MASS COMMUNICATION AND THE TECHNICALIZATION OF MUSLIM SOCIETIES

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One of the interesting convergences between Islamic modernist and Islamic fundamentalist or revivalist thought is the concept that the Muslim can separate and obsorb modern technology without having to absorb the values that accompany it, and do so with relative case. That it is all a question of niyyat: of intention.

But I doubt there are few areas of life subject to such radical technicalization as mass communication which could more readily disapprove that particular concept. Yet the concept has shown an amazing resilience since its appearance in the Muslim world - at first only within very limited circles in the earliest years of the 19th century, to flower more fully as part of otherwise rival ideologies (secular nationalist, Islamic modernist, revivalist) in the 20th century. In the West however this concept - in its basic or universal assumption about the relationship of spirituality and technology - has been profoundly shaken over the past few decades.[62]

This paper offers a series of observations concerning the nature of the process and effects of modern mass communication as a particularly virulent

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[62] See the work of the Traditional School Guenon,, Coomaraswamy and similar but quite independently arrived upon analysis by the French Protestant social philosopher Jacques Ellul or the more related Catholic ethical Philosophy of E.F. Schumacher.

In the specific Islamic context the concept of the technological neutrality is most thoroughly challenged in the work of S.H. Nasr, Abu Bakr Siragadeen (Martin Lings) (see his particularly courageous 1964 lecture at Al Azhar, translated into English as "The Spiritual Function of civilization," in The Sword of Gnosis (Baltimore, 1974). Gai Eaton.(Hassan Abdul Hakim), Syed Ali Ashraf, Syed Muhammed Naquib al-Attas, and Abdullah Nuridin Durkee elaborate upon or approximate this perspective. The boldest challenge to the concept (a challenge that is unfortunately marred by the author's evolutionary utopianism) and with particular reference to mass communication is to be found in the work of Marshal McLuhan. The Guttenberg Galaxy (Toronto, 1962) and Understanding Media (New York, 1965).

and distorting form of technicalization of Muslim society and contemporary Muslim consciousness. Or, to use a more specific vocabulary, this paper will propose examples of how mass communication technologies, regardless of their apparent content ("message") can distort or even subvert the spiritual environment of Islam.

1. The determinants of a mass communication are that the communication in question is addressed to a large and relatively undifferentiated audience and mediated by technology; a technology that renders the communication impersonal. Therefore mass communication is by definition a modern phenomenon, and to such an extent (as is closely argued in the critically important work of Eisenstein)[63] that we might reverse the dictum and state that the modern world is to a great degree the result of an ever-expanding system or nexus known as mass communication.

The traditional or pre-industrial equivalent of mass communication - communication to a relatively large group of people but without benefit of mediation by modern technology - was the khutbah delivered in large mosques from an elevated position - the member or pulpit, and we would characterize the use of the pulpit today as 'soft technology.'

In the West (where the technicalization of communication as an inseparable element of secularization occurs much earlier in time than in the East) it is again the sermon and the lesson, but delivered in the medieval cathedral.

The dawn of mass communication, then, is the late 15th -16th century overthrow of the pulpit by the printing press, and the overthrow of the priest by the printer-businessman as the arbiter of what is relevant information and what values inform that information.

I would suggest this is not a historic accident, nor that its duplication in the Muslim world from the 19th century onward is still another historic accident but an inescapable component of an axiom that the quantification (mass) and impersonalization ("hard" technology) of any human

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[63] Elizabeth L. Eisenstein. The Printing Press. As an Agent of Change (Cambridge, 1979); The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe (Cambridge, 1983).

phenomenon is inescapably desacralizing, since the sacred is by definition personal and qualitative. And I hope to illustrate that axiom in the observations that follow.

The same dawn of mass communication --Guttenberg's printing press, also heralds the overthrow of the scribe by the printer.

In Europe scribal culture was sustained by communjities of monks, or groups of religious-educated laity working under the direct discipline of ecclesiastical authority. In Islam scribes were usually members of the ulema, or if not, then at least pious literate amateurs, whose efforts were invariably for the sake of other worldly reward.

In either case - Christianity or Islam - control (which is not so much the determination of what is written as of what is reproduced) rested in the hands of men specially trained in religious disciplines, who at the very least formally acknowledged what they took to be Truth rather than a printer's profit as their fundamental pursuit.

I am not trying to suggest that printers are by definition impious (on the contrary the earliest Protestant printers were ultra-zealous in their faith and the first book to be printed was Luther's bible) but that in no way negates the long term transformation, whereby the invention of movable type took news and literature out of their respective traditional "formats" -the pulpit and the scribal centre and into the print shop; which meant out of the hands of the moral and spiritual authority of Religion and into the hands of whoever and whatever the printer might be. And whatever else he might be, the printer was in business which meant that news and literature had at least as much significance as commodities for sale as they did as vehicles for truth and salvation.

Since most people in Europe in the 15th century were by contemporary standards deeply religious - much like the Muslim world in the late 19th century - even secularizing forces operated within a religious ambiance and the most popular books were religious in content, as to a certain degree they still are today in most of the Muslim world, Initially printers continued to publish many of the same religious books the monks once so painfully copied - again a situation which has held true in the Muslim world, even up

to present times, given the crumbling but still apparent consensus that the most spiritually significant and scholarly conscientious literature of our various Islamic religious sciences were almost all written prior to the introduction of the printing press.

2. The public address (p.a.) system that has been mounted in nearly every urban mosque - whether for use to call the neighborhood to prayer or to amplify activities within the mosque, both inside and outside the mosque - has had several disastrous results.

Obviously if the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) in reference to the human voice told the Believers not to invoke Allah's Name or recite Qur'an loudly, then a system that is louder than any imaginable human voice must be questionable. Even more so when we recall that the prophet (pbuh) specified that Muslims were to use the human voice rather than bells or horns - the mediation of technology - to call the people to prayer. But what we hear from a p.a. system is not the human voice - it is the electronic simulated reproduction of a human voice. The better the system (and most systems in Cairo, where I live, are very poor indeed) the less "noise" or distortion, the more the product of the p.a. system resembles the human be voice, but never is.

The ulema of the Indian subcontinent opposed the introduction of the loudspeaker in the mosque in the nineteen-thirties, but they were overwhelmed by both modernist and revivalist currents. However Egypt's extraordinary Sheikh, Metwelli al Sha'rawi, continues the periodically to challenge the use of p.a. systems.

The human voice functions as a measure in two different contexts that relate to the mosque. Within the mosque its range is sufficiently limited (unless consciously extended by the soft technologies of pulpit projection sound-reflecting mihrab) so that any number of activities can occur simultaneously in a traditional living mosque of significant size between the hours of collective prayer. Throughout the mosque circles devoted to listening to lessons in fiqh, tafsir or hadith; to Qur'an recitation or to dhihr (invocation) are all mutally compatible.

The use of a loudspeaker at such moments destroys this rich spiritual diversity and imposes but one mode or religious practice in its place; the broad parameters of traditional orthodoxy replaced by a technological totalitarianism. When the p.a. system in turn carries the sound of prayer or sermon through the neighbourhood it synthesis breaches the privacy of the Muslim home, rupturing the concentration of Believers reciting their prayers, reading Qur'an or invoking the Name.

At the same time the use of a loudspeaker to call prayer distorts the spiritual geography of the neighborhood. According to Hassan Fathy, the limits of the human voice calling prayer from minaret or roof top, marked the point where a new mosque would be built in any expanding community. Since large mosques invariably had several high minarets, and, from the same perspective of architectural harmony, small mosque had small minarets, the mosque that was capable of sheltering large number of Believers had more minarets of greater height and thus greater range.

Today, the smallest neighbourhood "storefront" mosque in Cairo without visible roof or minaret can operate an amplifier that for reasons of tortuous pride can be heard a mile away.

Aside from the jarring clash .of electronically distorted calls to prayer that abort the Prophet's (pbuh) decision to make use of the beauty of the human voice, the effect sounds as If the quarter has far more mosques than It needs, when in fact Cairo, and probably most other of the growing cities of the Muslim world, have an insufficient number of mosques to handle the vast numbers who come to-the Friday communal prayers, and perform them in streets and on sidewalks outside the mosque for lack of space within.

3. Why was the printing press introduced at such a late date in the Muslim world, or never "developed" still further to the East in China, where movable to was Indeed first invented long before Guttenberg? Certainly not because of any inherent objection to adaptation and synthesis by Islam and the world civilization It produced. Prior to the colonial epoch and the post-colonial modern secularist epoch - epochs that share the experience of, imposed, artificial and subversive cultural synthesis forced upon Islamic civilization, Islam is recognizable as the great universal religious phenomenon that it is precisely because of its characteristic of racial and cultural synthesis.

Just as the last Prophet confirms all past prophecy so this last and most universal sacred civilization salvages the residual knowledge (including technique) of the ancient worlds. To this swooping generalization should be added two qualifications: That the synthesis was always in the service of an aware (and comfortably triumphant) Islamic consciousness, which was quite capable over a historic period of time to discriminate between those,, natural and philosophical sciences on one had that le themselves to Islamization, and tragic theatre naturalistic art on the other.

The second qualification: That the ancient worlds however much they may have differed in dogma from Islam, shared a sense of the sacred, and an adopted/Islamicized forms or techniques, if not purely Islamic, where nevertheless never intrinsically) decasualizing, e.g., the difference between the. inescapable impact and ultimate Islamization of Byzantine' or Persian dynastic political forms on one hand, and t intrinsic revolt against Heaven and denial of God known the French Revolution on the other.

But one could argue from the perspective of control that the Ottomans had eyes and ears and were no fools and indeed the first Muslim writers to observe a, comment upon the French Revolution were universally) convinced that it was fitna (subversion, seditious dissent, and corruption).[64]

As Eisentein has so clearly documented, the print' press was as inevitably the most potent weapon of eve subversive (or "progressive") force in the West; of worldliness, licentiousness and secularism in the late Renaissance, of a plethora of sects splintering t religious unity of Europe during the Reformation; of the Enlightenment philosophers and their popularizers, who banished God from social and scientific discourse and paved the way for the French Revolution, and finally, the Revolution itself, primarily a product of journalists and publicists the discontented alienated class par excellence of 18th-century European society.

But I can only suggest that there was more Otooman distaste for the printed word than fear of subversion, and when printing in Turkish and

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[64] Unlike so many contemporary Muslims and specifically militant Islamic writers who appear so enamoured of a vocabulary and "dynamic" bequeathed by the French Revolution.

Arabic finally came to Istanbul it was first in the form of an official' press. Rather we might,consider that The Book - and thus; by metapoetic understanding the father of all books, is t Untreated Word of God, which was transmitted to ti Prophet and then reproduced as sacred speech by t Prophet's voice, to be preserved in its entirety in the memory of the earliest Believers, and, as a religious necessity, preserved however modestly in the memory of every Muslim for use in ritual prayer until the end of time.

Certainly there has never been a century in the 15 centuries of Islamic history when the written or printed text of Qur'an has been as cheaply and massively available as the century we now live in. But I cannot imagine even the most enthusiastic revivalist characterizing this century, in contrast to any of the preceding ones, as notably an age of faith and unity.

In Afghanistan, where the Muslims have waged one of the most extraordinary examples of popular resistance in defence of the Faith against outrageous odds, the number of printed Qur'ans in circulation until only a few decades ago was barely more than a handful; the extent to which the Qur'an was contained within the memory of the typical Afghan to his day is as extraordinary as the jihad waged for its sake.

(And to digress to an earlier observation, the memorizer of Qur'an does so metaphorically as well as literally at the foot of orthodox religious authority - the modern reader of Qur'an, so often self-taught, does so often at the danger of self indulgent and heretical interpretation).

I refer then to that dimension of Qur'an which transcends the conscious understanding of the meaning of the text by the rational intelligence, which is but one dimension of understanding - especially in Islam where belief in the Unseen is at the core of Islamic consciousness.

I refer then to Qur'an as sacred resonant speech, and in particular to the Beautiful Names of Allah, which are what Allah Reveals of Himself in Qur'an and whose recitation, according to authentic traditions of the Prophet (pbuh) are doorways to Him in this life and to His Paradise in the life to come. Perhaps that is why those Qur'anic passages that are particularly laden with the Mercy of His Names are inevitably the most popular for memorization and pious reproduction as calligraphy.

With this as context we can appreciate why the traditional Muslim would stop and examine any stray piece of paper that he passed by, in the event the paper contained one of the Names and as such was subject to desecration by dirt or any ritual impurity. Fikr tells us how to dispose legally of paper containing the Names.

Consider this aspect of traditional Islamic life; the reverence for Allah, for His Revelation that revenyence: reflects and reinforces, and then consider the implications of a modern Arabic-language or Urdu or Persian language newspaper, containing in all its varied (and vocally sacralizing forms) the names of God, as direct refenyence to Allah; as spiritual adab (insha allah, bismillah, masha Allah, subhanallah and in the customary forms of Muslim names e.g. Mr. Abdur-Rahman, Mr. Abad'Allah, Mr.Abdul Karim.

The oral opportunity for self-purification that each of these occasions promises-invocation of the Name, spinyitual adab, and addressing by, Name our brothers-In-submission to Him, becomes displaced in the context of a fast offset printing press capable of producing a quarter of a million copies of a ten or twenty page Arabic-script newspaper; displaced by this great processing plant for the desacralization of the Word and most particularly of the Names. At the very least, indifference 'to the Name by virtue of its mass and impersonal vehicle; at worst, the inevitable desecrating use of those millions of pages of daily newsprint for fishwrapping; for treatment as trash, A, desecration to which we are all at best unintending and unwilling accomplices, If we are to remain sane and. functioning in a rapidly desacralizing world,

4. Several years ago an American Muslim film producer put together a project to make a movie about the Prophet (pbuh) originally called "The Messenger" and, evetually released under the title "The Message". The script took note of the repugance of orthodox Islam to portraying any image of the Prophet (pbuh) (even Persian printing left the Prophet's face blank or veiled his face in light) by not casting an actor as the Prophet (pbuh), Instead, in a curious way, the camera (which means my mind and the mind of every other viewer) "becomes" the Prophet (pbuh) for in specifically cinematic terms, as McLuhan reminds us, our mind is an extension of the camera.

The script was submitted to al-Azhar, and since this formula had been used successfully in earlier Arabic films approval was expected. Instead the late Sheikh al-Azhar, Dr. Abdul Halim Mahmoud (rahmatulla) rejected the script.

Sheikh Abdul Halim's argument was essentially this: We do not portray the Prophet (pbuh) in cinema because his life is more than a life - it is a sacred commentary on the Qur'an. If we understand the Qur'an by virtue of the Prophet's life, how then do we understand the Prophet? By virtue of his Companions; their lives are sacred commentaries upon his.

If we read about a Commpanion in hadith and sirah, or experience this material through someone's recitation, we acquire a sense of his attributes, which are of meaning in - asmuch as they reflect the divine attributes. With those attributes literally in our mind, our spiritual imagination has the capacity to shape an image within our mind that cannot but be infinitely closer to the reality of the Particular Companion, than the image of the Hollywood or even Cairene actor hired to portray Hamza or Bilal - as in, the case of "The Message."

But if we are exposed to that cinematic image, it is indeed the false-Bilal or the false-Hamza - an image that reflects the soul of an actor who could easily be an alcoholic, or a drug-user, a transmitter of AIDS, an atheist - which is implanted on our mind and into our subconscious, and not the result of our transcendent spiritual imagination. Consciously or not, Sheikh Abdul Halim was describing the brain-washing effect, and those who have had vivid movie-inspired nightmares or daydreams know from experience the troth- of his remarks... Film and video can only dilute the possibilities available to. us via our spiritual imagination.

The corollary of this is that "baraka does not track[65]." Which is a way of saying that we cannot make visible what is present but invisible; what can even be overpoweringly present--such as a sense of sanctity and awe; the presence of angles or any other dimension of Allah's Mercy.

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[65] To "track" is to record a sound or picture electronically on tape for reproduction.

There is a debate at this point about photography ---be it film or still photos for the photographic process, which is a mechanical reproduction of an image, does in its form as a negative "capture" the image with light before mechanically reproducing the image by printing. The X-ray negative can catch what is materially there but hidden; the controversial Kirlian technique can reportedly capture the image of an otherwise invisible aura projected by people with recognizable psychic powers.

Sometimes we look at black and white photographs of holy men --- I think of certain photographs I have seen ---and we are convinced we can see in their faces traces of the illumination of their souls visible as light.

But there are no such possibilities in electronic media-television and video--where even the visible world does not exist as a fixed image, captured chemically as light upon film. Instead the image is instantaneously broken down into color-coded electronic charges, and reassembled out of so many electronic "dots" on the screen. The ultimate screen is our mind where we reassemble those dots into the simulation of whatever was visible, but never seen. In video and TV everything is a screen; the cameraman looks at his viewfinder, not through it at what is there in front of him; he is looking at a tiny black and white TV screen which shows him a fuzzy simulation of what is visible.

Continuous efforts in my own professional work as a TV producer to record scenes that contained extraordinary intensities to me and to other Muslims when experienced personally always ended in failure. Those intensities or spiritual properties so-to-speak are invisible or "transvisible" and cannot be simulated by electronic media; my pictures never reflected my awareness.

What video and live TV does record and very well indeed, is movement and change which is manifest in visible and strong emotions, acts of violence, acts of passion and the facial expressions of turbulent souls that are not at peace.

Even the baraka of virgin nature and the cosmos does not track. Its essence, which makes it an ayat (sign) of Allah, is lost in the simulation that replaces image.

Attempts to produce a more contemplative video for educational television have for that reason failed. Somehow the same breath-taking scene of virgin nature that could hold the attention of even ordinary, uncontemplative modern man for many minutes or even hours fails to hold anyone's attention after but a relatively few seconds on the television screen. Video and TV. are intrinsically anti-comtemplative. When we find a television film of the natural world to be satisfying it is invariably one that involves continuous movement and change of scene and camera angle-tropical fish, herds of wild animals on the run or even intimations of violence-sharks, lions, erupting volcanoes.

Video and TV are intrinsically anti-contemplative. But if religion, and in particular Islam, is by definition concerned above all with the Invisible world---with Allah, His Angels, Heaven, Hell, the Day of Judgement, then the limits of TV and video can only provide a picture of Islam that is profoundly distorted. Psychologically speaking, as any TV newsman knows, what you don't have a picture of doesn't "exist."

Those limits inherent in the technology suggest that the tendency of international media to focus upon Islam as violence, upon Muslims as hysterical mobs and threatening, grimacing individuals, is not only an issue of unquestionable bias, and/or commercial exploitation of the sensational, but also in the nature of the medium; the technological nature.

The most powerful images I retain of a contemporary "Christian" experience from my years of professional video tape viewing, are the bizzare TV pictures of Reverend tone's last days and the final scene of that mass suicide in the jungles of Guyana.

5. What then are our options? Especially for the increasingly centralized, urbanized Muslim world that has lost the protective traditional environment of rural or dispersed urban life? The backwaters are vanishing, and, as I have noted elsewhere in another context, the entire Muslim world is rapidly being incorporated into an international secular culture based on mass communication, that is breaching the cultural forms that. protected Islamic consciousness.

I know a small number of highly educated individual Muslims who do not watch television or read newspapers. Some watch films; some do not. They very selectively read books, and spend as much time as they can in a spiritually reawarding contemplative universe. And they translate, edit, write and publish books that can be of invaluable assistance to others.

Another option is to work within the margins of this emerging international culture in order to suggest the possibility of other alternatives to Muslims who would be otherwise cut-off from the products of Islamic consciousness, as is increasingly the case. To produce as it were coded signals, much in the way that having experienced hajj and the 'umrah the picture of the Ka'bah on television is a signal recalling an original experience that is inexhaustible.

The idea of narrative formats for television, which reduce the shallow surface satisfaction of action and movement, and through the dramatic effectiveness of the story-teller return the viewer to a more,auditory mode of reception, also interests me, for oral transmission. even simulated and lacking the baraka of the human voice still at least addresses the spiritual imagination and can be the vehicle for extraordinary messages. Cairo's Qur'an Radio station is reoralization at its best.

To produce materials that serve as coded signs to call attention to and encourage participation in what remains of the traditional in the realm both of media and "message"; to point the viewer or reader towards the direct and personal religious experience. The• recitation of the Qur'an and the simulation of the image of the Ka'bah can also be a most reasonable invitation to the the Muslim to make any number of journeys, and there to recover his sense of the real.

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