

# THE CULT OF DIGITAL MEDIA



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Aldous Huxley's writing may not explicitly detail his personal use of deductive and inductive reasoning, although we use both every day in the 'Brave New World' of media. In fact, the global change with the advent of the first printing press was based on these two reasons, which partly obstructed the first industrial revolution – which was fueled by facile material, not reason.

Today, at the confluence of the fourth and the fifth industrial revolution, information travels not only through highways and seaways alone but also on the wings of digital conduits of media, primarily because of the digital revolution, which itself is the 'Fifth Industrial Revolution'. It determines how we harness, employ, and use the workforce and reward labour. It will determine how we can continue colonialism, based on direct rule, to global institutions after the second world war, whereby an assimilation is observed as 'The Bretton Woods Institutions' or a novel new form without the benefit of sovereign, the so-called national state.

The twenty-first century has brought the 'Great Convergence' in media—print, radio, terrestrial, and satellite television—which has become digitally available on the palmtop cellular device that we recognise as a mobile phone.

Every day we consume news, its analyses and subsequent syntheses. The analysis is called opinion, and the synthesis is often termed editorial - quite a judgment. The opinion and editorial clubbed together and termed 'OPED' have a central presence in news publications. Television is run on the same editorial architecture. News, its analysis in prime-time current affairs' programs and editorial judgments, often involving exclusive interviews of experts. This is true for terrestrial (PTV) and satellite television, also known as cable television, which forced a sunset on terrestrial setups. Just before the sunset, however, the digital era brought satellite television to its twilight zone.

The digital era is here and transcending previous eras of

the 20th century. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, as they say.

The General Elections of 2024 in Pakistan have been fought on digital platforms, not in open arenas packed with thousands produced by the bureaucracy to favour the favorable. The election result is a telltale, and there is no going back. The conventional media took everything with a pinch of salt, forced upon them – whereas digital media was either bitter or sweet, a largely binary affair. This time, one did not require a tin of margarine or a honey trove to say it, just a few plain, bitter and honest words were enough to appeal to the sensibility of youth: constituting about 65 percent of the demography in the country. The digital media is creating larger than life personalities and establishing their prowess not as thoughtful movements but cult enterprises. This time, the media has reserved the cult portions and proclivities for itself.

This is quite a role reversal. The media, hungry for revenue, would sell a story and build a tale in the hearts and minds of viewers. It shows them what they want to get eyeballs. In the digital era, citizen journalism is dictating terms. Some presence of 'shock and awe' dictates editorial selection. Now it is the viewer who is drawing out the content. Inspired by this trend, Cambridge Analytica allegedly helped Mr. Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin in rigging the US elections, only to grab victory for Donald Trump – who was tied and tangled with a thread in Moscow, perceived as controllable. The method has been in vogue since then, and we have a plethora of our own 'Analytics' funded through taxpayer money.

With the decline of traditional advertising revenue, media outlets are adopting subscription-based models to for their income streams, directly from audiences. This improves the quality of content, earns loyalty, and engages readers and viewers in a better way. The new media has its own appetite and new ways to quench revenue thirst.

To extend the lifespan of the dwindling niches, conventional media is beginning to deploy new tools. Aata analytics is used for audience targeting and to understand audience preferences and behavioural patterns. The data-driven method helps in tailoring content, advertising, and distribution strategies to optimise viewership and revenue. Social media platforms have empowered content consumers to create and share, enabling citizen journalism. Media outlets are integrating user-generated content into their reporting, enhancing diversity and expanding coverage. And there are quite a few interesting developments.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) and automation in general are amongst them. These employ media production and distribution, content creation, curation, and recommendation systems – forming the basis of generating autonomous content. AI even helps in already established automation tools by streamlining workflows and reducing the cost of video editing, transcription, and social media management.

Virtual and Augmented Reality are another budding discipline. They enhance storytelling and immersive experiences. This is particularly the case in scientific fields, like medical teaching, where they offer an alternative to performing surgical practice on the actual human body.

This is a one-stop-shop, and that too at the wholesale level. No more does the manufacturer control the wholesaler, who in turn would influence the retailer.

All these developments have brought generic changes, causing tectonic movements at social, economic, and political levels. The so-called Westphalian national state is facing erosion at the highest level, compromising fiscal sovereignty. The heat is felt at the global level, figuring prominently in the arena of superpower competition. The American lawmakers have pushed the U.S. House Energy and Commerce committee to approve a bill that would grant China 165 days to divest its ownership of TikTok — or effectively face a U.S. ban. TikTok has ties with China's communist regime, as they call it. In response, TikTok says "This legislation has a predetermined outcome: a total ban of TikTok in the United States. The government is attempting to strip 170 million Americans of their constitutional right to free expression. This will damage millions of businesses, deny artists an audience, and destroy the livelihoods of countless creators across the country." It is worth thinking about: entire livelihoods are dependent on a social media platform in the most advanced country in the world.

In essence, this is the formation of a new global society – demanding a new social contract and new ethical standards to ensure trustworthiness in authority at the topmost level. This is a must for an orderly transformation that sidesteps the prospect of war and conflict, as was the case in the previous century. But are we going to learn from history? One of the greatest systematic thinkers in the history of Western philosophy, Friedrich Hegel, says "we learn from history that we do not learn from history." It is even more difficult to do so now: the digital media and its impact on society have no parallel in history.

Perhaps the 'Autonomous Media' is here to subjugate and rule its creator.

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