

THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION IN THE CLASH OF CULTURES

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Western and particularly American producers of popular entertainment for export might be forgiven for thinking that the sale of movies, TV programs, and music to other countries is just business, as in: Asia sells television sets and the industrial West sells the programs for them. Hardware for content. Videos players for videos. Stories with Tom Hanks or Julia Roberts in return for Saudi gasoline to drive us to the cinema and Nigerian cocoa and peanuts for the chocolate bars.

Obviously, it is not that simple. We in the West do not regard the hardware and other goods connected with mediated communication as a threat to our culture, but, if anything, an enhancement. By contrast, some people in other parts of the world do not consider the mediated content coming from Western Europe, Japan, and especially the United States to be benign. They look with alarm at the video shops and Internet cafes popping up on their city streets. Looking at its exports of communication content, the West may see, officially at least, global economic policy at work. Others see an overt nationalistic, cultural invasion.

1. BLAMING THE IMAGES

The screen images Hollywood sends of corrupt foreign government officials and religious figures, and villainous non-Westerners, the guns in

the hands of ordinary people, the lack of respect for parents and authority figures, the tolerance for uncomfortable ideas, the equality or even the superiority of women over men, and, above all, blatant sexual imagery and behavior are an affront to many cultures. They blame movies and television if moral slippage is perceived at home, say a boy seeing a girl outside the strict confines of a traditional society¹.

That *Baywatch* is widely watched in the Third World not only fails to convince the upholders of traditional values, it proves to them that Western entertainment, particularly American, bearing its message of a looser and wealthier lifestyle, is a conscious effort to undermine the values held by billions in the rest of the world. Armed attacks become a justified defense against this Western aggression. In many Muslim madrassas funded from Saudi Arabia, Deobandism is taught, calling for the rejection of modernity.

The following story appeared under the heading “‘Evil TV’ Ban”

“A Muslim cleric has reportedly issued a diktat against watching television or even owning a TV set in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. Mufti Raees Ahmed, the 24-year-old religious leader of Jogiakheda village, told people to “surrender the evil TV set — or else”. TVs would be “smashed to pieces” if found in any home, he said”².

Carried by communication satellites and even CDs in student backpacks, American and other

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¹ As an example, see Waldman, Amy, “Sarendhi Journal”. *New York Times*, 28 March 2003, A4.

² *Bangkok Post*, 23 February 2002, 5.

Western nations' values have been spreading to every corner of the globe. The mufti correctly identified his village's television sets as the carriers of values different from those traditional values he espoused. His Luddite response was to destroy, without apparent awareness that a television set can carry differing ideas.

Not all supporters of traditional values are modern-day Luddites. Others harness it to serve their own goals and retain their own traditions:

"The key point is not just whether people hate us. The key point is that it matters more now whether people hate us, and will keep mattering more, for technological reasons. I don't mean just homemade W.M.D.'s. I am talking about the way information technology—everyone using email, Wi-Fi and Google—will make it much easier for small groups to rally like-minded people, crystallize diffuse hatreds and mobilize lethal force. And wait until the whole world goes broadband"³.

Traditionalists can be found in every religion. Fundamentalist Christian leaders such as the Reverend Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson of the United States not only attack much of what can be found on television but appear regularly on television to say it. Israel imposed restrictions on television broadcasting for cultural reasons. The programming of other nations reflect the traditional religious values predominant in those nations.

This from the editor of a leading Middle Eastern newspaper:

"Like it or not, the media have become part of the arsenal of the political conflicts that define many aspects of U.S.-Arab relations. This is not incitement; this is digitized combat"⁴.

2. CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Sex and violence require little translation. They travel better than culturally bound humor and thoughtful drama. For financial and other reasons, smaller nations cannot compete with the endless and overwhelming flow of popular American, Western European, and Japanese content. The result is that too often the available fare in much of the world is the tawdry and puerile stuff that most educated Westerners would not themselves choose to watch. Much of the world

sees an industrialized West heavily peopled by gangsters, prostitutes, monsters, and morons.

"In the United States, Homer Simpson is a unique character, interesting for how he deviates from American behavioral norms. In Europe, he is a typical American—fat, rude, stupid, and provincial"⁵.

Cultural differences extend to news as well as entertainment. Like the unbalanced flow of entertainment programs from West to East and North to South, news flows daily from developed countries to less developed countries. AP, BBC, Reuters, CNN, Deutsche Welle, and Agence France-Presse are the major news suppliers to the world. Many countries have complained that Western values distort the news they get and the news that other countries get about them. In much of the world, news is usually of government leaders' activities and national economic growth. In America, news, especially local television news, is quite often of violent crimes, the sexier and gorier the better. "If it bleeds, it leads" is a saying familiar to American journalists.

To Western journalists the news of the Yangtze River flooding was about villages swept away and people killed or homeless. There was no political malice in this, for the flooding of the Ohio was treated the same way. To Chinese journalists, tragedy is all too familiar. The real news was about the heroic efforts of soldiers to stem the flood and to save lives. Government pressure certainly influenced the coverage, but the judgment remains valid.

What is roiling much of the world today has been described as a clash of cultures. This is not new, for clashes of cultures have formed much of history. They go back beyond the 19th century opening of Japan and the savaging of China, beyond the European colonizing of Asia, Africa, and the Western Hemisphere since the 15th century, beyond the Crusades since the end of the 11th century, beyond the invasions of the Vikings, the Mongols, the Muslims, the Roman Empire, and no doubt beyond the spread of the Egyptian, Sumerian, and Chinese empires at the expense of the lesser tribes around them. The invading army threatened or clashed until it dominated the field and introduced its culture.

³ Wright, Robert, *Nonzero*, quoted in *New York Times*, 29 June 2003, op-ed page column by Thomas Friedman.

⁴ Khouri, Rami G., executive editor, *Daily Star*, Beirut; *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, 5 September 2003, A13.

⁵ Vaidhyanathan, Siva, *The Anarchist in the Library*. New York, Basic Books, 2004, 78-79.

Unlike all previous clashes of cultures, the present one is not limited by infantry front lines. With notable exceptions, foot soldiers are not invading traditional cultures. Western media are. In terms of societal change, the results are little different than in those centuries when Roman culture or Chinese culture or British culture or French culture was imposed and accepted, grudgingly or enthusiastically, by the conquered peoples. Today's social change will be familiar to anyone who has lived in countries filled with the advertising, products, sights, and sounds of America, Western Europe, and Japan delivered by media.

3. COCA-COLONIZATION

Aalo Maity barely remembers life before her tiny Indian village got its first television set. She only remembers that after, life seemed unbearable. Every night she would gather with other villagers in a hut to watch soap operas that showed people in pressed clothes strolling while savoring ice cream from pretty cups. "In my hut we ate soggy rice and lentils and I wore darned saris," Maity recalls, "I wanted a better life." So she and her husband, Gaurang, leased out their land and found jobs in New Delhi⁶.

"A lot of us really admire Americans' way of living: better houses, better education. I want CNN", Muhammad Ishgi, a Chamber of Commerce official in the Red Sea port of Jidda said. "But there is what you might call an American cultural danger to us, because they show us another way to look at things. They tell us we might do things differently. You must know that education is a weapons system. It can go either way"⁷.

The social bifurcation need not be international. The division between haves and have-nots has always existed within countries. What media do is expose that difference. An editor in India put it this way⁸:

"Every time an Indian villager watches the community TV and sees an ad for soap or shampoo, what they notice are not the soap and shampoo but the lifestyle of the

people using them, the kind of motorbikes they ride, their dress and their homes.

They see a world they want access to".

When Saddam Hussein fell in 2003, thousands of Iraqis rushed to buy satellite dishes, some for entertainment programming, but most for news⁹.

"In most Arab countries, women generally do not go to movie theaters. Because of the rapid spread of VCRs, Arab women are among the fastest-growing group of movie watchers. After the Israeli army invaded Lebanon, the first ship to arrive at the Lebanese port of Sidon was loaded with videocassette recorders. The city had suffered heavy damage in the fighting, people were desperately in need of cement, housing materials, and other staples, but what came steaming into the port were VCRs from Japan. First things first"¹⁰.

And from Moscow, as the Soviet Union collapsed:

"Hundreds of people clamoring to buy imported VCRs surrounded stores in a Soviet city for five days, and some even staged a hunger strike and protests demanding the chance to buy the devices ... The newspaper *Sovietskaya Rossiya* described the incident in Yaroslavl as a "video uprising"... Finally, after five days of turmoil, a happy buyer walked out of the store with the first VCR, called the local TV station and declared, "Victory! The Panasonic is in my hands!"¹¹.

Direct broadcast satellites (DBS), which are not routed through a control point but go directly into people's homes, have obviously not been greeted as an unalloyed joy in Third World countries. These communication satellites rekindled old quarrels about cultural imperialism. Unlike incoming radio signals, satellite television transmission is difficult to block. Media magnate Rupert Murdoch, owner of Star TV, declared that technologies such as satellite television "proved an unambiguous threat to totalitarian regimes everywhere"¹².

Home dishes have been banned in Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Qatar, Iraq (under Saddam), Vietnam, and Singapore, though the bans were not always enforced. Myanmar dealt

⁶ *Newsweek*, 20 October 2003, E36.

⁷ *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, 12 October 1990, 11Ae.

⁸ Chanda, Nayan, reported by Thomas Friedman, *New York Times*, 6 June, 2004, WK 13.

⁹ Oppel, Richard, *New York Times*, 10 August 2003.

¹⁰ Friedman, Thomas L., *From Beirut to Jerusalem*. New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989, 33.

¹¹ *Associated Press*, 8 January 1990.

¹² *Economist*, 3 February 1996, 54.

with unwanted programming by a prohibitive license fee on dishes. China limited the dishes to luxury hotels and some businesses, although an estimated one million illegal dishes were pointed to receive Western programs. Malaysia had restrictions similar to China's. Former Indonesian President Suharto even banned advertising on his own country's Palapa satellite apparently out of fear that rural people would see how much better some urbanites lived. The ban remained in effect for eight years. Indonesian viewers were later permitted to watch programs, but their dishes had to be pointed only at the Palapa satellite. With hesitation Japan—of all countries—agreed to permit pointing home dishes at foreign satellites. The DBS *footprint*, or reception area, of a Japanese television signal spilled over into part of South Korea, which did not please that government.

4. VALUES REPLACE VALUES

When Western values, including the concept of democracy, find root in other societies, they do not settle where nothing existed before. Democracy replaces something else. So does free enterprise. So does Judeo-Christian morality. So does consumerism. So do attitudes toward governmental leadership, family structure, individual rights vs. family and societal responsibilities, sexual standards, and so forth. All new values that take root do so at the expense of existing values, for no society since the dawn of time has existed without values.

An editorial in Thailand's newspaper *Matichon* noted how traditional values are being eroded:

"What's wrong with our young people these days? The parents of families living in the country's bigger cities are complaining more and more that their children are becoming addicted to computer games and fast food.

In addition, Thai children are paying less attention to their family affairs and social problems. They are increasingly pursuing activities for nothing more than their own pleasure. These attitudes are vastly different from the views and principles held by their parents. Older generations were educated to be kind, studious and respectful to senior members of society, as well as responsible for their professional duties.

But the world is getting smaller, thanks to globalization and modern technology. These elements are enabling

people to send and receive messages and news with the push of a button or the click of a mouse. World cultures are melting in the same pot, and consumerism is promoted through modern information technology. Young Thais are no different from their foreign counterparts in this respect. They chat on the Internet, eat fast food, talk on their mobile phones and listen to the same kind of music as youngsters living overseas. They also see the same violence in videogames, and react violently when being faced with problems in their daily lives...

It is high time that government agencies concerned with youth policies look closely into the changing behavior of young Thais. If globalization is partly to blame for this problem, then corrective and preventive measures must be taken to enable our young people to cope with the changes¹³.

At a national level prosperity went hand in hand with freedom of the press, unfettered broadcasting, and Internet access. Almost everywhere, repressive societies were poor. Poor societies were repressive. These were mostly countries of vast poverty plus wealth at the top and almost no middle class. Open communication threatened political and economic control. Governments tried but could not fully stop modern media. As media content spread, Western culture spread, good and bad. Democracy and capitalism spread, as did images of sex and violence.

On any given day, hundreds of radio broadcasts crossed national borders for the purpose of bringing down governments. To cite one example, radio broadcasts from Los Angeles were beamed into Iran nightly by Iranians opposed to its theocratic dictatorship. When students in Tehran took to the streets in 2003 to protest against the government, the broadcasts spread the word throughout Iran in real time.

The anti-government riots in Thailand in 1992, during which soldiers fired directly into crowds of peaceful demonstrators, were never shown on Thai television news, but were seen in other parts of the world. Videotapes taken from American news programs, brought secretly to Bangkok, reportedly commenced to be the most popular rental item in videotape stores. Such Western films as *Gandhi* (India), *Sadat* (Egypt), and *Missing* (Chile) were banned in the countries where their stories unfold, but nevertheless have been widely seen there on tape.

¹³ *Matichon*, 24 February 2003.

5. THE GLOBAL INTERNET

It took the telephone 75 years and television 13 years to acquire 50 million users. It took the Internet five years. Today, more than 500 million people around the world are connected to the Internet. Its development is a historical prime mover like the alphabet and the printing press. The Internet has no borders and is unregulated as it crosses frontiers, but it uses phone lines that are national and regulated by each government.

Laws in different countries govern it and some countries assign departments the responsibility for what it brings, although the Internet has proven harder to control than any other means of communication. Governments are aware of its threat to provide uncontrolled news and opinion originating both outside and inside the country, and to serve as a communication alternative to controllable media. What enters their country without their power to stop it undercuts the impressions that they spend millions to establish. At the same time, all governments need information technology and the Internet as gateways to economic progress. To ignore the Internet is to risk stagnation.

Britain, France, Belgium, Germany and Singapore proposed setting up regulations for ISPs, the Internet service providers. An international NGO (non-governmental organization) Internet group proposed a rating label for content, possibly like the movies' PG system and the E to M system for videogames. Software would block unrated content and any content with the equivalent of an X rating. A current widely accepted labeling system considers four matters: the levels of violence, sex, nudity, and language (including hate language). It may rate a site a 2 for violence, a 1 for sex, and so on.

It is not just pornography that troubles sleep. One of the most irritating capacities of the Internet is its ability to connect dissidents beyond the borders of a country with unhappy people at home. The interconnectivity offered by the Internet has enabled minority groups to share their struggles with the rest of the world.

In *The New Yorker*, Lawrence Wright wrote, quoting Gilles Kepel, a prominent Arabist and a professor at the *Institut d'Études Politiques* in Paris:

"Now one doesn't have to be in Saudi Arabia or Egypt to live under the rule of Islamic law. 'Anyone can seek a ruling from his favorite sheikh in Mecca', Kepel said. 'In the old days, one sought a fatwa from the sheikh who had the best knowledge. Now it is sought from the one with the best Web site'.

To a large extent, Kepel argues, the Internet has replaced the Arabic satellite channels as a conduit of information and communication. 'One can say that this war against the West started on television', he said, 'but, for instance, with the decapitation of the poor hostages in Iraq and Saudi Arabia, those images were propagated via Webcams and the Internet. A jihadi subculture has been created that didn't exist before 9/11' »¹⁴.

Websites are accessible and email is hard to monitor. Instant messaging, usegroups and chatlines can be insidious. It is virtually impossible to identify and block all the sites and pathways. New sites crop up faster than old sites can be identified. Proxy servers offer ways around censorship blockages, but beyond a border a government has no legal power to shut down a site. All it can hope to do is block reception within its own borders.

6. FLASH MOBS

In 1995 Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo announced the start of a military offensive aimed at capturing the Zapatista leader Subcomandante Marcos to bring the rebellion in Chiapas state to a decisive close. Within hours the President's words were on the Internet via the rebels' fax machines and laptop computers. The Zapatistas also faxed out a communique that the *federales* were "killing children, beating and raping women." Many thousands of faxes from around the world opposing the military action were sent directly to the president's office. Faced with the pressure, the government ordered its troops to halt and reporters were allowed into the area. They found no evidence of atrocities. Meanwhile, the Zapatistas had melted away into the rain forests, lugging their laptops. As Marcos pointed out, what governments should really fear are not rebels in the jungle but a communications expert.

We also live in an era of "flash mobs." During the global disputes about the Iraq War of 2003, armies of antiwar protesters was summoned to the streets of Western capitals by email and cellphone instant messaging. One day, at a command,

¹⁴ *The New Yorker*, 2 August 2004, 49.

400,000 American antiwar protesters created a "virtual demonstration" by tying up the White House and Congressional switchboards with emails, telephone calls and faxes. In Rio de Janeiro, on the same day, an imprisoned Brazilian druglord used a smuggled cellphone to organize bombings, bus burnings and street riots.

The flash mobs' tool of choice is the cellphone. The transmission of brief text messages, known as "texting," has been especially popular among the youth of Third World countries, who are now always connected. Cellphone use has spread quickly in Third World countries where the wait for a land-line telephone can last for years. A coded message of a few words can send them to a political protest or to chase down a celebrity discovered shopping. In Nigeria, texting summoned rioters to the Miss World contest and shut it down. Hundreds were killed.

The Iraq War generated massive antiwar protests but these received less television news coverage in the United States than their numbers suggested. The Internet picked up what the stations ignored. Hundreds—perhaps thousands—of websites called weblogs, or "blogs," were devoted to political opinions, filled with links to other opinions and news stories supporting the sundry viewpoints of the "bloggers." These differ from online chatrooms in that a single viewpoint usually prevails.

Painfully, the end of the Iraq War brought out websites from Iraq devoted to identifying and locating those who disappeared during Saddam Hussein's rule. Several hundred thousand Iraqis were missing, mostly young men, most probably slain. Even so, the websites giving their names and showing photos perhaps brought some small comfort to relatives as a virtual memorial.

7. GLOBAL ISSUES

Governments now employ the Internet to sell themselves. This is not a new response. Almost as soon as the printing press was invented governments and churches tried both to regulate it and to use it. Radio and television, which can be controlled, are arms of government in most countries. They are centralized and dependent on the assignment of frequencies. That governments would ignore the Internet defies bureaucratic logic.

Disputes that newspapers declined to publish because of political pressure have circulated widely

on the decentralized Internet, ranging from Ecuador to the Tibetan Information Network out of London distributing information to Tibetan exiles. Websites have supported separatists in Chechnya and Nigeria. Citizens of Arab countries have debated and talked with Israelis in chat rooms and online forums when it was impossible to have face-to-face contact.

Violations of national laws include distribution of pornography and child pornography, hate propaganda, defamation, invasion of privacy, copyright and trademark infringement, deception, and thievery. The United States created the Internet and handles half of all traffic, but should the United States lay down laws for everyone? Probably few people want that, even in the United States.

One problem that governments face is the lack of skilled people to combat Internet violations or even to recognize them. The law-breakers live at the cutting edges of fast changing technology and some are now being aided by encryption that, for example, can allow drug money to flow across the Internet to be laundered. For the most part the governments are far behind. They cannot afford the kind of counter-measures needed, and many government leaders do not fully understand even what is needed. Their priorities lie elsewhere.

8. THREATS TO THE NATION-STATE

Within its own borders, should each nation's laws dominate the Internet? That seems logical but unlikely. With the erosion of borders, nation-states have been losing authority to multinational business, non-government organizations, and to media, including the Internet. Parallels can be drawn to Europe in the Middle Ages, when power passed from feudal barons to commercial interests, a change helped by the spread of another means of communication, printing.

This is not to say that the nation-state will soon be on history's dust heap. Resistance to change is more than strong. It is formidable. For example, while the European Union has made changes in the direction of cooperation, core concerns like control of national armies remain under firm national control.

For poorer countries, the Internet is virtually beyond control. For the poor in most nations the demands of daily survival and dealing with natural disasters make the Internet nothing but a curiosity

or a distraction. The world Internet map resembles a medieval mariner's chart filled with dark areas in much of Africa, Asia, and South America. In such countries as Mozambique, Madagascar, Rwanda, Zaire, and Indonesia most life is too basic to consider the argument that a telecommunication infrastructure plus computers and modems will make a difference in their lives. Telecommunication has a low priority compared to basic needs for food, clothing, shelter, clean water, and health care. In Bangladesh, for example, the cost of a modem is reported to be the cost of a cow.

The problem is that modern health care, education, industry, and agriculture all require information, and that means telecommunication and the Internet. Some countries—notably India—have used their English language skills and the global communication network to advantage. From their legions of otherwise unemployed college graduates have come computer programmers, data entry clerks, and even telemarketers, who are trained to use American accents and know baseball team standings when they interrupt American diners with telemarketing spiels.

Industries especially dependent on the Internet and other telecommunications include banking, health care, and information services from financial brokers to journalism, transportation, and education. Today an estimated four billion of the world's more than five billion people have no phone, let alone Internet access. Half of the world's population has never made a phone call. A researcher in India estimated that a single added phone line in a developing country added an average of \$3,700 to its national wealth. But in some countries even when a family can afford a telephone, five or even ten years can go by before a dial tone reaches them. That is why cellphone technology is such an important part of the information revolution.

Communication technology cannot be separated from culture or from ideology. This argument has been made strongly by thinkers as diverse as Martin Heidegger, Jacques Ellul, and Marshall McLuhan. An inseparable connection has always existed between the tools of communication and the social fabric. Throughout history they have developed together in an intertwined, mutual cause and effect relationship, each giving impetus to the other.