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M. Anjum Irfan



Madiha Irfan

### **The Effects of Technology and Globalization on Society and the Individual in Developing Countries, Now and in the Future**

*Dr. M. Anjum Irfan and Madiha Irfan*

How have humans adapted to the constant changes in the world? How have we coped with the rapid changes in lifestyle that have continually affected human civilization since the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century? This article is an attempt to understand the complex answers to these questions, especially in regard to the effects of communication technology on the human experience. While these innovations have affected much of the world, we will examine most carefully the situation through social, economic, and cultural lenses in the developing world. When we think about the current and future

implications of all the social and technological effects, we must consider the younger generation as they will represent the future.

### **Identity, Culture, and Western Influence**

Until the last few decades, most of the people living in the developing nations—regardless of their socioeconomic status in their communities—traditionally had a good sense of being rooted in their own distinctive cultures, and were largely unaffected by Western influence. They had a stable sense of family and especially an extended family system; that sense of belonging was not only very supportive to the human psyche; it was at the very core of the individual's identity as a person and helped define the purpose of life.

Historically, the individual identity and self-esteem were very much tied to simpler notions, for example, which family one belonged to and where was one's standing in that particular family. That whole situation changed in the West gradually with the Scientific Revolution, the European Renaissance, and most significantly, with the Industrial Revolution. Most recently, the fast-paced changes of modern communication, technologies, and gadgets have affected humans even more acutely. The developing world has lagged behind the rich and more fully industrialized nations and cultures like North America, Western Europe, and Japan. In other words, the impact of industrialization on the developing world has been delayed in onset, patchy and inconsistent, depending on the location of the particular community and has been a gradual process over the last two to three centuries. If we look at the effect of the new technologies—for example television, telephones and automobiles—the effects have been more sudden, pronounced, yet inconsistent depending on the social and economic status of the family or the individual. Even more dramatic and remarkable have been the changes in the last three decades with the advent of Internet, video games, cell phones, search engines such as Google and social media including Facebook, Twitter, text messaging, and Skype. Compared with the first wave of the Industrial Revolution, which included cars, telephones, and radios among other things, this next wave of technology consisting of mass transmission of information and communication through the Internet has been much slower in reaching the developing world.

The developing nations or underdeveloped nations have historically suffered from problems of various types in the last two centuries. The impact of colonialism on the developing world, especially the colonization of India and African countries, is immense. Additionally, the developing world has faced immense difficulties due to internal political corruption, socioeconomic imbalance, economic deprivation, mistreatment and degradation of women, low educational standards, and in some cases, religious intolerance and exploitation by elites. It was easy for the selfish leaders and businessmen and companies to exploit the masses and censor the information to which they had access, keeping them largely uneducated, uninformed and suppressed. Now the situation is changing as the masses in these countries are slowly gaining access to information and communication tools available through the Internet, such as Google, Facebook, and Twitter.

These technologies are neither inherently good nor inherently bad, as it depends on how they are used. In the field of mental health, we still lack large-scale scientific studies on the effects of modern technology on mental health. Of particular interest would be future large-scale studies on the effects of excessive time in front of the computer screen as well as excessive use of the Internet, cell phones, and videogames on the human brain, especially the younger and still developing brains.

### **Technology and the Psyche**

If we focus in some more detail on the prevalent mental health problems in developing nations, we can find some startling and frightening observations. First of all, it is important to realize that mental health problems are generally underreported in most of the developing world. The reasons for this are complex, but following factors are implicated:

- a. Lack of understanding of what is a mental illness, what causes it, and how to treat it

- b. Belief that mental illness or disorder is a divine punishment for individual weakness or sins
- c. Stigma and shame associated with the mental disorders

Because of the above factors and also because of the lack of governmental supervision and budget allocations specifically to address these issues, the treatment for mental disorders has been largely ignored in the developing world up until very recently.

A number of studies in the developing nations in the last 15-25 years has shown that there is strong correlation between poverty and prevalence of mental disorders. This correlation may not necessarily be direct, as 60-80% of people living in poverty do not have a diagnosable mental disorder. It is possible that the correlation between the poverty and mental disorders are mediated by multiple factors, for example low educational status, experience of insecurity and hopelessness, risk of physical violence, burden of physical disease, etc. These factors may have been in effect for centuries and are not necessarily new, but in the last 30-40 years, newer political, technological, economic, and social challenges have been imposed on the people living in the developing nations. Most of the new technologies and gadgets—computers, cell phones, iPods, and videogames, for example—have been developed largely by the wealthier nations and sold by huge multinational corporations. The developing nations' citizens are mostly on the buying end when involved. This quickly may become an issue of affordability and economic disparity as the latest technologies are always relatively expensive.

It is useful to look at two categories of people in the developing world: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The first category of people is mostly able to afford the modern technologies and machines. The ability to purchase and utilize these items has far reaching effects on the psyche of people belonging to that ever-growing upwardly mobile class of people in the developing nations. The immediate effect of these newly acquired technologies can be gratification, perceived success, and an ability to utilize this information more easily. Other positive benefits include a feeling of connectedness to the global community and friends and people in general, which has been most evident in the case of social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc). There is a whole lot to be said about the effect of the Internet and social media on the lives of masses as evident in the global age on many different fronts. Many social and political analysts have observed and studied the recent events in the Middle East and North Africa, particularly Arab nations such as Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Yemen, and Bahrain. Many of these analysts have reported on the importance of social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter in communication amongst citizens. While these tools can be problematic (as we will discuss later), they have also played a profound role in organizing protests and general activism in response to the recent upheaval, turmoil and revolutions in these nations. Obviously, the effects of these events on the future are far-reaching and require a separate article to address.

The people who can afford the modern gadgets are of course subject to many negative consequences of these technologies. First of all, these people unknowingly become part of a larger group of consumers who continue to buy newer and newer versions of these gadgets to quench their thirst for newly possessed items. If they can buy the latest version of a laptop computer or smart phone, for example, or the latest model of a sports car, they can boast and show off to others. They become usually so dependent on these technologies that they take them for granted. For example, when they cannot download a document on their computer or smart phone within a few seconds they become easily frustrated.

While these tools can be empowering and essential in certain circumstances, there can be many unintended side effects including psychological and emotional problems as a result of some of these modern gadgets. While effects may vary among cultures for various reasons, anyone can develop a sense of dependence on computers or smart phones, and it may feed into a sense of psychological alienation from one's own community. One can experience a conflation of the real world and the virtual world. It may in fact result in feelings of depression, anxiety, and social maladjustment.

Younger people especially are more vulnerable to negative psychological effects of these new technologies. They can become victims of social isolation, attention span decline, deterioration in the ability to think abstractly, and weakness in postponing instant gratification. Facebook can be especially problematic for young children and adolescents if they begin to create a virtual identity that is not true to their real personality and/or compare themselves to the virtual identities of their peers. Excessive texting (also known as SMS) and/or instant messaging are also incredibly problematic for this age group, as they can become means of escaping real, deeper, face-to-face relationships in favor of the superficial relationships forged through texting, instant messaging, etc.

Now, let's look at the category of people who are in a lower socioeconomic status in developing countries, as it is obvious that these people have great difficulty in acquiring the new technologies, because they may be living in impoverished conditions or in remote areas. As one can imagine, there are pockets of unequal wealth distribution in developing nations such as China, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Brazil, etc. This class of people may develop feelings of inferiority because of their inability to buy the modern technologies or machines. This can lead to all kinds of social, individual, and emotional problems.

Underprivileged people live in slums and ghettos, in the shadow of large urban centers. For many different reasons, this can eventually lead to an increase in crime, violence, feelings of resentment towards authority, gang activity, and disregard for authority. At the individual level, there may be increasing perceptions of living in an unfair and unjust society that has mostly ignored the lower socioeconomic category. This class is vulnerable to developing multiple emotional or mental disorders. In the younger population particularly, there may be more prevalence of conduct disorder and alcohol and substance abuse problems, and in the general population, problems such as anxiety and depression be more prevalent.

The gap between the developed world and the developing world in terms of understanding of the mental problems is considerable. If not addressed properly and quickly, it can lead to a growing sense of frustration, a feeling of deprivation, and psychological consequences—which can further lead to an attitude of rebellion, violence, and crime, ultimately resulting in possible social and political turmoil.

### **Encouraging Countertrends**

However, there are encouraging countertrends. For example, there have been various movements in the past few years to create private organizations focusing on the individual finding his or her own peace and fulfillment inwardly, through various meditative practices, as opposed to through material possessions, privilege, and cutthroat competition. The advent of these groups has been accompanied by new non-governmental organizations that understand the importance of the human mind and mental health and that take their impact on the functioning of society into consideration. There is already strong evidence of emergence of a lot of these new groups, organizations and retreat centers where people can go for spiritually uplifting experiences, meditation practice, and health benefits—but above all for raising their consciousness. With their alternative values, these groups can be a watchdog on policymakers and a counterweight to zero-sum, cutthroat competition mentalities and overemphasis on material success.

In addition, local governments in cooperation with businesses, corporations, and NGOs have begun to create small credit loans and banking opportunities for the underprivileged. In nations such as Bangladesh, these practices have met with considerable success.

### **Ways Forward**

In one possible future world, success will be measured not by what material possessions one owns or by the privileges that one has, but by one's connectedness with his/her family, friends, neighbors, and community, and eventually with all humanity. Fairness, justice, peace, and a more holistic approach to life and its challenges—in contrast with today's more prevalent zero-sum mentality, itself often a

hidden assumption taken for granted—are useful guiding principles if people are to live meaningful and happy lives in the future.

In support of this, international organizations such as the World Health Organization, World Bank, and International Monetary Fund—and some of the more powerful nations—can promote notions of prosperity that are consistent with the cultures of the underdeveloped nations that they seek to help. Additionally, they can address the issues of healthcare, particularly mental healthcare and treatment for the masses including preventive care, primary care, and secondary care treatment.

This age of globalization and the high-tech that enables it may redefine cultural and individual identity within the next few decades. This is especially pertinent for today's younger generations who will be tomorrow's leaders, scientists, and social scholars. Their points-of-view will be much more globally informed. People who will make a real difference in the lives of masses are likely to be people who are not only highly educated but also culturally sensitive to the differences in many nations and cultures, and who aspire and hope to establish peaceful and just societies.

It is in the interest of the international community for all nations, peoples, and cultures to learn to live peacefully with the sense of collective global consciousness, especially in this era of globalization and communication age with all information readily available to many people.

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**Dr. M. Anjum Irfan**, a practicing physician (specializing in psychiatry) in West Chester, Pennsylvania, is the founder and director of Mind Body Institute of Chester County located in Exton, Pennsylvania, USA. In addition, he is a faculty member of the CCB Institute for Peace, Justice, and Interfaith Dialog (IPJID), Children Creating Bridges, Inc. ([www.childrencreatingbridges.org](http://www.childrencreatingbridges.org)), a Pennsylvania-based non-profit organization. Dr. Irfan's Website is [www.mbipa.com](http://www.mbipa.com), and he can be contacted at 610-524-2444.

**Madiha Irfan** is a first-year English major at Bryn Mawr College. She enjoys learning new things and hopes to become a teacher. She lives in West Chester, Pennsylvania.

**POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM** (send comments to [forum@futuretakes.org](mailto:forum@futuretakes.org) or post on FUTUREtakes blog):

- *The authors refer to the Scientific Revolution, the European Renaissance, and the Industrial age – and by implication, the Information Age. What revolutions might be next, and with what impacts?*
- *As the authors and others suggest, various revolutions (see preceding questions) have uprooted the sense of individual identity and self-esteem – and separated people from their cultural underpinnings. To what extent might the countertrends later discussed by the authors reverse this trend? What “wild cards” (unexpected discontinuous events) might reverse the trend that resulted from the revolutions? Alternatively, what “neo-tribes” might supersede the sources of identity that are being eroded?*
- *What are possible implications of constantly being “plugged in” to others via social media? Of feeling pressured to be “plugged in” constantly?*
- *Is IT-addition either a creation of, or a result of, a stimulation and diversion-oriented society and/or an instant gratification society?*
- *The authors discuss mental illness and the strong correlation between poverty and the prevalence of mental disorders. To what extent might some mental illnesses be cultural (for example, behaviors that are dysfunctional in one society but not so regarded in another)?*
- *As information technology (IT) becomes pervasive within developing nations, is it more likely to benefit nearly everyone – or is it more likely to exacerbate the “digital divide” – and why?*
- *As the authors discuss, customers who buy the latest laptop computer, smart phone, or sports car can boast and show off to others. What other cultural imprints is the consumerist society making in developing nations? Where is this leading, and what might reverse this trend?*
- *The authors discuss possible impacts of dependence on computers and smart phones – e.g., psychological alienation, a conflation of the real and virtual worlds, attention span decline, deterioration in the ability to think abstractly, aversion to postponing instant gratification, substitution of superficial relationships for deeper ones, and “virtual identities and their discontents.” In what ways are computers, smart phones, and similar devices shaping values, lifestyles, and thinking modalities in developed and developing nations, and in what ways might they be reshaping culture?*
- *In what ways might instant access to information transform the workforce?*
- *In some parts of the world, Web surfing and TV have been at the expense of family life. Transport yourself to 2021. How have friendships, family life, business relationships, and other interpersonal relationships changed during these ten years?*