



FACTVM FOUNDATION

FOR DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY
IN CONSERVATION

Positive growth

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A book was published recently by César Hidalgo - the Director of Macro Connections at MIT (he is based in the Media Lab where visualisation tools are his focus) called "Why Information Grows: The Evolution of Order, from Atoms to Economies" (Allen Lane, 2015) that has a central theme that is fascinating and is, I believe, a powerful area of thought for economists, philosophers and all of us.

The book looks at the knowledge that has compounded since the beginning of time - and the value and use of that knowledge - or data. We have always looked at the human capital that is employed in the productive economy as the growth factor that drove our world. But if we look at the knowledge embodied in that human capital and then look beyond it - to the accumulated information in everything, everything, not just in our minds - then we have a new clue.

Nothing stays the same - that we have said here before - everything is different as we look at it - that change creates information - there is a history - a biography. Hidalgo uses a lovely metaphor - a child in the womb looks now as an embryo has looked for thousands of years but the moment that child is born it enters a world that is dramatically different now than then. It is like a time machine. The information that has been accumulated in the time, the way things are now, the very DNA in living things - all has grown and has additional material in the form of data, of information. Humans have a unique ability to take this data that has built and matured and have become makers - we have something that allows us to use this data to create - Hidalgo uses this to show how an economy is the collective system by which humans make information grow. Just think of social networks to see the pattern. This is a positive and exciting concept. It is the use of the information that makes man unique. It is our ability to share and then to make and then to develop and then to enjoy the fruits of that development - constantly. Art, culture - our heritage - reflects this continuum. It is the creation of minds that have accumulated data and have used that data to make statements about their present, their past, their aspirations, their concerns. It is a marvellous thing to think that this is a constant and growing process.

But it is also a terrifying thing to think that we treat this precious record with as little care as we do. The technology that is now increasing our ability to grow that data base - the sum of all that is - the technology that we have because our forbears gave us the tools and the elements from which we have created it - that technology should be used to make absolutely sure we pass on what we have, intact. It is a nice point to suggest that even if an object is destroyed it is still part of our collective knowledge - it is, of course, but it isn't there to see and to enjoy and to learn from as an object or as a fact. It has gone. We have lost it. And we all know that a vast proportion of our physical cultural heritage has been destroyed by so many and various agents. We cling to what we have though we witness loss all the time. The Foundation was built with this loss clearly in focus. Using the knowledge that we have inherited and the technology that is available we have developed the way and the will to record and store the data that represents the physical forms that make up our cultural heritage - we have that ability and want to use it to make sure that the physical form of our collective soul is recorded for our descendents. That's quite an aim - but if we think of that store of knowledge - it is what we must do.