

**Media, Markets and Meaning: Placing Sustainable  
Development and Environmental Conservation and  
Enrichment at Risk**

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**Abstract**

*This paper critically assesses the globally dominant pattern of complex relationship that obtains among mass media, market economics, and both cultural and environmental change. Making use of Buddhist conceptual resources that link the meaning of development, environmental conservation and attentional enrichment, the effects of consuming mass media commodities are evaluated in ways that are compatible with Bhutan's overarching commitments to enhancing Gross National Happiness (GNH).*

*Contemporary media are a complex result of historical processes shaped by the interplay of wide-ranging social, economic, political, cultural and technological forces and systems. Understanding how media affect public culture and environmental quality requires gaining critical perspective on these processes and the multi-dimensional context of their consolidation. Here, I want to focus on a particular pattern of connections obtaining among mass media, communications technology and market economics—a pattern of interdependence that has crossed key thresholds of intensity and scale to begin globally transforming the quality and directional character of attention itself, thereby affecting the very roots of public culture and effecting a systematic erosion of environmental diversity.*

*In spite of its complex texture, the broad outlines of this pattern of connections can be relatively simply formulated. As a result of compounding efficiencies correlated with*

*specific advances in transportation, manufacturing and communication technology, by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century there had emerged global markets of sufficient reach and density to bring about a commodification of the entire range of goods and services needed for basic human subsistence, including food, clothing, shelter, healthcare, education, sensory stimulation and a sense of belonging.<sup>1</sup> In the early phases of this process, mass media played a key role in coupling markets and consumers by transmitting advertising content specifically designed to manufacture consumer need. In later phases, positive feedback circuits emerged between market growth and media consumption that did not depend upon media content performing a coupling function.*

*As a result of advances in communication technologies, the scale of media consumption crossed a decisive threshold beyond which the explicit content of the media has come to be less crucial to furthering market growth and the proliferation of consumer needs than the summative effects of media consumption as such. The most salient among these effects is the mass export of attention from local environments, resulting in a depletion of the basic resource needed to appreciate or directly add-value to those environments, as well as a concomitant impoverishing of relational capacities and commitments.*

*Beyond certain thresholds of reach and density, markets attain sufficient complexity to begin producing not only goods and services, but also populations in need of them – populations that experience themselves as living in increasingly elective environments open to and*

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<sup>1</sup> This list of subsistence needs combines the customary triad of food, clothing and shelter with four other basic needs that are derived from a range of Buddhist teachings, including those referring to the “four nutriments” and the minimal level of material support needed to sustain a spiritual practice. Failure to meet of any one of these seven needs for very long seriously compromises quality of life.

*yet also in deepening need of management or control. For individuals in such populations, opportunities for differing multiply geometrically, but those for truly making-a-difference to and for one another contract. Expanding powers for exercising (consumption mediated) freedoms-of-choice come at the cost of diminishing strengths for relating-freely.<sup>2</sup>*

*These are very strong claims. They suggest that contemporary mass media are implicated in a complex pattern of interdependencies that compromise appreciative and contributory virtuosity, degrade immediately experienced environments and ecologies, and foster the systematic translation of locally vibrant patterns of cultural and environmental diversity into mere variety. If valid, contemporary media must be seen as having come to exert a potent and yet practically invisible, corrosive effect on public culture.*

*This will come as unwelcome news for those inclined to see the media as a potentially powerful forum for developing national-scale Bhutanese public culture and as an efficient means of widely promoting environmental conservation. For those who have seen the media—and especially the new media emerging at the developmental edge of communication technology—as vehicles for expressing differences and resisting hegemonic social, economic, political and cultural forces, they are likely to be seen as claims hardly worth countenancing. At the root of such hopeful visions of the interplay of media and public culture*

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<sup>2</sup> Here, “power” indexes ability to determine situational outcomes; “strength” indexes capacity for opportune situational engagement. Power enables winning whatever “game” is being played, be it social, economic, political or cultural. Winners are accorded further power. Strength enables playing whatever “game” is being played in such a way as to keep all players interested and involved. Where power implies having relatively greater freedom-of-choice than others, strength implies having the resources needed for relating-freely with others.

*is the presupposition that the media and their underlying technologies are essentially value-neutral—the conviction that neither the media nor their technological infrastructure in any way determine or prescribe their uses or their social, economic, political and cultural effects.*

*In what follows, I hope to show that matters are not so simple. Media, global markets and the technologies that make them possible jointly express a sustained commitment to values, intentions and practices—in Buddhist terms, a karma—that occasions a complex of outcomes and opportunities which poses particular challenges to realizing the deepening capacities-for and commitments-to equity and diversity that are at the heart of Bhutan's GNH-oriented public policy.*

### **Technology and Media**

The crucial role of technological change in the emergence of contemporary mass media is incontestable, and many media historians and critics have rightly granted a central role in their emergence to advances in communication technology. Most obviously, technological change made available vastly greater powers both for the mass duplication of communications content and for its geographically expanded mass distribution. The leap of printed daily and weekly newspapers from local to regional and national scales of distribution, for example, required both greatly increased unit production and greatly expanded means of reliable and rapid automotive and rail transportation. Radio broadcast, likewise, made possible vastly amplified audiences for live public commentary, music performances, and both scripted and improvised dramatic entertainment.

Less obviously, perhaps, but no less importantly, advances in communications technology also enabled an expansion of the sensory reach of the media and a radical extension of their potential content. Abstract, nominally visual media like print

were first augmented by lithographic illustrations and still photography that allowed the presentation of relevant visual information/images and not just linguistic representations of them. The advent of audio recording and broadcast radio opened the sense of hearing to mass mediation. The invention of motion picture film enabled mass kinesthesia and the inclusion of gesture-based, non-verbal communication as media content. Film, television, and more recently computer-based gaming enable the merging of visual, audio and kinesthetic content to bring about potentials for mass-mediated emotional stimulation and interactive imagination. Although we are perhaps decades away from full-sensorium mass media, that is certainly the dream of those pushing the communication technology envelope: the creation of convincingly “real” mass-mediated virtual environments.

The contemporary *scale* and *scope* of mass media can, with considerable plausibility, be seen as a direct result of technological development. But technology itself is not an autonomous domain. Its development is closely allied, if not essentially alloyed, with changes taking place in the social, economic, political and cultural dimensions of contemporary life and, even more importantly, within emergent interdependencies among them. Thus, while it is entirely natural to begin a discussion of the impact of media on public culture by reflecting on technological conditions that have enabled them to take on the shape and scale that they have, the discussion needs also to take into account the larger, truly global patterns of historical development in which the rise of mass media has played a particularly complex and crucial role.

### ***Evaluating Technologies on the Basis of Tool Use: A Category Mistake***

As a crucial preliminary to this broader discussion, a key critical distinction must be made between technologies and tools. Tools are products of technological processes that can be adequately evaluated individually, on the basis of their intended, task-specific utility. If tools do not work or work well, they are discarded, recycled or redesigned. Although tools are designed with specific uses in mind, flexibility obtains in how they are actually used; adapting existing tools to new uses commonly precedes the design and manufacture of new tools. Televisions, DVD players, radios and internet-connected home computers are among the more common consumer tools associated with contemporary media; producer tools include audiovisual recording equipment, disc manufacturing machinery, radio and TV broadcast transmitters, and network routers and servers.

In contrast, technologies are complex alloys of material and conceptual practices that embody and propagate distinct systems of strategic values. While tools occupy relatively limited and precisely located amounts of space, technologies consist of emergent, value-laden *flows* of historically-informed relationship saturating wide swaths of the entire spectrum of human endeavor. Technologies are not *things* that can, strictly speaking, be said to exist—literally “standing apart” or “taking place” at some particular point in space—in service of some task-specific utility. Instead, technologies are indefinitely occurring *events* resulting in the generation of new kinds of tasks and embodying broad propensities for realizing certain kinds of world or lived experience.

Unlike tools, technologies cannot be evaluated on the basis of task-specific utility. Indeed, technologies cannot in any strict sense be used at all; instead, technologies are engaged in the shared conception and promotion of particular interests or ends.

Technological engagement means consolidating specific patterns of strategic valence. Thus, technologies—and the values they propagate—can only be effectively evaluated in terms of how they affect relational quality and the meaning of the interdependencies they establish among the personal, social, political, economic, cultural and environmental dimensions of our situations as complex wholes. Somewhat surprisingly, technologies must be critically appraised in explicitly aesthetic, moral and ethical terms.

Important implications attend the ontological difference between tools as individually existing things and technologies as indefinitely occurring event flows. First, although one can refuse to use particular tools and whatever advantages they might bestow in carrying out particular tasks, there are no clear “exit rights” from the effects of heavily deployed technologies. Thus, even those people who elect not to own televisions cannot entirely escape the effects of televised entertainment and news consumption on public and popular culture; people who elect not to own and drive automobiles are nevertheless subjected to the polluted air, traffic gridlock and transformations of urban space that attend heavily deployed automotive transportation technologies. The impacts of a given technology on relational quality may be initially greatest for intensive users of tools associated with that technology, but eventually these impacts become effectively ubiquitous.

A second key implication is that while tools can persuasively be depicted as simple problem-solvers, regardless of how many of them are in use at any given time, this is not true of technologies. Histories of technology suggest that scale thresholds obtain beyond which further deployment of a given technology begins generating ironic consequences or problems of the type that only this technology or its close relatives can apparently address. These ironic (or “revenge”) effects demonstrate the fallacy in assuming that what is good for each

of us will be good for all.<sup>3</sup> They also demonstrate that technologies emerge as higher order complex systems<sup>4</sup> on the basis of novel compositions of lower level systems of knowledge and material practice in novel ways, while at the same time exerting “downward causation” on such component systems to bring them into better functional conformity with their own higher order needs and values.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For a thorough discussion of ironic consequences, see Peter D. Hershock, *Reinventing the Wheel: A Buddhist Response to the Information Age*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> To clarify the force of this claim, let me distinguish among simple, complicated and complex systems or phenomena. Simple systems—for example, an automobile engine or a notebook computer—comprise relatively few inert parts or variables. Their behavior can be understood in linear causal terms and can be accurately predicted and controlled as a sum of the capacities of their component parts. Complicated systems—for example, ocean currents or traffic flows in a large city—are composed of large numbers of simple, interacting, and yet non-adaptive, parts or variables. Although the behavior of individual parts cannot be accurately determined or controlled, the overall behavior of complicated systems remains limited to a sum of the capacities of their simple, component parts and can be predicted and controlled in probabilistic or statistical terms. By contrast, complex systems—for example, living organisms and societies—comprise significant numbers of interacting and dynamically adaptive parts or variables. Complex systems do not simply aggregate the characteristics of their component sub-systems. Instead, they express qualitatively distinct, recursively-structured orders that are capable of generating novel behaviors, actively incorporating histories of the situational outcomes of their own behaviors to shape present and future behavior. In sum, complex systems are both *auto-poetic* (self-making) and *novogenous* (novelty-generating).

<sup>5</sup> The notion of “downward causation” is explored at length in Peter Bogh Andersen with Claus Emmeche, Niels Ole Finnemann and Peder Voetmann Christiansen edited, *Downward Causation: Minds, Bodies, and Matter*, Aarhus



Confusing tools and technologies, collapsing the important ontological differences between them, is to commit a particularly ominous category mistake, especially if one errs on the side of considering critical assessments of tools to be the equivalent of critically assessing the technologies from which they are derived. In effect, that is to exempt technologies from any appropriate critical regard at all.

***Mass Media as Complex Technological Phenomena, not Complicated Tools***

The term “mass media” was first used in the 1920s with the advent of national radio broadcasts in the U.S., marking a close association of media with technology that continues to the present day. “Mass media” is now generally used to refer a range of technology-enabled communication systems including: print publishing (newspapers, magazines and books); electronic broadcast (radio and television, but now also computer-based podcasts); the internet; and computer games. These media categories are associated with a range of purposes including: journalism (the provision of news and information); advocacy (the provision of social, political and business/economic perspectives and propaganda); entertainment (the provision of sensory and aesthetic stimulation); public service (e.g., organizing disaster relief); and education.

The alignment of mass media with technology that is evidenced by standard categorizations of the media reflects how the media are appraised, especially in terms of their impact on the dynamics of the public sphere. Unfortunately, however, the media have not been understood and appraised as truly complex technological phenomena. Rather, they have been treated as merely complicated tools that can be evaluated in terms of how well they serve the distinct purposes for which

they are used. In essence, the effects of mass mediation have most often been assumed to be a simple, combined function of the intentions of those using the media – either as profit seeking producers or enjoyment or information seeking consumers – and the content that mass media deliver. Consequently, the public impacts of the media typically have not been assessed comprehensively – as I have argued should be the case for any technological phenomena – in terms of how they affect relational quality and the meaning or directedness of the interdependencies they foster.

Seeing the media as tools has deflected critical attention away from the media themselves to the commodified goods and services passing through them and the reasons that they do so. Paralleling the popular argument wielded by the proponents of the right to bear arms – “guns don’t kill, people do” – the media are generally held to lack any intrinsically determined effects on public culture. Whether the media have good or ill effects on society depends strictly on who is using them and why.

In sum, mass media for the most part have been critically regarded as an essentially neutral interface between media users – a means of transmitting messages and not communicative systems expressing and/or propagating meanings of their own. Media ethics has thus tended to concentrate on establishing codes of professional conduct for those generating media content (most prominently investigative reporters, newscasters, journalists and book authors); on building systems for regulating media production and marketing (often reflecting stances on censorship and worries about market monopolies); and on discerning if, how, and in what way specific program contents affect individual media consumers (e.g., the effects of violent cartoon programs on young viewers)

To be sure, the intentions of media users (both producers and

consumers) and the communicative content linking them do make a difference in how the media affect popular culture, as well as other dimensions of the public sphere. The importance of program content is evidenced, for example, in strong correlations between the consumption of violent media and social violence.<sup>6</sup> The proven success of mass mediated advertising and the successful use of television as a propaganda tool in—to illustrate both ends of the “propaganda” spectrum—both Hitler’s Germany and contemporary American presidential election campaigns leaves little doubt as to the relevance of intention in the public impact of the media. Nevertheless, the effects of program content and producer/consumer intent do not exhaust the full range of media effects on the dynamics of the public sphere. Indeed, granted that technologies arise as complex and value-laden relational flows that pervade both the personal and the public spheres, and that their effects are not restricted to those making direct use of tools associated with them, it may well be critically counterproductive to focus exclusively on media users—those whose communication and information needs are being adequately met, and perhaps shaped, by the increasingly refined tools of mass mediation.

In the following section, I want to sketch out the relational terrain linking mass media and market economics. The point of this is to open for consideration the possibility that, as important as the mediating effects of content and intent are, they

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<sup>6</sup> A summary of scientific findings on media and violence, as well as media misinformation about these findings, can be found in Brad J. Bushman and Craig A. Anderson, “Media Violence and the American Public: Scientific Facts Versus Media Misinformation,” in the *American Psychologist*, June/July 2001. An interesting work focused on the role of unconscious imitation in media consumption is Susan Hurley’s “Bypassing Conscious Control: Media Violence, Unconscious Imitation, and Freedom of Speech,” in *Does Consciousness Cause Behaviour? An Investigation of the Nature of Volition*, edited by S. Pockett, W. Banks, and S. Gallagher, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005.

ultimately may be dwarfed by the systemic effects of the media as complex, value-laden technological phenomena that have emerged through, and helped to both sustain and direct, a particular pattern of interdependencies among modern (and now postmodern) social, economic, political, and cultural practices and forces.

***The Bigger Picture: Market Realities and the Emergence and Flourishing of the Media***

It has been said that the only thing more certain to hamper the advance of critical understanding than generalizations is the failure to make them. The aerial views afforded by generalizations are notoriously short on detail, passively obliterating differences that at ground level may be profoundly important. At the same time, however, their broader horizons make possible both a significant expansion of what might be considered relevant and an almost paradoxical sharpening of detail with respect to large-scale patterns. Comprehensively and critically understanding mass media and their current and potential shaping of public culture requires systematically reckoning with how the media's historical evolution has affected and been affected by large-scale patterns of development outside of the communication sector. Adopting such an aerial perspective on the media will mean glossing over important differences in how mass media have emerged and become woven into the fabric of day-to-day life in various parts of the world.<sup>7</sup> But at the same time, it will enable shedding critical light on whether those differences might—or might not—be able truly to make a difference in how 21st century media affect public culture.

Within the overall patterns of events constituting the historical

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<sup>7</sup> For a collection of essays exploring such differences, see James Curran and Myung-Jin Park, edited, *De-Westernizing Media Studies*, New York: Routledge, 2000.

“terrain” out of which contemporary media have emerged, I want to concentrate on four main features. These are: 1] the growth of national and global institutions aligned with such modern values as universality, equality, autonomy, plurality, tolerance, precision and control, which fostered; 2] the concurrent evolution of a globally integrated economic system that has successfully commodified virtually every aspect of human subsistence, thereby; 3] challenging and dissolving traditional socio-cultural roles, practices and identities, especially those related to direct, mutual contribution to shared welfare, to; 4] greatly expand experiential freedoms-of-choice and systematically support the fashioning of globally profitable elective identities and communities, ironically compromising both capacities-for and commitments-to relating freely in the realization of a truly diverse and environmentally enriching public sphere.

### **Modernity and the Advent of a Global Market Economy**

Among the most prominent and significant features of global history over the past half millennium have been the ideological and institutional triumph of modernity and the consolidation of globally integrated market activities. Understanding how contemporary media affect public culture involves coming to see how the media have been implicated in expanding the scope of market activity, but also in qualitatively altering the critical purchase and practical traction of modern values, inculcating postmodern sensitivities-to and celebrations-of difference in a technologically enabled reconciliation of tensions between the values of autonomy and equality.

In his book, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*, Stephen Toulmin has argued masterfully against the long received view that the birth of modernity and its displacement of Renaissance humanism and skepticism resulted from a kind of immaculate conception—an intrinsically generated shift of

basic values and conceptual frameworks. To the contrary, Toulmin makes the case that transitioning from the values and concept clusters of Renaissance humanism and skepticism to those characteristic of modern thought and institutions was of a piece with equivalently radical shifts taking place in the social, political, economic, cultural and technological domains. These shifts, he maintains, occurred as systemic responses to a confluence of stresses, within the public sphere, that were unique to 17th century Europe and that continued significantly to affect the trajectory of global history through most of the 20th century.

No less practically than theoretically motivated, modernity involved the interpretation of difference as an expression of contingency and the canonization of dichotomies asserting the primacy of reason over emotion; of mind over body; of the written over the oral; of the universal over the particular; the general over the local; the timeless over the timely; and the logical over the rhetorical. Modernization meant—and continues to mean—change based upon the preeminence of a constellation of values including: universality, autonomy, equality, sovereignty, precision and control. These values ramified with particularly apparent force in the realm of politics, setting in motion nation-building processes that profoundly revised the shape and quality of political space. But, just as powerfully, they transformed the dynamics of trade and development.

Global trade is not a strictly modern phenomenon. A quilted pattern of exchange relations linked, for example, imperial China and imperial Rome from as early as the 1st century CE. But global trade began undergoing a series of technologically and ideologically driven shifts in the 16th century that, over the succeeding three hundred years would bring about the realization of a truly global market economy through which almost all natural and industrial resources were commodified and put into worldwide circulation. Among the key values

inscribed in and prescribed by these shifts have been: control, competition, convenience and choice.

It is useful to identify four major periods in the realization of contemporary global markets: the period of colonial economics that prevailed from the 16 to the 19th centuries; the period of development economics that developed from the 19th century through roughly three quarters of the 20th century; the information economy that assumed global primacy over the last decades of the 20th century; and, most recently, the subtle emergence of a media-sustained attention economy.<sup>8</sup> These four periods can be associated with technologically triggered efficiencies that dissolved geographic and temporal constraints on the expansion of market scale and content, making possible: 1] the successive commodification of natural resources, labor, information and attention; and, 2] the successive extension of power over the production and flow of goods, consumption, knowledge/human capital, and a sense of belonging or meaning.

An important turning point in this process occurred in the late 19th century. By this time, markets of truly global reach were fast maturing, resulting in shortfalls in the velocity of consumption required to sustain economic growth. Theorists like Thorstein Veblen were, by the end of the century, noting that expanding markets mandate expanding consumer bases and that limits exist as to how far this expansion can be driven by falling prices associated with efficiencies in production and transportation. Sustaining growth meant continuously increasing the absolute range of goods and services placed into global circulation. Beyond a certain scale threshold, the growth of overall market activity can only be stably realized through

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<sup>8</sup> I have described these transitions and their wider contexts in: *Reinventing the Wheel* (op. cit.) and in *Buddhism in the Public Sphere: Reorienting Global Interdependence*, London: Routledge/Curzon, 2006, especially, Chapter 3.

accelerating rates of consumption. In short, maximally extended market reach produces powerful imperatives to maximize market density, incorporating entirely new populations (e.g., children) and new commodities (e.g., entertainment) within the scope of market exchanges.

In effect, increasing the density of market activities involved the generation of needs and problems that might be addressed by new, market-designed and market-delivered goods and services. Under the aegis of added convenience and expanded freedoms-of-choice, market growth came to be sustained by systematically finding fault with the familiar and traditional. Homemade soap, for example, was faulted for being “un-hygienic” – produced by rendering animal fat wastes – and far inferior to the scientifically engineered and “pure” cleaning agents produced by the chemical industry. By the mid-20th century, novelty itself had been elevated to the status of a selling point. Particularly in the U.S., accelerated consumption was successfully sold to the public as a means of bringing “the future” into every home and neighborhood.

Two major consequences of increasingly dense market activity can be noted here. First, economic growth becomes coupled to deepening dissatisfaction with things as they have come to be. In Buddhist terms, this can be seen as the systematic creation of an economy of dissatisfaction rooted in the production of *papanca* or the proliferation of situational blockages – the steadily expanding experience of disappointment, trouble and suffering (*dukkha*). Secondly, economic growth becomes proportionate to a tightening of the consumption-to-waste cycle, which translates into decreasing opportunities for directly appreciating or adding value either to the goods and services one purchases or to one’s situation as a whole. Beyond certain thresholds of market reach and density, growth has a corrosive effect on relational quality. This effect is most severe for the poor, who are deprived in relative, if not absolute, terms of the



resources and imagination needed for investment. Economic growth, in these terms, becomes systematically impoverishing.<sup>9</sup>

Mass media have played a crucial role in making this kind of economic growth possible. Technological advances in industrial production and transportation had, by the beginning of the 20th century, enabled the commodification of basic, material subsistence needs: food, clothing and shelter. Over the course of the century, the needs for medical care, education, sensory stimulation and a sense of belonging or meaning were successfully subjected to marketization. Mass media were important throughout this process. They served first as a means of advertising goods and services and creating new kinds of needs. Later, they served as forums for broadly shaping and setting popular agendas for public policy. Finally, they began functioning as almost universally available conduits for marketing/distributing sensory, imaginary and intellectual stimulation in the form of news and entertainment products and programming.<sup>10</sup>

The development of commercially viable, electronic mass communication, from mid-20th century onwards, was especially important in bringing about both quantitative and qualitative shifts in the relationship among media, expanding market reach

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<sup>9</sup> I have presented this argument in greater detail in: "Poverty Alleviation: A Buddhist Perspective," *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, Volume 11, Winter 2004, pp. 33-67.

<sup>10</sup> It should be noted, here, that I am working with a Buddhist-inspired understanding of subsistence needs as those "nutriments" required for sustaining human beings as persons-in-community. It is part of the basic, Buddhist worldview that human beings have six sense organs and associated ranges and qualities of consciousness: the visual, auditory, gustatory, olfactory, tactile and mental. Thus, intellectual stimulation is, in Buddhist terms, a form of sensory stimulation. Concepts and ideas are, for us, a kind of "food"—a nutriment without which it is impossible to lead fully human lives.

and density, and the erosion of personal and communal resources and opportunities for contributing directly and significantly to sustainably shared welfare. Here, let me draw attention to four phases or aspects of this complex process.

First, because electronic communications technologies were instrumental in opening up possibilities for mass producing and mass marketing auditory and visual experiences, they effectively enabled mass media to circumvent the literacy hurdle presented by print media and, in some degree, to perforate the language barriers that had hitherto segregated national media markets. Among the most readily apparent outcomes of this capacity of mass media to penetrate markets worldwide was the emergence of global pop music.

Secondly, these new technologies also made possible the penetration of mass media into the lives of barely literate and pre-literate populations, especially children. The affects of television program content and advertising on children's desires and expectations—and subsequently, family consumption patterns—has been nothing short of profound.

Thirdly, these new technologies made possible the marketing of ephemeral goods—experiences or sensory stimulation as such—that radically collapsed the consumption-to-waste cycle and habituated media consumers to a diet of virtually unbroken product streams. An importantly aspect of this was the market-driven development of user-friendly, inexpensive and highly portable media tools (e.g., the original Sony Walkman and the new I-Pod) that allowed the consumption of mass media to be effectively freed from spatial/geographic constraints. It became practically possible to consume media products virtually anytime, anywhere.

Finally, the flood of cheap, new media tools combined with niche marketed media content to fabulously expand consumers'

freedoms-of-choice in managing the content of their (mass-mediated) experience. In effect, this dissolved tensions between the values of autonomy (acting in one's own individual interest) and equality (the combination of difference with an absence of explicit hierarchy). Internet technologies, in particular, made possible the realization of a virtual public sphere in which—at least as claimed by some cyberspace visionaries—every individual can exercise the right to pursue whatever he or she means by liberty and happiness, making a difference for himself or herself without necessarily making a difference to anyone else. The widely recognized “digital divide” of inequitable access to computer-mediated information and opportunity is one shadow of free market media; the digital divide or gap that allows individual user choices to occur in almost complete isolation is, in terms of public culture, an even deeper and more dangerous shadow—a direct threat to diversity understood as a function of mutual contributions to sustainably shared welfare.

## **Mass Media and the Global Market Sustaining Export of Attention**

If the media are viewed as (or, at least, in terms of) tools that are used and evaluated by individuals, these “effects” of commercially viable mass media can easily be regarded in a quite positive light. For any individual, having more choices, for example, regarding the content of their day-to-day experiences is certainly better than have fewer choices or none at all. Whether mass mediated experience is of higher, lower or equivalent quality to unmediated experience is, arguably, simply a matter of personal opinion or debate. And, as proved by the use of the internet to organize social and political activism (e.g., the movement advocating alternatives to free market globalization), or by the proliferation of non-mainstream sources of information and analysis (like Z-Net or the blogging phenomenon), the tools that have been used to build global markets can also be used to take them to task.

However, if mass media are understood as technological phenomena or strategically structured flows of events, then it is entirely possible that the sum of all individual stories about media use will still not tell us much—at least, not much that is critically relevant—about media effects on public culture. Critically engaging mass media requires keeping the bigger relational pattern in mind. To this end, I want to look at attention itself as a form of capital—indeed, the single most important form of capital for realizing diverse and caring communities, but also one that is circulated by and essential to the “health” of the global market economy.

It is often assumed that the overall viability of (especially) electronically delivered, commercial mass media is a function of how well the costs of producing and marketing media commodities are offset by income from their purchase and consumption. With media like recorded music or cable

television, unit charges for individual products or time-based charges for access to product streams are a major source of income; for media like broadcast radio and television—which supply media goods (program content) without any direct charges to consumers—costs are largely recouped, and profit generated, through advertising sales and related product spin-offs. The dynamics of the information economy are, in fact, very much dependent upon such processes in which flows of information and opinion intermingle to form immaterial attractors for both production and consumption.

Yet, mass media play a much more important role in global economics than that of generating product- or program-mediated monetary transfers. At present scales of media penetration, made possible in large part by technological efficiencies that have allowed media consumption to become highly individualized, as well as nearly ubiquitous, mass media are habituating entire populations to diets of virtually unbroken streams of ephemeral entertainment, information and news. This signals a systematic and significant export of attention out of the environments within which mass media are consumed—homes, schools, workplaces, neighborhoods, communities, and so on. Because this export is occurring in the context of rapidly evolving, postindustrial institutions, it does not result in obvious, large and lasting accumulations of attention capital. The export of attention from here does not result in its apparent import elsewhere; it is the entire system of the global free market economy that benefits from the flight and circulation of attention capital.

Critics of mass media have almost exclusively linked the ill-effects of mass media on family life, personal development and public culture to specific—most notably, violent or sexually charged—program content, and these links are quite real.<sup>11</sup> But

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<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that the causality linking media program content and society is not linear, but complex and network-like.

the most widely spread and relationally powerful effects of mass mediation center on their role in distracting attention from local environments and placing it into contingently structured global circulation. Simply stated, time spent consuming mass market media is time not spent attending to the needs of one's family, home, neighborhood or local community. In countries with mature media markets—the U.S. is, perhaps, the best, though not necessarily most extreme, example—time spent in media consumption now exceeds a per capita average of 6 hours per day.<sup>12</sup> This is time not spent developing new relational capabilities, not acquiring new skills or refining existing ones, not passing on personal or cultural traditions, and not making use of locally available resources to meet other basic human needs by, for example: cooking, designing and making clothes, building or repairing one's home, caring for the ill, inspiring and refining learning activities, creating new works of art, music, dance and drama, or participating in public debate, policy formation, or democratic governance. In Buddhist terms, mass media consumption functions as an asrava or effluence of attention-energy into activities that—whatever personal enjoyment or sense of freedom they afford—are relationally

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The linkages are, in other words, correlative—a function of interdependencies and not one of independent 'causes' producing dependent 'effects.' The policy failure (or irrelevance) of research that is critical of the interplay of mass media and society is itself very much a function of the rarity with which one can find a "smoking gun" in media content.

<sup>12</sup> Americans spend, on average, 4.5 hours per day watching television. Internet use stands at about 12-15 hours per week. Statistics for radio, video-game, magazine, newspaper and recorded music consumption are not readily available, but surely add significantly to the total. Even allowing that some media—like radio, MP3 products and podcasts—can be consumed while engaged (at least superficially) in other activities, it is quite conservative to estimate the Americans devote roughly one-third to one-half of their waking hours to media consumption.

polluting or wasteful.<sup>13</sup>

It must be stressed, again, that the ill effects of mass media on public culture and the appreciation (or sympathetic resonance with and adding of value to) local environments are not a direct function of media content. Attention is exported just as powerfully by so-called public broadcasting, documentaries, and locally produced news or entertainment as it is by commercial, global media. It must also be stressed that a significant, cumulative effect of massively exported attention will be an increasing reliance and, eventually, dependence on market designed and market delivered, non-media commodities. That is, time spent in media consumption effectively mandates the consumption of goods and services that otherwise might have been personally produced (and, perhaps, traded). Mounting reliance/dependence on market produced goods and services leads, first, to a professionalizing of the means of production for meeting these needs, then to the erosion of local production ecologies, and, finally, to a consolidation of highly mobile, profitably rationalized global production monocultures.<sup>14</sup>

From one perspective, this be seen as a means of opening up economic opportunity—fostering a transition from a world of locally made and used crafts to one of globally circulating commodities. Recommending such a transition is a marked increase in the number of choices available with respect to meeting basic needs, but also—at least at certain points in the process of transition—a general increase of quality with respect to specific goods and services. But, this same process can be seen as trading-off or forfeiting high productive diversity for

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<sup>13</sup> It is worth noting that, particularly in early Buddhism, the elimination of *asrava* was identified with the attainment of ultimate freedom—the realization of liberation from trouble and suffering.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, *Buddhism in the Public Sphere*, Chapter 3.

heightened consumption variety – acquiescence to the seductive mandates of consumerism. As the attention economy matures – albeit with considerable unevenness at all geographic scales – there occurs a proliferation of differences associated, for example, with the development of niche markets and new domains for the exercise of choice. There is not, however, a comparable enhancement of capacities-for and commitments-to making a difference. Indeed, an important outcome of the individuation of media tool use that fuels the attention economy is a shrinking of active opportunities either to differ-with or differ-for others.

Beyond a certain threshold of complexity, global market growth has the downward causal effect of producing populations in need. Consumer needs now span the full spectrum of subsistence, including: food, clothing and shelter, medical care, education, sensory stimulation, meaning-making and a sense of belonging. Mass media consumption, by exporting attention capital from homes, neighborhoods and local communities, plays an indispensable role in the deepening of consumer neediness.<sup>15</sup> The complex pattern of values-intentions-actions (karma) informing global market economics and the emergence of the attention economy yields conditions in which increasing opportunities for exercising freedoms-of-choice are coupled with lowering opportunities for relating freely in the satisfaction of our own needs and in contributing aptly to others.

Ivan Illich's insight that the commodification of subsistence needs invariably leads to the institutionalization of a new classes

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<sup>15</sup> Among the most striking demonstrations of this neediness is the epidemic of boredom afflicting much of global youth—a generation that can only with great difficulty bear being “alone” or present in a way that is not technologically or commodity mediated. The need they experience is not just to be entertained or to be present virtually with others, but to be entertained or networked with increasing variety and speed.



of the poor is, here, of signal relevance. By effectively making sensory stimulation, meaning-making and sense of belonging commodified services to which public has ready access, the complex dynamics of the attention economy engender a public in need of such services. Simply stated, the growth dynamics of the attention economy are relationally impoverishing.

### **Mass Mediation and the Conversion of Environmental Places to Locations**

It is not possible to accelerate rates of consumption, especially of goods and services aimed at meeting, as well as stimulating, needs for sensory stimulation, meaning and a sense of belonging, without intensifying dissatisfaction with present circumstances. Empirical studies on happiness or perceived well-being suggest that a threshold exists, beyond which further consumption and accumulation of material “wealth” do not enhance perceived well-being. On the contrary, evidence suggests that accelerating consumption—or tightening the consumption-to-waste cycle—at some point begins negatively affecting perceived well-being.

Buddhist teachings on karma and consciousness are particularly useful in understanding this inverse correlation of increasing “wealth accumulation” with a decreasing sense of well-being. The Buddhist teaching of karma can, for present purposes, be summarized as enjoining insight into the meticulous consonance that obtains between values-intentions-actions and the play of experienced outcomes and opportunities. Put somewhat differently, the teaching of karma encourages realizing that we have intimate relationships with the environments in which we find ourselves and with all that takes place therein.<sup>16</sup> The

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<sup>16</sup> The karma of global markets and the various economies—colonial, development, information and attention—that historically have been associated with them is, undoubtedly, a complex function of many generations of intentional activity, informed by historically and culturally distinct constellations of

consumption of mass-produced, globally marketed commodities to meet all of our basic needs, rather than personally or locally crafting them, alters these relationships. This is especially the case with mass media, which serve the dual purpose of providing desirable experiences while extracting attention from consumers' immediate environments.

As noted earlier, shifting from a world dominated by craft to one of commodities is not necessarily a bad thing. The availability of fruit and vegetables throughout the year can (but, as is well known, need not) enhance physical well-being. What is crucial, from a karmic perspective, are the values-intentions-actions in accordance with which our relationships with our environments are altered. As a crucial part of the global market economy, in addition to their explicit content, mass media also promulgate a particular complex of values and, in order to be profitable, must also systematically affect patterns of intention and action. The pivotal values embodied within global market operations are competition, control, convenience and choice. Mass media are competitive to the degree that they are able to attract and, finally, extract attention—that is, the degree to which the consumption of media commodities supplants other practices for meeting the basic human needs of sensory stimulation and a sense of belonging and meaning. What the media offer is convenience, a nearly infinite array of choices, and

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values, flowing together in the gradual articulation of globally shared practices and institutions. Just as doubtlessly, however, close ties obtain between the patterns of inequity and impoverishment associated with contemporary scales and depths of globalization and the distinctive modern and market values that have largely shaped its dynamics—in particular: control, competition, choice, autonomy, equality and universality. Human history is always a function of both intention-rich personal karma and collective/cultural/communal karma in which intentional is of largely generic importance and in which the force of values is, accordingly, much more prominent.

almost complete, individual control over the contents of experience.

All of these values have liabilities in terms of the cyclic pattern of outcomes/opportunities that they generate. Consider choice. Choices, in contrast with commitments, do not imply sustained involvement. One chooses between two or more things, courses of action or experiences. Although it is possible only to choose one out of any given range of things, actions or experiences, all of them are equivalent as intentional objects that are subject to being chosen. We do not have an intimate relationship with what we can choose, but rather an entirely contingent one. A world in which we have an almost infinite array of choices—like that offered by contemporary global media—is a world of things that we can instantly possess; it is not a world to which we belong, a world to which we give our hearts. The karma of continuously expanding our freedoms-of-choice is then a karma for being free to not belong, to not commit, to not contribute as needed; it is not a karma for enhancing our capacities-for and commitments to relating freely.

A distinctive feature of Buddhist thought is that consciousness is understood as a quality of relationship constituted by and encompassing the interplay of sentient beings and their environments. That is, consciousness arises between and qualitatively integrates sentient organisms and their supporting, sensible environments. From this, it follows that degraded environments are necessarily correlated with degraded patterns of consciousness. It follows, as well, that degradations of consciousness—defined generically, here, as an attenuation of attentive virtuosity (*samādhi*) or the capacity for sustained, concentrated and yet flexibly responsive awareness—will also necessarily result in environmental degradations. Degradations of consciousness will eventually result in being less and less well or valuably situated.

This, in fact, is the particular pattern of outcome/opportunity that is associated with the controlled satisfaction of wants or needs: the better we get at getting what we want, the better we will get at wanting; but the better we get at wanting, the better we will get at getting what we want, only we won't want what we get. To get good at getting what we want, we must be left continuously wanting. Likewise, the karmic cycle of control implicates us in finding ourselves in situations that are not only increasingly open to control, but also in apparent need of it. The ability readily to determine experiential outcomes leads to a systematic depreciation of being where and as we have come to be. This, in a nutshell, is what results, karmically, from the convenient, choice-rich and control-bestowing consumption of globally circulating mass media commodities. There is a point beyond which the export of attention from our immediate situation brings a mounting degradation of our environment.<sup>17</sup>

The Buddhist teaching of karma enjoins seeing that environments are always 'mine' or 'yours' or 'ours.' As the relational understanding of consciousness stresses, we ultimately are continuous with—indeed, infused by—our environments. Environments are places in which we have a place—they are an expression of what we mean by being sentient. Consuming mass media is an act of displacement. Mass mediation displaces our attention, removes it from where we have come to be. Mass media allow locating ourselves elsewhere. In doing so, they render contingent—a matter of choice—both where we have come to be and who we have come to be along the way. The media allow us to choose, experientially, where we are and who we are, at the cost of reducing our current place to but one among an infinite array of locations or spaces that we might occupy if we wish. The natural world, once home, becomes a generically shared context for

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<sup>17</sup> I have discussed at length, elsewhere, how the consumption of contemporary mass media qualitatively affects consciousness (see, in particular, *Reinventing the Wheel*, Part III).

choice. It ceases being the place where, together, we all belong.

Under the regime of consumption that is mandated by the market-driven attention economy, there is little time left for immediate and sustained appreciation of family and friends, of the day's weather and the advance of the seasons, or of the subtle presences that distinguish houses from homes. If there is no time for appreciating what is most nearby—the lived environments of the home, the community, the village and the urban center, but also in the environments within which economic and political activity is directly undertaken—there is even less time for attending to the natural processes without which nothing human ever could have come to be. And, while the effects of degraded consciousness will be most apparent in the disintegration of homes and neighborhoods and senses of felt community, they are ultimately horizonless and affect every scale of environment from the most intimate to the most global. The looming prospect of human-triggered climate change is a singularly troubling case in which qualitatively deficient patterns of human consciousness have had a corrosive effect on planetary health.

#### **Bhutanese Public Culture, Environmental Conservation and the Media**

It has been argued thus far that errant or troubling patterns of relationship have come to obtain among mass media and global market economies, resulting in systematic compromises of attentive virtuosity and diversity, at every scale, and in every domain, of the public sphere. This pattern of compromised diversity extends beyond the public sphere to affect even the ecological systems comprised in the biosphere as a whole.

Nevertheless, the critical perspective from which this argument has been forwarded also allows asking whether there might be a scale or depth of media penetration that is compatible with, for example, Bhutan's policy of development committed to the

promotion of Gross National Happiness (GNH). Is it possible to make use of media tools to further the evolution of Bhutanese public culture and environmental conservation, without opening the Bhutanese population to the neo-colonialism of the attention economy? Or, put in more operational terms, how does one determine the utility threshold beyond which mass media—as complex technological phenomena—begin producing the conditions of their own necessity?

The second of these questions is more easily answered. One cannot determine, in advance, the precise level of deployment at which a technology crosses the threshold of its own utility. It is not possible to predict when a technology will begin spawning problems of the sort that only it (or related technologies) can solve. Technologies are complex phenomena, and while they may exhibit quite typical histories or patterns of development, they are also capable of behaving in ways that could not have been anticipated. There is no amount of empirical data that will make it possible to know in advance when mass media will cross the line, in any given society, from just providing entertainment, news, and a sense of meaning or belonging, to generating intensifying needs for (or perceived lacks of) them.

It might be objected that media history, of sufficient scope, can surely afford useful insights, if not accurate predictions, in regard to the conditions for such a crossover. Unfortunately, history never repeats itself precisely. In a world of increasingly complex social, economic, political, cultural and technological interdependence, it is not just that no particular “history” is ever repeated, the very rules of history are being constantly rewritten.

The first decades of television consumption that were experienced in the U.S. or Europe will never be repeated because more recently developed media complexes in other societies have simply leapt over them. In many Asian countries,

for example, cellphones with extended functions like image transfer and email capabilities have allowed leapfrogging over the era of building extensive land line infrastructure; access to television programming by satellite dishes preceded (or made irrelevant) antenna-based, national broadcasting; direct downloading of music and films from the world-wide-web and a vibrant trade in (often bootlegged or illegally reproduced) DVDs and VCDs has enabled the mushrooming, virtually overnight, of consumer markets across the region that are accustomed to viewing the latest Hollywood, Bollywood or Hong Kong films within days of their official, theatrical releases.

The postmodern realities of “time-space compression” – most incisively analyzed by David Harvey in his book, *The Condition of Postmodernity* – do not, however, only affect macro-level phenomena like technology transfer and global flows of production/consumption. Compare the sensory diets of the present generation of world leaders, born in the 1950s or earlier, with that of children today, especially during the first six to eight years of life, when basic enculturation and personality formation take place.

Consider the effects, first, of a shift from engaging in mass media consumption for, at most, a few hours a week to doing so a few hours per day, and the associated lack of time spent in shared play and other social activities that encourage, not only skill in improvised communication, rule-making and joint imagination, but also critically appraised reasoning and emotional maturation.

Consider, next, the pervasive violence, physical, verbal and emotional, that characterizes so much of, for example, so-called children’s television.<sup>18</sup> Consider the product placement and

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<sup>18</sup> The average American child, turning eighteen this year, will have watched 11,000 murders, killings or rapes in the course of his/her life in media consumption.

consumption cues ingrained in television shows, films, books and educational media targeted at young children, as well as the quick-cut editing and narrative discontinuities that condition the nervous systems of young viewers to anticipate and eventually “need” environments in which change is constant, rapid and extreme. Finally, consider the computer and on-line games that constitute a major global media for children and young people—media that share all the traits just enumerated and which inculcate, in addition, a keen sense of competition and yearning for control.

The effects of adding limited mass mediated experiences to the sensory diet in the first generations exposed to global mass media do not provide a basis for envisioning the effects of contemporary media diets on today’s children and youth. The only certainty, at present, is that their sensory appetites and understandings of meaning and belonging are being systematically adapted to meet market imperatives for accelerating media consumption and for proportionately depreciating engagement with their immediate, natural and social environments.

This suggests, at the very least, that Bhutanese public culture and environmental policies will be served better by limited the overall time spent in media consumption, especially by children and youth. The realities of Bhutan’s steady integration into the global economy, and its commitment to increasingly democratic governance, prohibit accomplishing this by restrictive legislation or by technologically constraining choices related to media consumption. In fact, any attempt to exert control over the public’s consumption of media or other globally circulating commodities is likely to have the same ironic consequences that are associated with control karma in general—a pattern of outcome/opportunity in which mounting capacities for control are inseparable from ever more intensely experienced needs for control.



What is needed, instead, are policies and practices that will enhance the sensitivities and sensibilities needed for the Bhutanese people to realize the difference between taking advantage of what global media offer and being taken advantage of by them. They must, in other words, be well enough attuned to their own qualities of consciousness to perceive the onset of a relationally degrading hemorrhage (asrava) of attention from their own lives and life circumstances, and to have the wisdom and moral clarity to respond accordingly. This will mean taking the time to make a difference in how the relationships constitutive of their immediate situation are unfolding, sustainably appreciating or adding-value to them, becoming, thereby, ever more valuably situated.

There are no set recipes for how to ready the Bhutanese (or any other) people to avert the relational and environmental ravages of steadily accelerating rates of consumption and the erosion of attentive resources needed to service a growing attention economy. Public policy responses must themselves be improvised in attunement with local conditions, as they have come to be. Still, it is possible to specify the overall direction in which public policy must move in order to foster the sensibilities and sensitivities needed to realize GNH enhancing development.

Simply stated, conditions must be created and maintained within which each and every member of society is poised to offer something distinctively to others. This means sufficiently sustaining local ecologies of production to insure that each and every person is not becoming increasingly needy—the result of capitulation to the demands of market growth that radically compress the production-to-waste cycle and that engender populations that are in almost continuous states of perceived lack or want—but rather increasingly needed. To be a needed person is enjoy kusala or virtuosity-developing capacities-for

and commitments-to contributing to others. It is to enjoy the bodhisattva karma of having ever more to offer to others, which is also the karma of being ever more richly endowed and valuably situated. Public policy must be oriented to the accumulation, not of material wealth, but of the noble wealth that results from skillfully demonstrating compassion, loving-kindness, equanimity and joy in the good fortune of others.

Development along these lines involves conserving differences, for the purpose of insuring the continued viability of each member of a community to truly make a difference. It means carefully recognizing the limited value of equality and the supervening value of equity or fairness in the context of resolute difference, thereby conserving the conditions needed for realizing truly robust diversity or innovation-rich mutual relevance throughout the public sphere.

One concrete measure that can be taken to create opportunities for realizing aesthetically rich and enriching public spaces for meeting the basic human needs for education, sensory stimulation and a sense of meaning or belonging. Environments like this are natural in the sense that they cannot be constructed according to preordained plans; instead, they can only emerge through the free interplay of those to whom spaces are entrusted, within which they can assume an abiding place. The privatization of experience and the creation of hybrid private/public spaces that are critical elements in the realization of a functioning attention economy must be resisted, but, in order to be effective, the resistance must take the form of a positive expression of common purpose and shared meaning-making. Some forms of knowledge can be acquired in private. Wisdom cannot. And yet, it is wisdom that is needed to promote truly sustainable development and the realization of truly liberating human and natural environments.