

Observations on the Information World

Much has been said in our era about the central role of information in shaping human destiny, making it possible even to claim that information has surpassed military and political might as the main source of power in today's world. All peoples who seek pride, power and progress must learn to manage this vital resource, staying abreast of constantly evolving communication technologies.

Timely access to information and effective means of disseminating it are central to the development process in every country. We cannot afford to fall farther behind in this rapidly advancing¹ field and must cooperate to produce, store and disseminate information effectively. This is no easy feat.

Most inquiry into the information world focuses exclusively on its technical underpinnings at the expense of exploring its human, political dimension. This task is crucial to our destiny.

In its contemporary, complex forms, information technology represents one of the highest achievements of modern culture, which uses its control over information to solidify its domination of the world. Thus, inquiry into the nature of the information world is inseparable from uncovering the nature of modern civilization itself. Until we address this important question, we will not be able to muster the confidence and wisdom to understand our relationship to modern civilization. Otherwise, we will live in a world whose rules have been set by others, at the mercy of circumstance, not as masters of our fate.

We confront the Western-dominated information world on two mystical yearnings of humans.

Of course, our concerns with the limitations of science do not imply that we must return to the Middle Ages. Nor can we regress to the limited and backward views of religion and spirituality prevalent in those times. Modern humans need new interpretations of spirituality and supernatural phenomena to imbue their lives with meaning. Because of the central place of science and technology in Western civilization, uncertainty about their meaning has led to a general crisis in the West.

This crisis is more acutely felt in the human sciences than in the physical or natural sciences. Modern civilization is more deeply tied to political, cultural, and economic ideas than to the natural sciences. In

the human sciences, the subject and object of study are the same, as humans study themselves, their societies, and their political systems. Inquiry is based on the motives and assumptions of the agent or the scientist, not on objective reality. The identity crisis of the scientific community naturally will permeate the cultural and political sphere.

The flood of information in our age saturates the senses of all humanity so extensively that the ability to assess and choose is impaired even among Westerners who are producers of information, let alone us who have played a peripheral role in the information world. Electronic information is the brainchild of modern civilization. Thus the power of today's information-based mass culture is tied to the legitimacy of the values of Western civilization for which the information revolution counts as the most prominent achievement.

For those of us outside the West, the information world poses manifold challenges. Today, advanced industrial countries use information as the main tool to safeguard their own economic and political interests, even if they are irreconcilable with the interests of the majority of the world's peoples who live outside the sphere of modern civilization.

Thus, however optimistic some might feel about the benefits of the information revolution for all humanity, we cannot doubt that politically and culturally loaded information is manufactured to protect the interests of industrialized powers while appropriating the rights of deprived and subjugated peoples.

As consumers of such information we cannot ignore that the political will behind information production and dissemination is based on maintaining Western supremacy. Non-Westerners are taught to respect Western supremacy as legitimate, even desirable. Western civilization has used and continues to use all its resources to dominate the minds and lives of all peoples through controlling the sources of information and the means of communication.

This does not mean that we must isolate ourselves from the Western-dominated information world. Such a thing is undesirable and practically impossible as the global reach of information constantly expands. Awareness of today's world events is an imperative for understanding our place in the world and planning our future in it. Being isolated from the world's information networks can only turn us into pawns of others because it is they who control the flow of this vital and strategic resource.

We must reach a level of historical evolution and social maturity to be able to judge accurately the thoughts and efforts of others so that we know our place in the world and can put our own house in order. This way we can choose what benefits us¹ in the new world and reject all that does not. We must become active on three fronts.

First, we must understand the peculiarities of our era and treat Western civilization as our era's ultimate manifestation and symbol. This means understanding the values and tenets of Western civilization and

freeing ourselves from the equally, harmful extremes of either hating it or being completely taken in and entranced by it.

Second, we must try to come to grips with our own historical identity that has brought many valuable gifts to humanity but has also encountered many difficulties and inadequacies. And third, while we must pay attention to problems that threaten our society from the outside—the hegemonic nature of Western politics, economics, and culture—we must also focus on our own internal problems and frictions.

Many of our traditions are human constructs that, however great they might have been in their own time, belong to a different historical epoch and place but have nonetheless maintained the veneer of sanctity and infallibility. Today, dogmatic attachment to archaic ideas poses a serious obstacle to our society, preventing it from utilizing the human achievements and thoughts of our era. Let us not forget that not just the natural world, but religion also must be scrutinized by reflection, for our interpretation of religion is constantly being modified as well.

Our attachment to the past should not mean negating all the achievements of modern, Western civilization. We will not return to the past to stay there, but merely to understand and regain our identity that has been rendered fragile by the onslaught of Western culture. With knowledge and will, we can shape the future, which beckons the cooperation and coordination of all devotees and thinkers of the Muslim world. We Muslims have a grand historical legacy that we must revive in today's world.

Despite disagreements among sects within the Islamic world, the unity and coordination of Islamic thought across various parts of the Islamic world has been phenomenal. Over centuries of Islamic history, Andalusia theologians preached in Damascus and Baghdad, just as Persian philosophers and mathematicians felt at home in Africa and Mesopotamia. We Muslims possess the foundations for a solid unity that can create a powerful cultural movement in the future.

First, we possess a common historical bond and system of values that Islam, as the source of a great civilization, has provided us. Although this civilization is no longer globally dominant as it once was, it represents the greatest source of shared. Experience among all Muslims. Our attachment to the theism of Islam, based on a belief in the unity of God, is the linchpin of the bond that ties all Muslims together.

Second, the increasing awareness of all peoples, especially in this century, has instilled a sense of unity of purpose among Muslims as we all perceive ourselves as the victims of colonialism in its various forms. There is no one among us who has not seen his dignity, freedom, and independence violated by colonial powers. We all wish independence and freedom from the shackles of this domination. If we combine our common pain and unify our visions and beliefs, we will sow the seeds of betterment and prosperity in our societies. Sharing and coordinating our information resources represents the hallmark of this cooperation.

The Islamic Republic of Iran, despite its many differences with the globally dominant political order, has always championed deep cultural and scientific ties. among Muslims of all countries. And today also, we believe that despite political differences, the conditions must be created for the scientists and thinkers of the whole Muslim world to work together. All Muslims must firmly join hands to further the cause of development in their societies.

Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/islam-dialogue-and-civil-society-sayyid-muhammad-khatami/observations-in-formation-world#comment-0>