

## Book review of *The Acceleration of Cultural Change* by R. Alexander Bentley and Michael J. O'Brien

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In *The Acceleration of Cultural Change*, authors Alexander Bentley and Michael O'Brien suggest that cultural change is now happening at a faster (horizontal) rate with less reliance on slower (vertical) transmission than at any other time in history, and that with computers (and algorithms), people can take advantage of the speed at which cultural change is occurring.

Cultural evolution research and theorizing form the academic core of this book. Bentley and O'Brien do a fine job at introducing the key concept of cumulative cultural (and technological) evolution. They review a substantial amount of research in the area and the information, for the most part, is presented clearly. Since much of the book is spent reviewing literature, there is comparatively little room left to contribute a novel idea or interpretation of the research. Consequently, the claims of the book are not particularly thought-provoking nor do they really push our understanding of cultural change. Rather, the book is more of a review added by the suggestion that algorithms can help us make sense of faster than typical cultural change. This is the main novel contribution of the book.

However, the primary claim that algorithms can aid in human evolution seems to be stretched somewhat. Although computers are widespread in the developed world, there are still many people that have little to no access to computers, and many with access to computers do not have reliable access to the internet and social media. According to Bentley & O'Brien, the internet and social media are some of the driving forces of fast, horizontal, cultural evolution. We suggest that because these forces do not exist everywhere, the fast cultural change claimed by Bentley and O'Brien cannot be a human universal, but instead is specific to particular developed cultures. Furthermore, it seems unlikely that in areas in which there is reliable access to computers and social media there will necessarily be exceedingly quick horizontal cultural change that supplants relatively slower vertical cultural change. For this to occur, social media or other modern technology would have to be used *in a particular way* (e.g., routinely) *by most individuals*, but this does not seem to be the case. For example, although some people within a particular culture can name social influencers that are active on various social media platforms, many others are simply unfamiliar with them because they do not use social media in such a way. Some social media accounts are used to keep up with friends, discuss shared interests (e.g., '80's movies), or gain discounts to products, which doesn't fit the narrative of the book. Taking these points together, much of the world might still be primarily driven by vertical cultural change that occurs at a more gradual speed,

and the main premise of the book might only apply to a much smaller subset of people with very particular cultural practices and technology.

The idea that cultural change is happening faster now than it previously has been is intriguing, and the authors should be credited with making such a suggestion. The suggestion, though interesting, might however not be overly novel in some ways. Cultural change has had several jumps due to technology. For instance, the invention of the printing press allowed for speedier horizontal communication and cultural ideas likely spread more rapidly than they did previously with vertical transmission. Computers and social media now allow another jump, but this jump is likely a difference *in extent, not kind*.

Finally, some of the more controversial claims are stated on the book cover, but the text itself does not seem to be as grandiose. One of these claims is that children are learning more from Minecraft than tradition. This statement is surely inaccurate. Minecraft does not teach language, food preference, and most of the skills necessary to survive in any given culture. Luckily, these types of overstatements seem primarily reserved for the cover.

Overall, this is a reasonably good book if you want a solid introduction to cumulative cultural change, but not necessarily if you want to explore the idea of how modern technology is causing faster horizontal cultural change and that algorithms can help us to take advantage of this speedy transmission.