

Internet And Culture: Virtual Reality As The Objective Neurosis Of The Future

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Introduction

Media has assumed a hugely significant role in contemporary life. This significance can no longer be limited to the mediatory role that has traditionally been assigned to it. Of course, it mediates between the human beings and the world of reality that s/he is assumed to live in. It is wedged between the human subject and her/his social, political and cultural contexts. But it is wedged precisely in between the human subject and reality because there happens to be a schism between this subject and the real world around it. Like an umbilical cord it mediates between the subject and the pervasive historical context. The model gets all the more complicated when media is wedged between the citizen of the postcolonial world and the hegemonic discourses that surround him or her.

All this is true if only we were sure of the “actual” reality of the pervasively historical situation out there. We know that there is a reality. We also know that it is being constantly constructed and deconstructed by history. But somewhere along the line we are denied an easy and direct access to these intricate historical processes and we become confounded by the discourse or by the ideology generated by some other tangential development of the discourse. Through a process of ideological refraction, we tend to locate reality afar from where it really is. Media is a very important participant in this game of deception. Media does not distort reality- though that seems to be the traditional accusation. Media, on the other hand, constructs reality. This reality might be a mirage. But in the absence of a credible, tangible model we usually tend to take this mirage for granted.

The development of writing gave mankind increased power over nature and it also paved the way, along with several other developments, for a system that gave a minority a lot of power over the majority. As 'writing' developed into "media" the impact of these "powers" which it gave to its practitioners and benefactors increased manifold. However, "media" soon grew out of whatever limitations "writing" has had initially and began to look for newer modes of communication. The first decade of the twentieth century saw the evolution of motion pictures. Household radios followed in the 1920's and television sets found their place in homes as early as in the 1940's. Though E-mail developed within Arpanet as early as in 1972 the commercialization of the Internet occurred only in the 1980's. With the establishment of the Internet a whole technological and cultural gamut has been created and this is something like a new anthropological situation in the history of humankind.

However, the development of the media is by no means an isolated phenomenon that can be studied within its own parameters. It is not a mere coincidence that the establishment of printing presses throughout Europe, the discovery of America by Columbus and Vasco da Gama's landing in Calicut occurred in the second half of the fifteenth century. Colonialism, in its nascent form, was being aided and abetted by the neo-natal forms of media. The give and take between print media and European colonialism has been studied in detail both by the historians of media and historians of colonialism. To put it simply media has always provided colonialism with its seemingly universalist ideological moorings.

The development of media has now culminated in the development of the World Wide Web or Internet which is a network of networks in which computers are the basic units. In the contemporary society it has become a very powerful instrument of cultural practice and also a producer of a specific mode of culture. As a form of media enriched with the technological advances of the digital age it is equipped with the advantages of both the visual as well as print media. It can contain the various facets of all hitherto media types and categories. As it was mentioned earlier it perpetuates a new sense of reality among its users. It realigns the way we look at ourselves and at the world. It does not mean that Internet or New Media is reshaping the world on its own. It would be rather scientific to say that internet in its historical capacity has aligned with powerful economic and political currents to reshape the world and in doing so to alter the identity and subjectivity of the users of this media. The Universalist implication of the title "World Wide Web" might hide some of the localized contradictions that might manifest in different parts of the world with respect to the homogenizing attitudes of this global media. The socio-cultural context prevailing in the former colonies, usually designated by the term post-colonial, could have a different way of appropriating this new form of media and assimilating the identities and subjectivities generated by it. The questions that naturally arise in such an enquiry are as to the nature of the specificities of post-coloniality, the role played by media in colonial and post-colonial societies in developing various kinds of subjectivities, the various versions regarding the origin and development of new media and finally the precise situation or location of internet in the post-colonial context.

To grasp the situation fully it is necessary to identify the cardinal stages in the development of Internet and the new media and to historicise the whole narratives related to such a development. This requires delving deep into those topics and concepts that have a direct bearing on new media related cultural studies. Internet related studies has already acquired a corpus of key words that have become an integral part of any study of the Internet. The problematic relationship between a postcolonial identity and the universal premises of cyber space is also a topic that requires subtle enquiries.

While trying to explain the affinity between visual media and the late capitalist society of the twentieth century in his paper titled "Surrealism Without the Unconscious" Frederic Jameson makes the following introductory remark:

It has often been said that every age is dominated by a privileged form, or genre, which seems by its structure the fittest to express its secret truths: or perhaps, if you prefer a more contemporary way of thinking about it, which seems to offer the richest symptom of what Sartre would have called the "objective neurosis" of that particular place. (Jameson 67)

Jameson was trying to take us to the observation that visual media, or to be more precise, the television was to be regarded as the "objective neurosis" of the late- capitalist age. However, when one attempts to locate the objective neurosis of the present age, one would surely arrive at a form of media that is not easily definable in terms of its attributes. It is a "medium" that incorporates or rather preys on the salient features of all erstwhile media into its ever-widening fold or network. The Internet which is also alternatively called the "New Media" is actually a conglomeration of all those modes of communication hitherto used by humanity in the various phases of its development. Surely, Internet, accompanied by the machine that makes such networking commonplace, namely the PC or the personal computer, is the "objective neurosis" of present phase of the twenty first century.

Historicizing the origin and the development of the internet is an ambitious project in itself. It has to be techno-cultural and the borderlines are rather difficult to delineate. What we are witnessing in the present context is a blending together of culture and technology where each domain attempts to model and shape the other in a rather competitive way. Hence what is attempted here is just a chronological and a plainly linear history of the origin and development of Internet with stress on the development of technology. In other words, the attempt is to delineate the crucial stages, at least in a chronological manner, which have gone into the creation of the Internet.

The telegraph, which was inaugurated in 1884 with Samuel Morse's transmission of the first electric telegraph message, "what has God wrought?" revolutionized long-distance communication. It aided and promoted the spread of trade and commerce and thus paved the way for the global consolidation of the colonial empire. During the following decades, telegraph lines were installed across North America and Europe and, in 1866, the first transatlantic cable was laid. This networking of cables was reinforced with the invention of telephone by Graham Bell in 1876. These inventions, fuelled by the capital accumulated from colonial exploitation and urged on by the grand projects of the empire laid the foundations for a global telecommunications system. The condition of the "cold war" and the budding imperatives of the computer industry further boosted and modernized this communication system. With the increased use of mainframe computers by military, industrial and academic institutions the need to create some kind of interconnectivity among these computer systems also arose. Let us see how Jason Whittaker describes this context:

By the 1960s, however, the demands of national security in America led to the strategic implementation of a network that could cover a much wider area. The beginning of Internet proper is conventionally dated to that decade, though one convenient starting

point is the launch of Sputnik in 1957, the first artificial satellite that began the space race and increased the importance of the telecommunication system that the Internet would plug into. (15)

The Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) was founded subsequent to the launch of Sputnik by the US Department of Defence. The main concern of the time was the protection of the communication system in the event of a nuclear assault. Thus, the development of computing and telecommunications was a product of the military- industrial complex of the cold war regime. Between 1963 and 1967, Whittaker points out that "ARPA investigated the feasibility of building a computer network and selected nineteen possible participant computer hosts to join ARPANET, as it had become known." (16).

During the 1970s individual networks began to connect to ARPANET and international connections were also established. The various protocols that act as the backbone for data transmission in internet were established and developed during this period. These include the Transmission Control Protocol (TCP) and the File Transfer Protocol (FTP). While TCP is a set of rules that enables different types of computers and networks on the Internet to communicate with one another and was originally developed by the United States Department of Defence for computers using the UNIX operating system. FTP is a method of transferring files from one computer to another or a set of rules that ensures a file is transmitted properly to the receiving computer. During the 1980s the personal computers (PC) became popular and with this the network began widening on a large scale. The 1980s also saw the introduction of Domain Name System (DNS) which helped in the allocation of addresses to host computers. With the DNS in place these networks could access any computer connected to the system and finally the Internet was in place by 1990, the year when ARPANET, its work finished, ceased to exist. The first text-based web browser was developed at European Centre for Nuclear Research (CERN) by a consultant named Tim Berners-Lee and thus the idea of using hypertext for accessing documents became a reality. With the development of a program called "Mosaic" by Marc Andreessen which was a web browser capable of displaying images as well as texts the boom in the use of the World Wide Web set in. The popularity and the wide appeal of the Internet were accentuated by the particular facilities it provided like the World Wide Web and e-mail.

The question as to who owns or who controls the Internet at present is worth asking. There are many bureaucratic bodies controlling its protocols and developments and there are companies responsible for its physical structure. Any network connecting to the internet has to submit to the standards ratified by the Internet Architecture Board (www.iab.org). This board oversees the technical support and the committees designed to maintain the protocols for communicating across the internet. The World Wide Web Consortium (www.w3c.org) provides information on the development of new web protocols. The principal non-profit organizations involved with the technical administration on the Web include the Internet Engineering Task Force (www.ietf.org) and Internet Society (www.isoc.org) which monitor general internet standards.

Also important is the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (www.icann.org) which handles domain name registration and IP address allocation.

In addition to providing advanced communication facilities the Net is also a hub of commercial activity both by itself and in itself. Questions regarding monopoly also arise in this regard. As Ziauddin Sardar and Jerome R. Ravetz rightly point out:

Now, to be sure, private corporations rule all in the development of the hardware and also the basic software. But it is not quite the pure competitive market in which so many fervently believe. For there are monopolistic influences which maintain dominance for products which are certainly not the best conceivable, but which are so deeply embedded that they can beat off all rivals indefinitely. (Sardar 2)

The seeming anarchy that one might visualize in the administration of the Internet does nothing but hide the sway of monopolistic capitalism that structures and administrates it. It is the invisible presence of the globally assertive capitalist system that presides over this huge network of networks. Issues regarding monopoly and rampant use of copyright laws have come up again and again with regard to Internet. Ethical issues related to libel, sex, pornography, erotica, obscenity and the techno-moral issues related to hacking and the spread of viruses have also come up with the popularization of the use of Internet. Issues regarding surveillance of Internet based communication and other activities have also come up at various stages. Such issues merit separate treatment of their own.

The term "artificial reality" was brought in to distinguish the reality associated to Cartesian concepts of space from the reality experienced through the mediation of technology. The term Cartesian space is occasionally used to refer to the "physical" or pre-virtual "real" world. It is generally used in opposition to "cyberspace" or "virtual space". A more reinforced variety of artificial reality is often termed as "virtual reality". Virtual reality works directly on the senses and it erases, to an extent, the possibility that it could be distinguished from real experience. Though the virtual reality experience might begin with a willing suspension of disbelief, it soon works its way up into the manifold patterns of reality and suspends even the slightest trace of disbelief. To that extent virtual reality is more active in comparison to artificial reality.

Information Technology has also brought in a philosophical rethinking about the meaning and the scope of the world community. Abstract extensions of social life were always a part of community building but the introduction of Information Technology has given such abstract extensions an edge over the real social content of communities. A related belief is that the political arena can also be extended to cyberspace and thus a kind of cyber democracy can be achieved which will have positive impacts on the contemporary society. Cyberspace as it is used here denotes the real and imagined space in which individuals meet in electronically mediated and simulated conditions. The concept of cyberspace brings in the question of individuation which is a process by which a population becomes atomized according to a technological network which privatizes participation in or access to a public realm. From this

question is born the issues of "monadic interaction" which describes the interactive drive exhibited by solitary individuals who pursue their appetites and needs in complete isolation from one another.

Postcoloniality, as a political destiny, is all pervasive. It is the singular characterizing feature in all our interactions, both Cartesian and virtual. Postcoloniality as a political realization is a powerful tool, both in Cartesian and virtual worlds. But unless the postcolonial realises the importance of politicizing their virtual interactions they will be doomed by this destiny. They will be caught in the endless chain of mimicry and mockery. When 'mimicry makes the postcolonial rather too self-conscious they will seek solace in mockery. When mockery makes them feel alienated, they will again go back to mimicry. When reality appears drab, they leap into the cyber world. When the cyber world bores them with its colourful meaninglessness we return to the earth looking like unsuccessful astronauts. They wait on the corners of chat rooms within the web of constructed identities and each prey that strays into the web disappoints them. Nonetheless each pray that evades the net makes them avaricious and they surf along. Each successful delivery of an e-mail, each emotionally drained emoticon they dispatch in chat, each homepage they construct for publicizing themselves all these activities carve out identities for them. The communities they partake in, the communities they form, the communities they destroy all these activities announce the lacunae in colonial modernity which is the inability to locate the discourses in a pertinent political sphere.

The World Wide Web has two worlds beneath it. One world belongs to the spider and the other world belongs to the hapless prey. If it is possible to categorize further, we would discover multiple worlds under the net cast by the new media. Just as there are multiple modernities there are multiple worlds. While one world controls it from below, the other is subjugated beneath it. Just as telegraph helped to consolidate the colonial empire the internet is a part of the consolidation of the neo-colonial empire. To that extent the network provided by the World Wide Web is a modernized extension of the transcontinental telegraph lines that were laid in the second half of the nineteenth century. The "virtuality" of the Web is a convenient tool in the covert operations of imperialist capitalism. The view that technology and its implications are universal is a naïve and apolitical one. Techno-cultural activities like the construction of a website or an online identity clearly reveal the cultural implications of technology. Almost all theoretical postulations that have come up as a part of postcolonial enquiries have a direct bearing on new media studies as well. While it is the tendency of superficial accounts to maintain that technology is apolitical such stances can be effectively interrogated by resorting to postcolonial postulations like agency, hybridity, subject-construction and cartographic practices. All the discriminations that plague the real world are brought into the cyber world through a transference that is essentially and wholly cultural and discourse centred. Thus, the view that Internet offers a digital/cyber heaven devoid of this-worldly inequalities is a myth that is being produced and perpetuated by techno-philosophy on behalf of capitalist interests. The characteristic feature of the presence of a postcolonial in the cyber world is experienced by him/her in terms of multifaceted conflicts. The feeling of being excluded is a part of her/his identity both in the real as well as in the virtual worlds. Third world centred studies on the role

of Internet and its links to imperialist designs have to be studied as a part of developing an alternative to the concept of modernity that is often thrust upon the third world.

The locus on which neurosis of the new media is going to enact its drama is not the cartesian society of the past but the virtual society of the future. And even this future is going to be remarkable with its moorings on a plethora of virtual socialisations and interactions. The present situation is marked by the mimesis of all aspects of cartesian reality on a cyber realm. This could be called the teething stage of virtual reality and has all the props and markings of the initial stage of an anthropological revolution. However, it is clear from the pieces of evidence that are available in plenty that, sooner or later cyber reality is going to declare its deemed independence from its current cartesian buttresses and evolve into a realm of its own.

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