Foreword

Globalization has many facets, institutional, economic, social, political, but like all phenomena it has no real meaning until experienced directly by human beings. The impact of informational technology on globalization is essentially personal. Not long ago I Skyped my daughter in New York from 33,000 feet on a flight from Narita to Dulles. Having a wireless device in my hand that enabled me to talk to someone at that distance during a flight and for no cost felt no more miraculous to me than making a phone call. Neither does talking to my phone while in my car to get driving directions. These things are not mind-boggling; but that they are not is in and of itself mind-boggling. When I first moved to Japan 40 years ago, my communications with friends and family were pretty much limited to a blue flimsy Aerogramme once a week, information was confined to selected depositories, phones were confined to verbal communication, and watches told time. Now I have instantaneous communication all over the globe, at very low cost, and can access an almost infinite amount of information from any of seven different devices that I own including my phone, my watch, my music player and, soon, my glasses. Why is that not mind-boggling? We have become acclimated to, or numbed by, a stunning rate of innovation and technological change and, as with all shocks to the collective system, the ultimate ramifications of these changes have yet to be fully understood. But one can accurately say that almost all of what is happening in the world today is fundamentally affected by globalization manifested as information and communication technological development.

Globalization is an outcome of the processing and communication of information made possible by the information technology revolution. It has happened so rapidly that we have let it wash over us like a wave of bytes and pixels, avidly soaking up all the advances that make our lives so much easier and more difficult. And that is the rub; this change has been so extreme in such a short period of time that our reaction to it has created extreme positives and extreme negatives. Let me use another personal example from this flight from Narita to Dulles. Over 40 years I have made the east coast-to-Tokyo and return many times and for most of those flights there was 12-14 hours of mixed relaxation, boredom and contemplation. It was time out of time. Now the advent of laptop computers, electrical outlets and on-board Wi-Fi make the flight much less boring, and yet they also have ended the time out of time element as I, and my colleagues, expect that I will be doing my emails and working.

It is the incremental (albeit rapid) increase of information, communication and transportation technologies that have numbed the sense of wonder and change. As we all moved from Tandy 2000s to Macs or PCs to laptops, the ability to somehow connect them to an interface that could access everyone and everything that exists now, and has existed in the past, did not seem so strange. Similarly, we were all equally accepting the idea that less industrialized societies that struggled with landline communications
technologies for decades could leapfrog those problems by individual use of cellular phones. The fundamental point is that from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s societies around the globe went from limited intercommunication and limited access to information to unlimited intercommunication and unlimited access to information; i.e., globalization.

The Internet connects everyone in the world who has the mechanical capability to connect to it, but it does so in a very constrained and individual way. We as individuals sit in our coffee shops and offices and bedrooms with our ears to the small end of an infinite listening tube. That is globalized individuality.

The human mind cannot cope with an infinite amount of information so we rely on internal and external mediators and filters: our religion, our desires, our prejudices, our knowledge, our state. The mediators have an impact on two basic human social desires, the urge to standardize, the comfort of the similarity and homogeneity, and the desire to be seen as an individual, to differentiate ourselves from others. New information technologies can create the same type of anomie that Durkheim describes in the late 19th century as the result of leaving comfortable and known structures and being overwhelmed with the new. For those who experience this change as anomie, globalization allows us to bring the egalitarianism of standardization to a whole new level. One can use the Internet to discover the warmth of the same; Christians, Moslems and Jews like cute kitten videos. It allows us to experience direct communication with others worlds away geographically, culturally, religiously, and politically.

But one of the most fundamental aspects of increased communication between humans, especially cross-cultural and cross-national communication, that that we also discover things we don’t like about them, or reconfirm preconceived prejudices we held against them. In this case ubiquitous means of communication for all people in the world can empower individual or group reactions against what is perceived as the all-powerful “other”, whatever guise that may take. So while globalized communication through the Internet may bring the hope/fear of uniformity and homogenization, it also gives a voice to any individual or group who can put up a website. The Internet is uniformity shattered into a million shards.

In my opinion, this is what the Handbook of Research on Individualism and Identity in the Globalized Digital Age is all about. To return to my original points, globalization is meaningless unless understood as the ability of people around the globe to instantaneously communicate with one another while having access to an almost infinite amount of information. And no matter how old or savvy we are as individuals, as a species, and as a global society, we are still learning to cope with this new, and literally awesome, condition.

Do we use it to come together or break apart? Educate or obfuscate? Share health and wellness or control for profit? Enjoy or fear? Or all of the above? I don’t have the answer but I do know that the more we know about this new and awesome condition of Globalization, the more we can manage it to enhance the positives and suppress the negatives.

Bruce Stronach  
Temple University, Japan Campus, Japan
Bruce Stronach is currently Dean of Temple University, Japan Campus (Tokyo, Japan). His other current functions include: Organization Member Director, Executive Board, JAFSA (Japan Network for International Education), and Member of the Tsukuba University Management Council. His previous functions include; President, Yokohama City University (Yokohama, Japan), Acting President, Becker College (MA: USA), Provost and Chief Operating Officer, Becker College Visiting Professor, Darden Graduate School of Business Administration, University of Virginia (VA, USA), Dean and Professor of Japanese Studies, Graduate School of International Relations, International University of Japan (Niigata, Japan), Associate Professor of Japanese Studies, Graduate School of International Relations, International University of Japan, Assistant Professor of Political Science, Merrimack College (MA, USA), Chairman, New England-Japan Seminar, Lecturer, International Center, Keio University (Tokyo, Japan), Chairman, School of International Studies, International Education Center (Tokyo, Japan), Visiting Scholar, Economics Observatory (Sangyo Kenkyuo), Keio University, Visiting Researcher, Institute for Communications Research, Keio University, Member, External Advisory Board for International Affairs, Osaka University, and Vice-Chairman of the Board of Trustees, Japan University Accreditation Association.