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Role of Values & Culture In Information Technology

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It is no longer unusual to see, in a remote town in northern area in Pakistan, a practically non-literate wagon driver calling from his Nokia cell phone his uncle in Dubai or in Karachi. He enjoys sharing with him about his success in business and the settlement of family disputes. While he is driving on dangerous curvy roads and having this conversation, in the back seat of the wagon a comparatively young person is playing games on his cell phone. All this was unimaginable a quarter of a century ago.

The superhighway of information technology has revolutionized not only the means of communication it has changed the concept of physical distances, international borders and more importantly social reality. Communication linkage of home, offices, business and government has lead to re-definition of “work”. For centuries people have been used to commute between their home and work place. Today the work place is no more limited to an executive office or a factory. Even when a person is in his bed room or bath room a pager or a musical tone interrupts his privacy and puts him back to work. Personal time has become an obsolete word.

The digital highways, digital convergence, Infobahn, multimedia super corridors and network computers (NP) and video on demand (VoD) are only some of the improvisationS which indicate how fast new generation superhighways technology of information is progressing.

While all this progress has made life in the twenty-first century easier and faster it has also made life enormously complex. The worldwide web, video conferencing, interactive distant learning, virtual universities, wireless internet and palm size computers have made access to information extremely fast and effective.

However, the knowledge thus generated still remains a major problem for man to handle.

The inventor of this super information technology and the owner of enormous power of information still remains to be enlightened. Information, like diamond and rubies, when only properly designed, organized, related together, classified and made coherent become meaningful, relevant and productive.

Today, information technology has become accessible not only to the powerful state mechanism but also within the reach of the common man. The power of knowledge and information has left behind the traditional authority enjoyed by those with military muscle or with foreign exchange reserves.

This access to power has also highlighted many ethical questions. Internet with all its benefits has also become, unintentionally, a source of global spread of pornography, violence, uncensored sensuous and horrific movies. All this has deep impact on the minds and personality of millions of young persons.

Technology as a “social construct” generally serves the prevailing system of economic power. Present day economic power draws its intellectual and normative justification from utilitarianism. Technology consequently becomes instrumental in influencing the basic institutional framework of society. Aware of this profound social impact of the information technology in cyber space and its application in social space, some countries, known for their large scale production of equipment used in information transfer, banned use of dish antennas in their own territories, obvious examples are Singapore and Malaysia.

One major problem technologically advanced cultures face is a behavioral change caused by technology determining the nature of relationship in society, family and work place.

Nevertheless the global networking of information systems also offers unlimited opportunities for the development of a knowledge-based ecology, and a new classification of knowledge and information. The production of knowledge in this context remains a complex process. Classification of knowledge and information is a logical and scientific as well as axiological exercise. With all possible objectivity and exclusion of personal bias, such as intellectual and critical process involves the vision and world view of the human actor.

Units of information, even when overtly independent do have a logical, dynamic and synergetic relationship of parts and the whole. Discernment of this relationship brings new dimensions of meaning. The internal dynamics of meaning in the final analysis leads to a knowledge based holistic understanding of social reality. Integrated information systems, in due course, build the ground for a unified understanding of knowledge.

The term technology, in its common sense meaning, appears value neutral and may also refer to mechanical devices, improvised to solve logistical problems. Nevertheless it is not easy to divorce technology from its epistemic and axiological foundations, may these be totally material, non-material or a mix.

Units of information, when put together, convey the world view and concept of truth and reality. It is not appropriate to regard information technology value neutral. Nevertheless what role values and culture can and should play in this fast developing discipline, requires a more in-depth analysis of the concept of values and culture. The term values, Latin *Valere*, meaning to be strong, to be worth, refers to ideal, purpose, goal or object of life. It stands for what matters in the scheme of priorities of an individual, a group, a society, an organization or a culture and civilization. For the Greek civilization and to a great extent for the Romans, happiness was a prime value. Aristotle (384 – 322 BC), and among the later philosopher Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274) also shared in this view. For others like Aristippus (435 – 354 BC), ultimate

value was pleasure. Among later European philosophers, Jeremy Bentham (1748 – 1832), John Stuart Mill (1806 – 1873) and Sigmund Freud (1856 – 1940) also considered individual or collective pleasure or satisfaction as the major drive or value. Nietzsche (1844 – 1900) the German Philosopher, held “the will to power” to be man’s basic drive.

Irrespective of one or the other above views of basic drive or ultimate value, these perceptions of the ultimate concern appear to suffer from a reductionist fallacy. They contain the holistic existence of the human to one dimension of material or non-material reality. Consideration of pleasure, libido, will to power or even spiritual ejaculation as the ultimate value, reduces all human endeavors to one single motivation and objective. While there can always be a possibility of a hierarchy of values.

This perhaps is a logical outcome of intellectual finitude of man. Our epistemic classifications and in depth investigations at a micro or macro level, at their best, represent an unavoidable finitude of human mind. Consequently, value systems created in a particular space-time, by their very nature, remain finite existential propositions.

Values created by human reason, local customs and traditions, or likes and dislikes of a people, also remain *particular, evolutionary and relative*. Whether originating in the so-called West or the so-called East, (which is an arbitrary classification) these values remain specific to the space-time in which they acquire a normative status. It will be a contradiction in term, to call particularistic values as universal or global.

In this context the so-called global culture, global economic world order, secularity, capitalist political order, pop music, fast food culture, nuclear family system, and the so-called safe sex culture remain particularistic though some proponents of global capitalist world order may like to impose these on “others” with the help of the so called doctrine of “regime change”.

The view that values are essentially an outcome or product of a social process in which local customs, traditions and ways of a people, are assigned a normative status, or that the consensus of a given society, at a given time, sanctifies them, is indeed a view held by a

generation of social scientists in Europe and the U.S.

Obviously this view is founded on sociological and empirical studies of specific and tribal cultures by a score of European anthropologists and sociologists. These studies generally disregard the possibility of a transcendent epistemic source of knowledge with universalistic characteristics. Their study of local human conduct, traditions, mythologies, customs and local world view persuades them to regard these local and indigenous customs and tradition as the source of their value systems.

Its basic assumption is that to be universally relevant and applicable knowledge has to be objective and not particular.

An equally logical and scientific view is offered by the Qur'an and the Prophetic *sunnah* (i.e statements, actions and endorsements of the Prophet), that a unified view of knowledge and humanity carries better prospects of guiding mankind to ultimate Truth (*haqq*), unity (*tawhid*), justice and balance ('*adl*) in life and cosmos; and ultimately unity in mankind (*ummah insaniyah*). Wahi as the objective source of knowledge (*wahi* or revealed knowledge) plays a key role in this process. This category of knowledge by definition is objective and external, because it is revealed to the humankind from beyond. It is not a result of individual or collective intellectual exertion, mystic, or intuitive experience. Wahi is not a matter of local customs and traditions, given a normative status.

The culture developed on these objective and revealed values (such as truth, unity, and justice), thanks to their universal and global nature, carries the potential of its universal application. It transcends ethnic, tribal, nationalistic, linguistic, racial, or genetic basis of unity of mankind.

The Islamic World view considers universal values, such as protection and promotion of life, independence of reason, freedom of the will, liberty to practice one's own way of life, dignity and honor of the human beings, realization of justice and, equity ('*adl*) not particular to any people. These values are holistic, and provide a solid basiss for a universally and globally viable value system and culture.

An information system based on a holistic, integrated and unified view of knowledge and unified vision of life is more likely to create cohesion, mutuality, and inter dependence in the humanity. It can also help in creation of a pluralistic society and offer resistance to hegemony of unilateralism and unipolarism.

The Islamic universal *tawhidi* paradigm, while calling for unity in life, cosmos, and humanity, questions sustainability of empiricism, individualism, materialism, and, unipolarism, as global ideologies. It on the contrary, offers a unified and holistic view of knowledge and reality.

It follows from the above discussion that a value neutral and non-normative information technology may not help man in solution of his social, political, economic, cultural and devotional needs. Similarly particularistic values with their origin in specific geo-political and customary traditions carry less potential to offer universal solutions for the global problems of mankind. Particular values may provide authentic basis for identity and development of a local culture, but may not provide foundations for a global culture.

Universal and global values, being not particularistic, enjoy having the potential to be the basis for a knowledge-based, integrated and holistic ethical paradigm needed to build a new and ethical world order. A unified vision of life, while recognizing individual differs after better apparently for realization of a pluralistic social, economic and political order.

Information technology, in the twenty-first century, has emerged as a major strategic discipline. Internet facility, satellite communication, networking and E-Commerce, are only a few examples of its global impact. The question that remains to be answered, perhaps is, is this techno-culture really value-neutral? Obviously not. Whether it is e-government or e-commerce it manifests a *utilitarian* value system which is impersonal, robotic and secular. This techno-culture is devoid of concept of virtue and vice or good or bad. Functionalism substantial ethics in social policy.

How fast, efficiently and economically a system can transmit signals becomes the major concern

in I.T; What messages are communicated becomes secondary, and irrelevant.

Satellite networking and internet has revolutionized our concept of time and space. Physical and geographic boundaries have become least effective in defending a culture and civilization from external interventions and invasions. Whoever has control over information technology also controls minds of the end users. International wars are fought and won with the help of information technology. Conventional and nuclear arms have become less important and are replaced by the more effective and strategic instrument of I.T. The two Middle East invasions by the unipolar imperialist power were made possible with none other but the power of their technology.

If I.T is developed on ethical and moral foundations it can become an agent for global ethical change. On the contrary if it remains value-neutral, then it may not help in development of a peaceful and dignified human society. It is not enough to have a wired society and a virtual community for sustainable economic development. It is equally important to disseminate values through these highways of information.