



It's all about Universal Time(ing)

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A radical plan to destroy global time zones and replace them with a single Universal Time is gathering support.

The case for collapsing the often confusing landscape of global time zones is being made by Steve Hanke, an economist with Johns Hopkins University and senior fellow with the Cato Institute think tank, and his colleague Dick Henry, a professor of physics and astronomy at the Baltimore, Maryland university.

Instead of Russia's 11 different time zones and the quirky 15-minute time difference Nepal maintains from neighbouring India, our lives would be simplified by conforming to a universal date and time.

This would be based on the current measure of Co-ordinated Universal Time, which operates through zones either 12 hours ahead or behind, tied to the 24-hour clock but which currently permits individual governments to decide their zone. The benefits, of streamlined communications, trade and travel, would be significant, the academics argue.

But the change to Hanke-Henry Date and Time, which would mean that when it was 7am in London, it would also be 7am in Los Angeles, would impose considerable disruption.

There would be political considerations to any proposal to alter the clocks. A campaign urging UK legislators to adopt Daylight Savings Time, or British Summer Time, on a permanent basis, aligning the nation to clocks on the continent, was rebuffed by Alex Salmond. The proposal would “plunge Scotland into morning darkness” the former First Minister said, since the sun wouldn't rise till 10am in the winter.

The academics defended their plan, noting that at least five countries had changed their time zones in the past year.

“It remains a political football, which would disappear if our ideas were adopted,” they told The Washington Post. “Today, much activity is global, and one time is called for. You'd quickly get used to the new reading on your watch.”

Travellers would benefit, they claim. “The reason all the airlines in the world use Universal Time [Greenwich time], is so that planes don't crash into each other. Every pilot and navigator knows what time it is.”

Local time zones in the US were introduced as a result of the development of the railroads. “Today the agency of the internet has annihilated time and space completely, and has set us up for adoption of world-wide time,” they said. “From a physics point of view, there is only one time.”

Winning acceptance for the change is a stumbling block. “[Former President Dmitry] Medvedev consolidated Russian time to some extent in 2010, but these reforms have been undone by the Duma in July 2014. Now North Korea has adopted a half-hour difference between Chinese and Japanese time. Confusion abounds,” Professors Hanke and Henry said.

Indonesia has proposed to abolish two of its three time zones for economic reasons. Countries and cities could still have control over their hours of work, the duo conceded.

The academics have previously made the case for a new calendar, under which every date would fall on the same day of the week every year. The new calendar would simplify holiday scheduling and financial accounting, they claim.

Two 30-day months would be followed by a 31-day month with an extra week called Xtr added on every five or six years to bring the calendar in sync with seasonal changes. The HH Permanent Calendar would launch from 1 January, 2018 exactly one year after Universal Time is adopted, under the proposed plans.

How we keep the time

The way we mark time today is based on the sun's position in the sky. It dates back to the Ancient Egyptians, whose sundials were divided into 12 parts between sunrise and sunset. In the second century BC, Hipparchus, a Greek philosopher, proposed a 24-hour clock and developed an early system of longitude based on 360 degrees. These were further divided into minutes and seconds by Claudius Ptolemy in about AD150. In the 18th century, accurate clocks enabled sailors to calculate longitude for the first time.