Cultural and Identity Pathology of the Internet

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Abstract: *Objective: Today, the internet is a significant problem in the world, particularly for the developing countries including the Islamic nations. It is essentially important to know about the consequences of the internet along with considering suitable strategies to correctly use it and prevent or reduce its negative consequences. Modern communication technologies have weakened national cultural power and, in contrast, consolidated the power and penetration of the western culture in different areas of family life. The internet may cause cultural changes in two ways: First, it offers its own culture, and second, it provides a passage for other cultures. It also helps the formation of individual identity through providing the means and methods that replace the existing deprivations in a society. The present research has been conducted to study the pathology of the internet in the fields of identity and culture. Methodology: It used a descriptive analytical method. Findings: The context of the real world differs from that of the virtual world. An individual's experience and cultural memory in the real world are different from those in the virtual world, particularly due to its novelty. Thus, various behavioral feedbacks are formed in both perceptional and emotional aspects. It may be claimed that the emergence of modern technologies and media and their consequent changes may have deep effects on the young. Despite all capacities, opportunities and potentials of this modern technology, the emerged problems and damages cannot be neglected. Conclusion: Other than cultural effects on societies, the internet has the ability to bring about cultural changes. Making decisions regarding the application of this new technology requires the identification of cultural needs, definition of some new relations and processes along with inclusion of modern tools in a context that has well sensed changes from within due to enough cognition.*

Keywords: internet; identity pathology; cultural pathology; cultural imperialism

1. Introduction

Today, information and communication technology (ICT) has been widespread and revolutionized the world. Marshall McLuhan has summarized the most significant worldwide change resulting from such a technology as the term "global village," where people from different parts of the world can communicate with one another and be informed of world news and events like the residents of a village.

The nonstop globalization trend has already exposed to change all micro and macro elements of human society at different levels. Among them, culture as the main pillar and the broadest, deepest, and most penetrating element of the human world reflects such changes more than other elements (Sharafodin, 2007).

On the other hand, culture has to be considered the most significant and richest source of identity. Regarding personality, identity means an individual's basic and constant self and his subjective concept of himself as a person. In this sense, an individual's qualifications such as his personal, gender, job, social, moral, cultural, religious, and national identities are determined. Among them, cultural identity has undergone considerable changes in the globalization process.

Today, the role of modern communication technologies in different areas is undeniable, and they have a special status in social, cultural, and economic plans. Mass media that use these technologies bring about undeniably deep effects in areas of individual and social moralities due to their having great power and various scopes and functions. Therefore, the internet as one of the most important achievements of communicative revolution in the early third millennium has given a new sense to communication, changed social interactions, and received great significance.

Pathological studies to determine the vulnerabilities of the young are an essential step for their immunity against value and cultural changes. By vitalizing religious culture and thinking, the Islamic Revolution of Iran has guaranteed the personality and active presence of the young at different social scenes. The revolution occurred in the era when the world moved toward materialism and moral deterioration developed. For years, we have been witnessing the penetration of foreign culture and promotion of material culture and moral platitude among the young individuals in the country. Gradual changes in social values and culture occur during the common process of interactions and communications (Ahmadi, 2010).

Changes in communication technology have led to serious consequences and brought about social challenges and worries. Modern communication technologies have weakened national cultural powers and, in contrast, consolidated the penetration of western culture in different arenas of family life (Kazemi, 1997).

Rapid changes in the society may commonly weaken cultural function and cause the people to suffer from confusion. In these conditions, values appear unstable. A person does not know correctly what style and way to adopt in life. Thus, in the society, people cannot simply

adapt themselves to the past and modern values and may typically face confusion (ibid.).

2. Statement of the Problem

The prevalence of the media in early twenty-first century and the serious role of the internet in forming social culture, identity, beliefs and values have all increased the significance of research in this field. In our today's society, tendency toward using the internet has become so common that most families have personal computers and the members spend much of their time working with computer. Internet development, like any other innovations, has led to changes in different aspects of life. Using the internet has become unavoidable so that life seems to be difficult for those who are accustomed to it. As a result, modern types of human interactions are formed that, while differing from common communication patterns in the mass media, have provided new opportunities to manifest self and identity in practice. Based on what appeared in this section and following the objectives of the current research, the most important effects of the internet on cultural structures and identity are studied.

3. Research Method

The present research is of analytical descriptive type. Therefore, its required data were collected by referring to the related books, papers and press together with searching various websites such as www.noormags.com, www.magiran.com, www.SID.ir, www.tebyan.net, www.ensani.ir, etc. Then, considering the research objectives, the data were classified and analyzed.

4. Cyberspace and the Internet

Cyberspace is described as a place parallel with the real world. Indeed, cyberspace is a metaphorical world composed of computer and communication lines. Here, we no longer perceive things in the usual three-dimensional space and linear time. Instead, we encounter an increasing multi-dimensional non-linear space. Our communication pattern may no more follow a linear model (Torbati, 2009).

It is rather hard to define the internet. In a very broad definition, the internet can be considered a source of good and bad, ugly and pretty as well as moral and immoral information. We enter a space quite different from physical objective reality; therefore, it is called virtual reality. This virtual reality may convince the user that he is really in another place, without being restricted to his physical bounds. This cyberspace develops our senses into an atmosphere not dominated by the conditions of physical environment, linear time, and three-dimensional location. The development of a user's senses into an environment with different spatial dimensions and non-linear time, a location where reality is no longer materialistic and permanent, may influence our understanding and communication nature. Such characteristics as simultaneity and multi-dimensional space lead us to imagine that we are in another place, while our body is in another physical location. Movement in such a space may disorder our linear

system and conventional perception of communication (Torbati, 2009).

The internet is the best situation for people to express their ideas regardless of real world considerations (Suler, 2007). Participation in virtual spaces may reduce the pressures resulted from adapting with group expectations in the real world and provide an individual with more freedom to realize his ideal self and communication with others (Goodwin, 2004; Rheingold, 1993).

Virtual identity may release an individual from limitations and reinforce his different aspects that he has not already been able to demonstrate (Kia, 2007). Users are likely to present a virtual description of their behavioral and personality features quite different from the real ones. It is also possible that individuals describe their gender, social class, education, place of residence, job, income and other specifications contrary to reality. This fact may develop a false or temporary identity in people. By false identity, we mean that a person experiences identities none of which belongs to him, and temporary identity means that a person in every chat introduces an identity that is unstable and lasts only to the end of the chat. Therefore, the person commonly experiences numerous identities that are unstable and transient (Ameli, 2006). Also, Zokaei thinks that the absence of a face-to-face nature of electronic internet communications can make the users more motivated to play with identity and treatments, presenting an unreal profile of themselves with less risk of shame (Zokaei, 2005). Castells believes that since culture is transferred through communications, cultural area including systems of beliefs and treatments developed with history may undergo fundamental changes with the emergence of modern technology. The introduction of communication technologies has brought about basic changes in the structure of human communications and relations (Castells, 2005). As a consequence, a modern type of human interactions is emerged that, while differing from usual communication patterns in the mass media, has practically developed new opportunities to manifest an individual's self and identity (Gorgi, 2006). Most young people can work with a series of computer software and easily understand it. These technological changes have influenced not only their wit, taste and communication, but also their leisure time. In modern societies, young people usually spend a major part of their leisure time staying at home and dealing with the mass media. The young spend their leisure time in isolation more than before, and increasingly depend on the modern media for their entertainment (Zokaei, 2004).

Anonymity, speed of communication, and fluidity of cyberspace may lead to noticeable consequences in young people's gender relations, communication patterns, and making friendship. Class interference with gender and geography may develop a free space for a group of the young, and gradually weaken the common social and gender bounds in their culture. Internet communications in chat rooms, while reinforcing the relations independent of space and time, has changed into a place for search and satisfaction of young people's curiosity (Zokaei, 2005).

5. The Internet and Identity

Recent studies in the field of communication media have paid special attention to the internet and its potentials concerning identity construction and identification process among individuals and socio-political groups. Since early 1990s, special attention has been given by researchers to the internet as a space for identity reconstruction (Lamb and Poster, 2000). Most of these issues indicate the interactions among individuals in the cyberspace and online discussions in chat rooms, etc. Generally, modern information revolution, by terminating unilateral mass communications, has principally changed the relationship between audience and the communication media. The interactive bilateral nature of the internet has caused an individual to be both the receiver and sender of messages at any time. Therefore, it is increasingly hard, in essence, to differentiate between producers and consumers of information. These features have all caused some theorists to consider the internet and its potentials predisposing to the introduction of human society into a modern civilization and identity; an era that has been viewed under various terms such as reflective modernity, postmodernist community, and information society.

Mark Poster, in his book *The Second Media Age*, considers electronic media-based communications a main factor in the formation of unstable multiple identities, casting doubts on past beliefs; therefore, the possibility of formulating unstable multiple identities is also reinforced (Poster, 1998). Decentralization and possibility of developing a less censored bilateral relationship as well as a person's anonymity in the internet cyberspace may provide the formation of a particular kind of public area. People, in this area, are practically able to challenge many absolute concepts in different aspects of life and develop it as a topic for public discussion and reflection. The internet makes it possible for individuals to face experiences that are usually removed from the order cycle of their everyday life. Moreover, the internet may provide individuals with the possibility of changing their lifestyles and obtaining new experiences by exchanging their experiments and challenging most of their life concepts and interpretations as well as mutual investigations. In this regard, while delocalizing social relations, it usually opens our cultural horizons to various customs and lifestyles and develops a new understanding of the world as a socio-cultural and moral context (Thompson, 2001).

Therefore, as Harvy also points out, we may know the most significant features of this epoch as fragmentation, plurality, and absence of determining identity policies, whose consequences can be witnessed in the displacement, decentralization, analysis, and weakness of social identity resources such as class, community, and decreases in political bonds and loyalty (Gillespie, 1995).

6. The Internet and Culture

At present, the internet is one of the most significant instruments to exchange information in socio-cultural areas. Shortening the distances and removing the physical borders between various tribes, nations and civilizations, the internet not only provides the possibility of familiarizing different cultures with one another but also contributes to mutual understanding among these cultures. By means of the internet, countries may typically reach cultural development through exchanging cultural information and giving awareness to their domestic and foreign audience.

Considering culture, language is a main point in relation to the internet. In fact, language is one of the most significant cultural elements through which different fields of culture may be conveyed properly. The dominance of English in the internet is an unquestionable reality that may easily contribute to the transfer of English-speaking cultures (Rezvani, 2002).

In current periods, it is not exaggerating if we consider cultural damages of information technology (IT), particularly the internet, the most harmful, serious and advanced kinds of cultural invasion. Those who are optimistic about the internet have always spoken about its advantages and considered it a powerful means for cultural exchanges between nations. However, critics believe that the internet is just a means for wide-ranging dominance, including cultural domination, by western colonizers and assume that terms such as global culture, digital culture, and internet culture are synonymous with the western culture. Yet, another group with a moderate approach believes that, while maintaining basic values and original traditions, we can welcome modern communicative innovations and technologies and use them to serve the culture (Shojaei, 2008).

The moderate approach appears more realistic and acceptable than both of the pervious approaches. However, if viewed more moderately in particular, statements by the critics also indicate bitter realities that should not be neglected. The internet can actually be used as a means for promoting the objectives of the Islamic native culture, as many admirable activities have been done up to the present time. However, propaganda of the western culture on the internet is so wide that its different forms are often expected to dominate other cultures (Rafipour, 2008).

The ulterior motives backstage the internet and objectives of its managers are specifically important to study its cultural damages. The approach known as "cultural imperialism" or "media imperialism" falls within the research areas in this field. Based on this approach, cultural dominance (i.e., unilateral exchange of cultural elements and phenomena) is a negative function of the media. The term "cultural imperialism" shows a type of social penetration through which a country imposes its basic assumptions, values, knowledge, norms, behaviors, and lifestyles on other countries (Shojaei, 2008).

There is a wide range of issues on identity and cultural damages, and the influence of cultural invasion also involves a large extent. Yet, the main damages discussed here include (1) social isolation, (2) weakening the under-present cultures, (3) propagating intellectual superficiality, (4) creating confusion, (5) development of giving lawful

liberty, and (6) developing the cultural products of deteriorated cultures.

1. Social Isolation

Social isolation involves withdrawal from society and running away from family. The mechanism of initiation and maintenance of social isolation problem originates from family relations (Ahmadi, 2010). Television and the media, more specifically the internet, usually engage young people and university students in the virtual world, depriving them of opportunities to experience the real world and familiarize with attractive, lively, and even hazardous realities. Spending much time with the media also means reducing the rate of human relations, particularly with children and the young. This trend may lead to increasing individualism and decreasing pluralism, serving as a main factor in damaging family integration.

Concerning individualism, Scheffers has pointed to the theory of structurelessness in young people. To explain it further, he writes that Ferechhoff, Hornstein, Hurreiman, and Olek developed the hypothesis of structural change in youth and its other form, that is, structuredness of youth. Their theory was based on the fact that social differentiation is developing in all parts of the society (i.e, social systems). This differentiation may be seen as pluralism in lifestyle. These changes have caused the young not to be able to live the common known lifestyles as the past. All the stages of life have already undergone changes so that we are witnessing the emergence of new structures and development of individualism among the youth (Scheffers, 2003).

The internet serves as a way for acquiring knowledge, raising awareness, and making friendship with others. However, since the internet offers a mass of positive and negative information, its potential dangers are worrying, particularly for the young generation (ibid.).

It is likely that easy internet communications makes individuals spend more time in isolation, speak with strangers online, and develop superficial relationships. They do these activities at the cost of losing face-to-face talks as well as relations with family and friends. Social relations through the internet are weaker than the real ones, leading to a person's social isolation in the end. In a two-year research on internet users, results suggested that increasing use of the internet is associated with decreases in family relations and participation in social communities (Kraut, *et al.*, 1998).

2. Weakening the Under-Present Cultures

Any kind of serious malleability is, in fact, a developed presentation of cyberspace features. Although this space provides a bed for presenting various cultures, only the culture with more active presence will be leading. The debauched western culture has actually cast a shadow over the cyberspace, and the dominance of English has caused the users to get involved in this language and move away from their own national language. This situation naturally leads to domination of the western culture over various

societies and, in particular, the Islamic communities. Accordingly, the values, methods, and identities favored by the western culture are injected into other societies and the process of changes in cultural elements accelerates (Taremi, 2008).

3. Propagating Intellectual Superficiality

Freedom of speech and expression of opposing thoughts are among the primary objectives in such a space. However, if a thought with no valid basis is expressed in this space, many doubts will be raised all of which cannot be studied, criticized, and analyzed by the audience. Therefore, the users are impressed by the thought without studying it carefully. As a result, the morale of accepting rights among the users, especially the young, may change into intellectual superficiality in the acceptance of new thoughts (Hosseini, 2011).

4. Creating Confusion

Accumulation of good and bad information makes it difficult to select the right information. Moreover, its indefinite unclassified plan leads to the confusion of those who are weak in analyzing thoughts. Hence, it is necessary to teach the right classified use of this space to the users beforehand (ibid.).

5. Development of Giving Lawful Liberty

Respecting the social rules and observing the moral doctrines are among the most basic principles in every culture. Obviously, development of giving lawful liberty in the cyberspace may ultimately influence the rate of people's refraining from committing immoral and abnormal acts in society. Some immoral acts in society originate from their development of receiving lawful liberty in the cyberspace.

6. Developing the Cultural Products of Deteriorated Cultures

The west, and sometimes the east, produce the most important cultural products including movies, pictures, texts, as well as computer and internet games and then advertise and distribute them in the cyberspace. Therefore, one of the dangers arising from the cyberspace is directed toward those countries whose cultures are opposing to the culture dominating the internet space (Hosseini, 2011).

7. Results and Discussion

Along with its undeniable positive applications in different fields, the internet is associated with undesirable consequences that should be considered by parents, teachers, all educational authorities, and cultural planners of the society.

The internet, as the most significant modern means of communication, is naturally a cultural technology. It serves as a means of production, reproduction, and diffusion of symbols and meanings, which directly relates to the cultural area and influences it. It may be stated that this

modern technology has traveled over many life areas, and its potential and capacities are so developed that it has created great wonders. Despite all the capacities and potentials of this modern technology, its damages and variations should not be neglected. For the users who have not a considerable thinking basis, the internet is "identity-generator" not "identity-creator," because it is not governed by the life values described by our Islamic culture and religion. In fact, transcendent humanistic identity has been victimized by mechanical identity. By decreasing the importance of place and time and increasing the significance of cyberspace in social life, the modern communication media, the internet in particular, may provide new opportunities for the interaction between self and system as well as the process of identity development. Since identity is always formed in the context of paradoxical dialectic spaces, it seems impossible for individuals and social groups to establish a certain integrated identity. Under these conditions, the process of identification due to its continuous changes has ever remained open and paved the way for developed interactions among socio-cultural and political groups. This fact may weaken some traditional and religious values, because cyberspace users directly speak about their values and meanings. In this process, while new values and meanings are established, past values are challenged or reproduced.

Authorities and socio-cultural institutions are responsible for teaching the society, particularly the adolescents and the young who are more vulnerable, how to use the internet correctly. It is worth noting that although filtering is required and may temporarily prevent from misusing the internet, the government should invest on immunization and reinforcement of religious beliefs as well as fertilization of piety and self-control spirits among the people. It is merely in this way that the culture of correctly using the internet is institutionalized in the society and its negative risks and damages can be prevented.

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