The UK is wedded to US tech. Time for a divorce

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6–7 minutes

'To be an enemy of America can be dangerous," Henry Kissinger once observed, "but to be a friend is fatal." As Ofcom begins its formal inquiry into Elon Musk's X – "to determine whether it has complied with its duties to protect UK users from content that is illegal in the UK" – that sardonic quote will doubtless be uppermost in many Whitehall minds. For if the regulator rules that X has indeed "failed" in its duty, the enraged response from Washington will be something to behold. It will vividly demonstrate how the world has changed; that, to coin a slogan, *the technological is now political*. And also that the corporate interests of a few American tech companies are now inextricably interwoven with the national interests of the US.

What may that new reality mean for you and me? To explore that question, the Cambridge computer scientist Quentin Stafford-Fraser (who, among other things, is the co-inventor of the webcam) recently came up with an interesting thought experiment on his blog.

Given that Donald Trump aspires to be the next Vladimir Putin (at least in the western hemisphere), let's suppose he does seize Greenland. What happens then?

Stafford-Fraser explores a number of possibilities. One is that Keir Starmer roundly condemns the US action. Trump responds by deciding to switch off UK access to Amazon Web Services (AWS) or Microsoft Azure or Google Cloud or Apple's iCloud, or he doubles our IT costs by imposing 100% tariffs, or just imposes bottlenecks to slow down our access to US-based web services.

Another is Starmer announces that UK users must promptly move their data out of any datacentres controlled by US companies.

A third is: "Your biggest clients decide that they will only purchase products or services from companies who are not at risk from repercussions of 'the tense geopolitical climate'."

And so on. The bottom line for all these scenarios is the same: if your access to US-controlled cloud services was suddenly interrupted, seriously curtailed or became prohibitively slow or expensive, would your business, organisation, hospital, school or institution still be able to function?

At this point, Rory Cellan-Jones, the former BBC technology correspondent and now a pioneering podcaster and campaigner on Parkinson's, joined the discussion on his blog. What interests him is how reliant the digital revolution that is happening in UK healthcare is on US technology. For example, the big UK hospitals are moving to electronic healthcare records and the dominant software supplier for this is Epic, described by Cellan-Jones as "a huge, quite quirky American company whose EPR [electronic patient record] systems receive lots of praise but not for their openness. Sign up to Epic and it wants everything in your hospital to work on its software, not someone else's."

And then there's Microsoft, whose Teams video conferencing seems ubiquitous in the NHS, and AWS, which is becoming a key provider of cloud services in the NHS, and Palantir, the secretive data-analysis company founded by Peter Thiel, which has a £330m NHS contract to run a platform bringing sensitive patient health data together.
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Outside organisational and business life, it's the same picture. All our smartphones operate by hooking up to the cloud. Social media, maps, train timetables, photographs, Amazon, Google, ChatGPT and other AIs, email, WhatsApp, Signal, streaming media, satnav, podcasts, Spotify, TikTok; all are based on persistent connections to datacentres operated by US companies and in most cases not based anywhere near the users.

Over several decades, we Europeans constructed a way of living that is totally dependent on technologies run by corporations that describe themselves as "global" but are all, in fact, American. It's as if, having abolished feudalism, we reintroduced it in the cloud; we diligently tilled our data, while Silicon Valley collected the rent. And for a long time, although we might have had occasional qualms, it seemed like a manageable deal. After all, the US was an ally that – as Winston Churchill allegedly said – could always be relied on to do the right thing, after it had exhausted all the alternatives.

Until now. The Ofcom investigation into X isn't just a regulatory issue; it could also be a test case to see if we can hold tech platforms accountable when doing so will enrage the regime in Washington. The answer will reveal whether we're still sovereign nations capable of protecting our citizens, or whether we've essentially become digital client states where US corporate interests trump our own laws. Kissinger's quip about friendship being fatal wasn't meant as a technology policy prediction. But as we acknowledge how comprehensively we've embedded US tech into our critical infrastructure, it's clear that we should have been paying more attention to the implications of where we were headed. Unwinding this dependency will be very difficult. But it has to be done. If we don't pull it off, then we'll be left with only one consolation: belletrist Geoffrey Madan's observation that "the dust of exploded beliefs may make a fine sunset".

What I'm reading

My Third Winter of War, a memorable dispatch from Kyiv by the Ukrainian economist Kateryna Kibarova, is a reminder of what Ukrainian civilians are living through.