basis for determining possible casualties caused by the organism than necessarily attributing an unthinkable Ebola scenario to the inescapable, uncontrolled kind of outcome that an asteroid hitting the Earth would pose.

Community resilience will be as important as personal health and natural immunity for preventing the worst Ebola scenarios or similar calamities. It is safe to count on some resilience in the face of Ebola, but this will ultimately be despite our vaunted technological prowess which, if enough damage has already resulted and if ominous trends hold, has served overall to weaken our species. Ebola is certainly a wild card with death's face, but a disease can also be mainly a symptom -- a symptom of our mistakes in the dominant culture, led by globalization for an unprecedented number of technologically dependent, overcrowded humans.

Proliferation of little-tested, unsound or risky technologies, and their effect on consumers' lifestyles and on young alienated minds, has -- besides the related environmental devastation -- been a threat to our species. The historic development has actually been key to the unraveling of the social fabric, a process that on its own is just as great a threat to our species. This is apart from the effect on other species being driven extinct by the use of technologies by too many people. Species-loss is to the possibly fatal detriment of all humanity, along with its embattled social fabric especially in industrial lands.

Loss of nature, or death of nature, is its own source of alienation, depression and disempowerment for all. The technological-induced effect, especially on the youth mentally if not physically, and on most of the world's social fabric, may not yet be evident to many in terms of everyone's already paying an extremely high cost. But in coming years, when global conditions and trends have worsened and accelerated, the likelihood of massive die-off from something like an Ebola catastrophe increases, as critical resources disappear or badly degrade. Where community is weak, and misplaced faith in technology-consumption prevails, the outcome can only be worse than in less complex, close

communities that maximize healthful immunity, sound precautions against infection, and safe treatment.

The effects of a global Ebola outbreak would be so devastating on many levels that many of us place the full possibilities into the realm of the unthinkable. Fear, confusion, and the not-so-hidden agenda of Big Pharma -- one of the more powerful industries imbedded in government and the corporate media -- largely determine the impressions that the public accumulates. These factors also determine greatly the content of news coverage and government emergency-policy. Are martial law, forced universal vaccination, and armed-guard quarantine around the corner?

In the face of these not unreasonable scenarios, we should keep in mind that when considering the ramifications of Ebola's not being contained, biologists and history have amply shown that there have been and always will be occasional sharp declines of any species. It occurs almost always vis-à-vis overly stretched resources. Populations of creatures ultimately plummet when ecological carrying capacity is greatly exceeded. Modern humans seem to need reminding that they are indeed just a species, not gods. The idea of a God saving us (or saving the chosen and devout) from plague seems to discount the logical idea that plague for possibly all humanity is also God's plan -- not because we violated the Ten Commandments, but because the Ebola organism is, arguably, a God's creature just as much as a human is.

Through technological resource-extraction and petroleum dependence -- carried out relentlessly and without regard to consequences -- humans have far exceeded ecological carrying capacity. This is why nature's tendency to balance species' populations becomes more inevitable for us. One could even postulate that a positive effect of a global Ebola sweep through the human population would be to make the species stronger, as the unfortunate weak are casualties and eliminated. This means that the casualties were weak to begin with, which can show in advance. Immunity is perhaps the greatest strength of any organism or community. Ultimately, technology does not produce immunity except in the short term, and it is with a cost (e.g., poisons in some vaccines that have dangerous side effects).

Unstable, entropic, toxic infrastructure: basis of most top-down medical management today

The technological infrastructure, especially for high-tech, is already extremely unstable -- fundamentally so. The underlying reason is that the production processes and consumer usage are highly entropic, consuming vast amounts of energy (e.g., using the internet and its uncounted, myriad electric "servers"). Back to the attractive products that the average teenager thinks he or she must have: the billions of radiation-emitting, toxic, short-lifespan widgets are created out of the apparent waste and chaos of nature. But in reality there is no waste in nature -- except by industrial humans. They produce the degraded chaos, and almost all call it "progress." They never question the "inevitable, glorious march of civilization."

The fact that manufactured "goods" break and degrade with much loss and waste -- keeping billions of consumers on a treadmill of unhealthful, sedentary consumption -- means that general collapse is hastened. People are unaware or uncaring about the pollutive energy going into these goods to make and run them, which is its own source of aggravated entropy and instability. The entire socioeconomic system increasingly needs to be maintained just to prop up what has become essential: the technological infrastructure and those profiting from it.

Meanwhile, to cope with the symptoms of unhealthful and deadly technologies and the increasingly toxic environment, people have been all but convinced to have blind faith in increasingly unaffordable modern medicine and medical insurance -- which have everything to do with unhealthful and deadly technologies. Add to this Western Medicine's vast number of questionable for-profit-only procedures, over-hospitalization for profit, proliferation of multiple-drug regimes, the high rate of accidents and malpractice, and uneven service for populations needing legitimate medical help. This state of affairs is by far most prevalent in the U.S., the leading society for weak community, social isolation of the individual, and technology addiction for lonely, empty consumption.

When people rely almost every minute on individual high-tech communication devices and the grid -- to stay plugged in

with short-lived possessions little more than fads despite their capabilities -- and when people have bought into the dominating, surveilled system of constantly connecting people in the globalized marketplace, they are mostly assuming that it will go on forever. They assume there is no alternative necessary, even if they could possibly imagine one in existence. So they laugh at the idea of living in nature ("God forbid!") or living in real harmony with nature, simply. They look down on those with less technological consumption, no matter if the despised and feared "others" have superior health, immunity and community. Meanwhile, our species becomes overall weaker and less resilient. It is getting worse before it may get better, but the tendency to hope for an upturn -- qualitative, not necessarily quantitative -- seems inevitable as long as there are people.

It's time to get healthier, and fast: as individuals, communities, and as a species. To do this we need a healthier Mother Earth. Meeting this challenge need not be too late for securing much higher odds for survival in harmony with one another in the bosom of Nature the Healer.

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Notes:

1. Statement provided to Culture Change by the author Dr. Cundiff, Oct. 16, 2014.

2. Gaia Hypothesis: Guided by Gaia
by Jan Lundberg, April 6, 2012.

Further Reading:

Ebola and the Five Stages of Collapse, by Dmitry Orlov, Oct. 12, 2014. He makes many important points, in his usual elegant style. Culture Change puts significant faith in health-resilience through high natural immunity and healthy/strong community. In his article he seemed to not allow much for fighting off Ebola except isolation or luck:

"It is notable that many of the medical staff who became infected did so in spite of wearing protective gear—face masks, gloves, goggles and body suits. In short, nothing will guarantee your survival short of donning a space suit or relocating to a space station."

Culture Change contributing writer Peter Crabb pointed out for us on Oct. 16, 2014,

"The U.S. and its oil company masters are using the Ebola outbreak as cover for establishing military bases in West Africa, specifically in Senegal and Liberia. Why? It's all about oil. What else is important to the U.S. and Britain these days? Tropical diseases? Don't think so. West African oil. The Collapse Narrative predicts that there will be more and more inter-nation military grabs for oil. And here is the beginning of the next grab.

"Consumer technologies definitely make a lot of people physically unhealthy as well as helpless and dependent. The rise in the rate of Type II diabetes in the U.S. and other industrialized countries is no accident. The decrease in literacy among the StupidPhone generation is no accident, either. Whether such technology-induced weaknesses will make people more susceptible to infectious diseases, no one knows. Obviously, though, a lifestyle centered around watching tv, eating cheese doodles, and texting is not going to increase anyone's adaptive advantages in the face of technological collapse or the spread of disease. So I agree with you that there will be "sweeps" through the global human population, and that this Ebola outbreak may or may not be such a sweep. Ultimately, we probably can predict with confidence that the survivors of collapse will be some pretty tough folks. Not necessarily nice folks, but definitely immunocompetent."

Alice Friedmann, Culture Change contributing writer, has brilliantly researched and reported on the fragile infrastructure in urban areas for water, food and the electrical grid. Her website is Energy Skeptic.

Consumption Civilization: Our Prospects Since Western Civilization's Historical Adaptation, by Jan Lundberg, Sept. 19, 2014.

William R. Catton, Jr. Overshoot: The Ecological Basis of Revolutionary Change, University of Illinois Press, 1982

The Facebook page for Culture Change has frequent postings of interest to this website's readers, including on the above topics. Use it to spread culture change.