

global market, global consumer

A look at the global consumer in an early stage

KURZFASSUNG

Der Artikel in 19 Sekunden

Just as sovereignty no longer functions as absolute value for national identity, so too has individual privacy become a relative value in the global market. Intervention through data analysis is becoming the rule for personal identity. No larger database exists on the planet today than the US National Security Agency database of telephone calls made by Americans in the United States. The value of such a database exceeds any particular country's currency including the United States. Such databases are becoming a **future market** of their own.

A global market arises with two technologies: shipping and data communications. Shipping means rapid and massive delivery of components produced and assembled around the globe. Data networks correlate information so that distance becomes irrelevant for organizing and assembling components. Together they create virtual factories – where everything exists within the same digital space even though physical components are continents apart. Virtual factories are still “under construction” as shipping routes like the Panama Canal are widened for the giant juggernauts of global commerce, and as jet fuels are reformulated for the rising petroleum prices. The mechanisms of the global market are, nevertheless, largely in place.

As global markets emerge, what about the shoppers in those marketplaces? Businesses are ready to buy, but what about the individuals who must live in the global agora? Human cultures evolve more slowly than businesses or technologies, so at present we see only the embryonic shape of the global consumer. Consumers will undergo more profound changes than the physical world of waterways and satellites. We will learn to think of our human cultures differently, including politics. Over 25 years ago, Charles Beitz wrote the 1979 prophetic book “Political Theory and International Relations.” This classic was so far ahead of its time that the first edition was nearly incomprehensible.

Beitz argued that international relations can no longer be conceived as the interplay of independent sovereignties struggling in a Hobbesian “bellum omnium contra omnes.” Instead of warlike independent sovereignties, nations commingle their identities, Beitz argued. Traditional assumptions about the autonomy and independence of nations cannot function in the actual cosmopolitan world we live in. Too many of today's empirical realities show us how governance implies mutual intervention: the World Health Organization in the age of easy air travel and contagious epidemics; the World Bank in adjusting monetary policies; the World Trade Organization in calculating a balanced flow of goods; and more recently, the Kyoto Accord and other efforts to cope with world-wide climate change. The age of isolated unilateral government is slipping away, and internal politics must increasingly take into account the ripple effects of local decisions. Beitz saw cross-border interventions no longer as

exceptions but as the new rules of the international game. The political logician Beitz drew a further conclusion about global relations. Against the traditions of political philosophy, he introduced morality by applying John Rawls's theory of justice to international relations. The pivot of international affairs, he argued, would come from supporting fairness in all nations, and agreements among nations would revolve around promoting internal democracy and morality – some anathema to traditional political theory. Beitz was reluctant to define the “just society” and his guarded language allowed for a flexible, adaptive notion of justice. As current politics catches up to Beitz's vision, we might draw the fuzzy outlines of the global marketplace by following his strategy. Beitz extrapolated moral obligations from the personal realm and applied them to international relations. So we too might similarly view the global consumer through the lens of data and shipping, imagining the individual to be the nation in miniature.

Just as sovereignty no longer functions as absolute value for national identity, so too has individual privacy become a relative value in the global market. Intervention through data analysis is becoming the rule for personal identity. Every time you visit Amazon Books or iTunes, your thought tracks are compared with millions of other minds who have also browsed or purchased books or music. You cannot avoid this invisible survey if you log on to Amazon or iTunes where the personal profile of your interests and past searches belongs to the marketplace. Every time you search a topic with Google, that search and its branches become your personal data trail – a trail which is mined by advertisers, other buyers, and governments. In fact, no larger database exists on the planet today than the US National Security Agency database of telephone calls made by Americans in the United States. The value of such a database exceeds any particular country's currency including the United States. Such databases are doubtless becoming a future market of their own. Like the nations in Beitz's vision, our personal borders are not what they used to be. As the autonomy of governments diminishes, so too does the privacy of individuals living under those governments. The global consumer – increasingly under the microscope of computer data and surveillance technologies – comes more clearly into view. ■

DER AUTOR

Michael Heim arbeitet als Medienphilosoph am Art Center College of Design in Pasadena und als Kalifornienkorrespondent von .copy.