

## The Cultural Assault

An unprecedented "explosion" of information has become the hallmark of our age. The technological advancement in the field of mass communication, achieved during the last one hundred years or so, has had a number of important consequences for the human race. Indeed, it is due to the ubiquitous use and influence of mass media that we find ourselves in a world that is radically different from that of our ancestors. In these pages, we wish to bring to the fore the fact that many of the changes brought about by the mass media are neither wholesome nor desirable.

In general, we regard the marvels of modern science like the cinema, television, computer, satellite dish, and the Internet as wonderful inventions that have enriched our lives and made them less burdensome. When someone points out the negative aspects of all this technological progress, the immediate response one gets is that all inventions are neutral in themselves, their good or evil lies only in the manner of their use. But is it really so? Social scientists do not agree on this issue. The debate is between the *Instrumental* theory of technology and the *Substantive* theory. The former is based on the common sense idea that technologies are neutral and have no valulative content of their own. They are not inherently good or bad, and they can be used to attain different ends as desired by the persons or institutions in control. The latter theory argues that each new technology brings with it a new cultural system and restructures the society as an object of control. Every new technology is designed to function in a particular and limited way, and, in practice, it does interact with the rest of the reality in specific and unique ways. Inventions cannot be judged in a vacuum, disassociated from the human beings who use them. As such, every new invention leads to changes in human activities, life-style, and even values. Technology, therefore, is not

essentially neutral. While it often has beneficial effects, there are darker sides too that are usually ignored or accepted as a normal part of modern living. According to Neil Postman, Chairman of the Department of Culture and Communication at New York University, "anyone who has studied the history of technology knows that technological change is always a Faustian bargain: Technology giveth and technology taketh away, and not always in equal measure. A new technology sometimes creates more than it destroys. Sometimes, it destroys more than it creates. But it is never one-sided." (Speech to German Informatics Society, October 11, 1990)

Unfortunately, the recent development of science and technology has taken place in a milieu that is bereft of a stabilizing principle, devoid of a faith in Divine Guidance that would have ensured the ethical use of new inventions and gadgets, limiting their deleterious effects to the minimum. Consequently, technological progress has turned out to be more of a menace for humanity in many respects than a blessing. American social philosopher and historian Lewis Mumford (1895-1990) writes, "scientific knowledge has not merely heightened the possibilities of life in the modern world: it has lowered the depths. When science is not touched by a sense of values it works — as it fairly consistently has worked during the past century — toward a complete dehumanization of the social order. The plea that each of the sciences must be permitted to go its own way without control should be immediately rebutted by pointing out that they obviously need a little guidance when their applications in war and industry are so plainly disastrous..." (*The Lewis Mumford Reader*, edited by Donald L. Miller, New York: Pantheon Books, 1986)

There can be no doubt that as far as the basic human predicament is concerned, the explosion of scientific knowledge and rapid growth of technological expertise have failed to provide any solutions. Industries have grown, but the environment has been shamelessly abused and at places destroyed; acceleration of the production-consumption cycle has brought natural

resources to the verge of depletion. Life has become easier and the standard of living has improved, but only for a chosen few in selected parts of the world. Sophisticated weapons have been developed, but are almost always used to achieve unjust and immoral ends. Extraordinary prosperity has arrived in the industrialized world, but only at the cost of hunger and repression in poor nations. Amazing progress has occurred in various medical sciences, but the major part of humanity continues to languish in its misery and suffering. Flow of information and ideas is taking place with remarkable swiftness, but generally in a manner that safeguards and promotes the interests of a small privileged group. As a matter of fact, the very idea that technological progress could somehow cure the afflictions of mankind is seriously flawed. No technology — no matter how wonderful — can provide solutions for the age-old dilemmas facing humanity. Rather, it is only through a recourse to Divine Guidance that we can avoid these pitfalls, and achieve a balance between justice and prosperity, between freedom and equality, between material progress and respect for nature.

Easy and quick availability of information is the most prominent consequence brought about by the communication media. This in itself is often viewed as the panacea for human race. But we too often forget that information is not synonymous with knowledge, data is not understanding, mere facts do not constitute wisdom. We are constantly being bombarded with the latest and most up-to-date pieces of information about all conceivable subjects. A great deal of this information consists of disconnected facts and half-truths that are lacking in perspective, background, and relevance. Instead of making our lives more meaningful, therefore, this flood of information is only adding to our perplexity and alienation. The basic problem is that we do not have a holistic conception of reality, a coherent world-view that can provide us with a sense of meaning and purpose amid this deluge of data. In the absence of authentic knowledge of reality, we are like a little boy who, unable to see the big picture, is mystified by the small pieces of a

jigsaw puzzle. Obviously, giving him more and more pieces of the puzzle will only increase his confusion, unless the overall pattern is first pointed out to him. Here again, technology is of no use in answering the age-old questions that have been tormenting mankind. Instead, it is only through a recourse to Divine Guidance that we can acquire reliable and authentic knowledge of reality; it is only on the basis of this knowledge that we can make sense of the world and sift the relevant from the extraneous.

None of the most basic problems being faced by the human race — repression, tyranny, injustice, social disintegration, exploitation, alienation, and spiritual emptiness — is caused by a shortage of information or lack of latest technology. None of these problems can be solved, therefore, by just increasing the quantity of information that is easily available. On the contrary, the vast amount of data that are now accessible to us often serve to obscure the real issues, hiding them in a cloak of technological brilliance. In ancient times, the weak and the oppressed were excluded from learning the truth, lest they should rebel; today, the truth itself is lost in a plethora of irrelevant and inapplicable information. A whole entertainment industry has sprung up to keep the minds engrossed in an overwhelming ambiance of fun and enjoyment, arousing wayward carnal desires while discouraging any serious and substantial thought. While this state of affairs has a lot to do with the vested interests of those who control the mass media and the flow of information, the role of the nature and bias of technology itself should not be overlooked.

In order to make sense of the contemporary scenario, we first need to comprehend a basic fact. In every society, there is a small minority of intelligent and powerful individuals that enjoys a position of leadership vis-à-vis its values, ideals, trends, and the general direction of its drift; this is also true at the global level. We are living in an age of materialism, not because this viewpoint has triumphed over religion in a fair battle, but only because it happens to be the creed of the powerful elite of

our times, with rare exceptions. This elite is able to exert an immense amount of influence over the thought and behavior of the masses — the majority of human beings who tend not to think on their own but to follow the dominant current of their time. In the contemporary world, the most effective means through which the elite is able to guide its followers is the mass media.

Today, the mass media is being used to propagate and reinforce a materialistic culture throughout the world. This culture is characterized by a strong emphasis on the pursuit of material possessions and sensual gratification, along with a corresponding disregard for spiritual and other-worldly ends. Since ours is the age of mass communication, trends and ideas rapidly diffuse throughout the world and quickly become global in their scope and extent. Consequently, the materialistic mindset that originally took shape in Europe during the 18th century has now become so pervasive that it transcends geographical and political boundaries as well as religious affiliations and linguistic or ethnic divisions. There is virtually no escape from the global culture!

Of all the modern mass media, television is the most powerful because of its omnipresence. We have come to accept this little piece of technology as an indispensable part of our lives, and only rarely do we pause to think whether it has any adverse effects, whether we can live without it, or whether we should put serious limits on its use. Those of us who have been raised on a continuous and heavy diet of daily television viewing would find the idea unacceptable — even horrible — that television should be altogether eliminated from our lives or, at best, allowed a very restricted and carefully monitored role. This, however, is precisely what we need to do in order to avoid its deleterious and addictive influence.

Although they are deeply interconnected and probably inseparable, the harmful effects of television can be classified into two categories: those caused by the very nature of its technology, and those related to the peculiar

manner in which it is being used in today's world. First of all, we need to categorically reject the myth that television depicts reality as it exists. The spokesmen for the popular media often argue that they are just showing a mirror to society. Not at all. Television is, in fact, a perpetual guide and mentor for the audience. It gives legitimacy to certain ideas and informs the viewers as to what forms of behavior, dress, and manners are currently in style. It provides them with a framework of conduct, determines their value structure, and gives them role models to emulate. Television deeply influences the viewers' sense of right and wrong, and sets for them the criteria for success and failure. It even affects the pattern of their conversations and fantasies.

The depiction of "reality" by television is almost always selective and biased. Television guides our attention towards certain specific topics, deciding for us as to what issues deserve our focus and what are merely frivolous. The overwhelming emphasis today is on entertainment. As a result, the viewer's attention is diverted from serious and relevant problems to sex, fashion, sports, and music, until critical thinking gives way to a mentality that will trivialize anything and everything. Indeed, why would anyone bother to grapple with questions about God, the purpose of life, and the accountability in the Hereafter when he or she can enjoy TV shows that are much more exciting and amusing? Why would anyone take the trouble of thinking through the question of exploitation and injustice that have become rampant in the world when he or she can spend the same hours sitting zombie-like in front of a flickering screen, drowning the tribulations of life in a sea of entertainment? According to Marie Winn, "the television experience allows the participant to blot out the real world and enter into a pleasurable and passive mental state. The worries and anxieties of reality are as effectively deferred by becoming absorbed in a television program as by going on a 'trip' induced by drugs or alcohol." (*The Plug-In Drug* by Marie Winn, New York: Penguin Books, 1985) Indeed, for many

viewers, television is just a method to cope with boredom and a meaningless existence.

This is precisely what Aldous Huxley (1894-1963) predicted in his celebrated satire *Brave New World*: that people would be laughing instead of thinking, and they wouldn't even know what they were laughing about and why they had stopped thinking. The Huxleyan nightmare is one in which the government has no need to censor dissenting viewpoints or to hide the truth. It is much easier to control the masses through a tyranny of pleasure. In the brave new world, the masses are offered a surfeit of entertainment, non-stop distractions of the most fascinating nature that ensures a state of perpetual amusement and happiness. According to Huxley, these non-stop distractions "are used as instruments of policy, for the purpose of preventing people from paying too much attention to the realities of the social and political situation." That nightmare has now become a reality. Television not only numbs the viewers' sensibilities, it effectively isolates individuals from each other so that they can no longer participate in an organized effort to reform the society.

Probably the most frightening aspect of television is its ability to indoctrinate. Hooked on TV, the viewer becomes a passive recipient of ideas and opinions that are deliberately presented in a way so as to give him or her certain specific impressions. The contents of television programs can be controlled, their messages can be kept more or less uniform, and they can be repeatedly shown to the same audience. It is well-known that images which are seen over and over again, especially in a relaxed state, get deeply ingrained in the viewer's memory from where they profoundly affect the manner in which he or she feels, thinks, and behaves. Research has also shown that the brain's left hemisphere, which processes information logically and analytically, tunes out while a person is watching television. This allows the right hemisphere of the brain, which processes information emotionally and non-critically, to function unimpeded. All this make television a powerful tool of mass manipulation.

The same fact can be explained in another way: The key to enjoying any tele-drama is suspension of disbelief; the viewer must withhold his or her faculty of critical analysis in order to enjoy television's images and sounds. Consequently, one cannot enjoy television and not get influenced, at the same time, by the world-view and values that the producers are trying to promote. The potential for control is enormous. It has been pointed out that, "as real-life experience is increasingly replaced by the mediated 'experience' of television-viewing, it becomes easy for politicians and market-researchers of all sorts to rely on a base of mediated mass experience that can be evoked by appropriate triggers. The TV 'world' becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: the mass mind takes shape, its participants acting according to media-derived impulses and believing them to be their own personal volition arising out of their own desires and needs. In such a situation, whoever controls the screen controls the future, the past, and the present." (*The Perfect Machine* by Joyce Nelson, Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1992)

Here, the difference between printing press and television is quite significant. In contrast to a reader who must actively use a considerable amount of mental effort to gain understanding from what he or she reads, television viewers passively receive images and sounds that stimulate and delight the senses but provide very little insight or awareness. When ideas are presented before us in a book or newspaper, we are usually able to analyze them critically, judge their value, challenge and refute them if need be. However, when the same ideas are injected into unsuspecting minds through captivating images, it becomes practically impossible to resist them. Since television's non-discursive visual imagery is emotional and associative, it acts sub-consciously by sanctioning some forms of thought and behavior while invalidating others. Indeed, the value structure of an entire people can be transformed by means of the subtle messages and indirect suggestions found in apparently innocent television programs and commercials.

Some critics have pointed out that serious and substantial discourse is impossible to achieve within the format provided by contemporary television programs. This is because the goal in all TV shows is to have very short segments that can stand on their own; the basic idea is that the programs must be fun to watch, and that they should never be a burden on the viewer's intellect or memory. As a result of this format, the most serious of happenings and the most solemn of ideas appear trivial on television. According to Neil Postman, it is not just that the television is entertaining, "but that it has made entertainment itself the natural format of the representation of all experience... No matter what is depicted or from what point of view, the overarching presumption is that it is for our amusement and pleasure." (*Amusing Ourselves to Death* by Neil Postman, New York: Penguin Books, 1985)

Television has an inherent bias towards presenting ideas and events as disconnected from everything else; it must provide constant stimulation through variety, novelty, and movement in order to keep the viewers glued to the set and to prevent them from changing channels. The emphasis in television shows is always upon performance, not on ideas; the aim is to get applause, not to encourage reflection. Since television must turn the most serious of enterprises into entertainment, it has a tendency to promote a muddled view of reality among heavy viewers, a mindset that is not willing to see anything as deserving serious attention. Even its news bulletins suffer from this ailment. Postman writes: "TV news has no intention of suggesting that any story has any implications, for that would require viewers to continue to think about it when it is done and therefore obstruct their attending to the next story that waits panting in the wings... [No] matter how grave any fragment of news may appear..., it will shortly be followed by a series of commercials that will, in an instant, defuse the import of the news, in fact render it largely banal." (Ibid.) A prime example of the trivializing effect of television news came in 1991, when wholesale killings and devastation in

Iraq were presented to the global audience as nothing more than an amusing show.

A number of reforms have been suggested to reduce the addictive and trivializing effects of television. These suggestions, however, are not likely to be implemented as long as the mass media is controlled by huge multinational corporations. The immense power of television is today being used mostly to serve the interests of these corporations on a global level. How is this possible? The spread of Western capitalism has ensured that the primary messages being conveyed through television will be more or less identical throughout the world. As a result of competitive as well as "imitative" pressure, even public television in countries like Pakistan is now following in the footsteps of commercial media. At the heart of this uniformity of content lies the capital-media nexus, a system that works in specific ways to promote a global culture of mindless consumption and hedonism.

Today, most of the mass media is controlled by large corporations that are themselves parts of even bigger conglomerates. Their goal is to catch viewers by seducing them with non-stop, round-the-clock entertainment and news. Once the viewers are caught, they are "sold" to other businesses who want to advertise their products. It is important to understand that the audience does not provide the money that makes the media work, advertisers do. It is not difficult to see, therefore, that the mass media serve the interest of the advertisers and not that of the viewers. An audience that thinks critically does not provide the happy and relaxed atmosphere in which advertisements can have their persuasive effect. Television — by encouraging us to enjoy and laugh but not to think and question — is serving the purpose of these corporations very well.

The businesses that buy time on electronic media have just one goal: to sell their products. This requires that a consumer mentality be cultivated among the viewers. Indeed, consumerism cannot survive unless the masses are preoccupied with enjoyment and pleasure-seeking. It is the desire to own better and more expensive items than one's neighbor that drives a consumer

economy. It is obvious, therefore, that the global media must use highly sophisticated methods of indoctrination to destroy traditional values and eliminate simple and austere lifestyles, as these constitute major obstacles in the way of consumer capitalism. Their methodology is to spread the secular mindset on a global level so as to achieve a certain uniformity of thought and life-style, this *homogenization of culture* being an essential requirement for the flourishing of market economy.

With a disturbing sense of *déjà vu*, one is reminded here of the numerous reports prepared for the East India Company in the 19th century. These reports dealt with the steps needed to be taken in order for the British economic enterprise to succeed in India. Invariably, they concluded that the indigenous culture of the natives had to be dismantled if the British economic enterprise was to have any chance of prospering in this part of the world. Thus, it can be seen that the cultural assault by the mass media in our own times is actually an extension of the colonial offensive on the cultural and religious traditions of non-Western nations. One may ask, in the words of the Qur'an, "is this the legacy they have passed down from one to the other?" (Al-Dhariaat 51:53)

It is easy, therefore, to pinpoint the basic idea that is being ingrained in our minds through the mass media. Gently and skillfully, we are being led to believe that the life of this world is the only thing that really matters; that we should get our pleasure right here and right now; that we must not delay our gratification for there is no Hereafter; and that life itself is a game in which the one who owns the most expensive consumer products is the ultimate winner.

What effect does all this have on the viewer? A constant sense of aimlessness and alienation is probably the most common disease of our age. This is further amplified by television shows and advertisements that foster the feelings of self-doubt, inadequacy, and anxiety among the viewers regarding their standards of living and material possessions. The emphasis, therefore, is shifted from *who you are* as a person to *what you*

own. Heedless or unaware of Divine Guidance, one feels spiritually empty and, searching for solace, gets carried away in the never-ending cycle of wanting, working, and having. But the pain does not stop. So one works harder — disregarding all scruples — and buys still more, hoping that the promise of eternal bliss will be fulfilled if he could just have a microwave oven, a bigger refrigerator, a latest car, a better house, a holiday trip to Europe. Things continue to accumulate, but the heart is hardened in the process. The promised peace never arrives, but death does. A life-time spent in running after illusions is nothing but a Satanic hoax, about which Allah (SWT) had warned us: "He makes promises to them, and arouses in them vain desires; and Satan's promises are nothing but deceptions" (Al-Nisa 4:120). Today, this function of deceiving mankind by arousing false hopes is being performed quite ingeniously by television. Satan must be smiling!

That the international media has practically become a manipulation tool in the hands of a small financial aristocracy is a fact too obvious to miss. Jerry Mander, a former advertising man, wrote two decades ago: "Without such a single, monolithic instrument as television, the effective power and control of these huge corporations could not be harnessed as it presently is. Monolithic economic enterprise needs monolithic media to purvey its philosophy and to influence rapid change in consumption patterns. Without an instrument like television, capable of reaching everyone in the country at the same time and narrowing human needs to match the re-designed environment, the corporations themselves could not exist." (*Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* by Jerry Mander, New York: Quill, 1978) With the growing popularity of American movies and TV shows, advent of the satellite dish, and the drive towards globalization, Jerry Mander's observations have now become as much applicable to the whole world as they were to the American society of twenty years ago.

More recently, Edward S. Herman and Robert W. McChesney, co-authors of *The Global Media: The*

*New Missionaries of Corporate Capitalism* (Washington D.C.: Cassel, 1997), have shown that most of the mass media today is controlled by the Big Ten, giant corporations that are global in their scope, although a majority of them is based in the United States. During the past two decades, corporate capitalism has greatly increased in its global perspective and reach, and the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization are serving its interests in different ways. The authors argue that just as the world is being pushed towards a socio-economic model similar to that found in the United States, the world's media are also being pushed towards a model found in the United States. The American socio-economic model is one of market hegemony, minimal state provision, the supplanting of the citizen by the consumer, and a commercial media providing the entertainment-cum-advertising culture appropriate to the socio-economic model. The U.S. model entails a displacement of the public sphere (forums where issues related to the community can be discussed and debated) with entertainment mixed with serviceable propaganda, as this is what the corporate system prefers. The authors aver that the spread of the U.S. media model is weakening public broadcasting systems and strengthening the commercial media in the rest of the world. Consequently, advertisers are increasingly in a position to shape media performance and standards; as a result, we should expect an increase in light entertainment, sex, and violence on television, and a parallel decrease in hard news, investigative reporting, documentaries, and debates on public and community issues.

Closely related to the commercial exploitation by mass media is the issue of propaganda, as alluded to above. Ours is the age of *dajl*, or deception: things are rarely what they are made to appear before us. Many of us are enchanted by foreign media because their news — in contrast to that of the government-owned local television — gives an impression of variety, objectivity, and neutrality. This impression, however, is often illusory. In addition to the promotion of a materialistic mindset, the

involvement of the financial and political stakes of the elite in the international broadcasting industry ensures that only certain news stories will appear on the screen, that these stories will be presented with a predictable slant, and that all facts and happenings that may be damaging to the interests of this elite will not be shown at all.

Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, co-authors of *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), have presented a wealth of evidence to show how a propaganda system works in apparently free societies. The authors describe five "filters" through which the news has to pass in a capitalistic-democratic country like the United States before it can appear on television. They argue that since the powerful elite share the same values but disagree on the tactics needed to attain their common aims, this disagreement is reflected in media debates and gives a false impression of diversity and free expression. On the other hand, views that challenge the legitimacy of those aims or suggest that state power is being exercised in elite interests will be completely excluded from the mass media.

In this perspective, what course of action should a Muslim adopt? Understanding the intricate and deceptive workings of the modern world and sharing this knowledge with others is obviously the first step. At the same time, Muslims need to realize that the influence of global culture is so powerful that a single individual has no chance of successfully resisting its onslaught; therefore, closer links, greater cooperation, and cultivation of mutual support among like-minded people is urgently required. Prophet Muhammad (SAW) has said: Be with the *jama'ah* and avoid *firqah*, for surely Satan is with the (one who remains) alone, but he stays away from the two. (Tirmidhi)

It is also important to realize that we cannot go out on a mission to save the world unless we first save ourselves and the members of our immediate family. In this respect, we need to replace television viewing with positive,

healthy, and family-oriented activities in accordance with Islamic teachings. We must realize that life has a definite purpose, and squandering our time away for the sake of superficial entertainment is an insult to the human soul. The only weapon with which we can fight the deception of our age is the Holy Qur'an, the Book of Allah (SWT). The choice, therefore, is clear: either we turn towards Divine Guidance, or we lose ourselves to dehumanizing materialism.

Ahmed Afzaal

According to a tradition narrated by Bilal Ibn Harith Al-Muzani (RAA) and reported by Imam Tirmidhi (RA), Allah's Messenger (SAW) said: He who revived a *Sunnah* out of my *Sunan*, which has died after me, for him is the reward like the reward of those who acted upon it, without any decrease in that reward. He who introduced some evil innovation which Allah (SWT) and His Messenger (SWT) did not approve has (a burden of sin upon him) like the sins of one who acted according to it, without their sins being mitigated thereby in the least.

According to a tradition narrated by Abu Huraira (RAA) and reported by Imam Bukhari (RA), the Prophet (SAW) said: Riches does not mean having a great amount of property, but riches is self-contentment.