

Television, Materialism and Culture: An Exploration of Imported Media and its Implications for GNH

*Dr Ross McDonald**

Introduction

I recently spent two weeks in Thimphu, hosted by the Centre for Bhutan Studies. While there, among other explorations, I sought out general views about television and its impacts on Bhutanese life. Almost everyone I spoke to welcomed the medium which was introduced in 1998. Cable television, dominated by Indian and American programming, was generally seen as a positive advance with the potential for educating, entertaining and symbolically connecting Bhutan to the modern world. I encountered few contrary opinions – from government ministers to cable operators and from shop owners to students, the view was the same. The few dissenting exceptions, came in the main from foreigners posted on temporary contracts within the country. For them, the arrival of 45 channels of commercial television symbolised the beginning of the end for Bhutan's unique identity and culture.

It was a curious division of opinion and as is the case in most such divisions, both sides possess some truth. It is certainly true, as the Bhutanese will testify, that television is an absorbing and fascinating medium. It does connect the viewer with worlds that were previously beyond their ken and it is fantastically entertaining. But there is indeed another, less visible side to television – a more complex aspect that can only be untangled by appreciating the commercial intent that hides behind the layer of apparently harmless entertainment. When the function of global television is connected with the ideology of globalising capitalism, it reveals itself to be a force intent on distraction and cultural reformation. It is this aspect that those long exposed to television and its effects,

* Professor, University of Auckland, New Zealand

may seek to warn Bhutan of. The unease though, is often only vaguely felt rather than clearly articulated and so is often minimally helpful in empowering Bhutanese policy makers to make wise decisions regarding television and its management. The aim of this writing is to attempt a clearer and more useful articulation of this trepidation.

This paper then explores the broad nature of commercialised television and how it impacts individuals, communities and cultures. Central to understanding these dynamics is an appreciation of the critical role television plays in globalising capitalism – that of *consumer creation*. The consumer is the necessary ideal of capitalism - a type convinced that well-being necessitates accumulating ever greater volumes of goods. As a social entity however, the consumer has been proven to be a highly dysfunctional type. Its basic psychology revolves around a complex of dissatisfaction, social isolation and immunity to larger ethical sensibilities. It is hardly a type to encourage in any society aiming to forge a sustainable and happy collective life.

A capitalist system aims to render the market and those who control it, free from all forms of constraint. To maximise its potential, capitalism must achieve the submission of any ideological forms that act to impede its cultivation of consumption. In this important sense, any cultural form promoting material restraint is perceived to be a barrier to “progress”. Liberation from such cultural confines requires removing the mass from traditional referents and authorities – a function that television achieves with remarkable finesse.

Thus, the recent arrival of commercial television in Bhutan represents more than the introduction of a merely benign technology. Global television brings with it a deeper process, one that systematically cultivates social isolation and the dissolution of all contrary cultural priorities. If Bhutan is to judiciously negotiate a happy balance of tradition and modernity, policy makers must become much more aware of the dramatic cultural impacts this medium seeks.

Part One - The Impacts of Television Viewing

Television and Cultural Distraction

The most obvious power of television in modern society relates to its ability to capture and retain attention. In effect, television removes the viewer's consciousness from the immediate social and physical environment - and often for highly extended periods of time. When television is on, social interaction is curtailed. Conversation becomes fractious and partial, even superficial when it comes to cohere around referents to what is being viewed. For whatever time viewers' attention is captured by the small screen they forgo the verbal interaction that allows for sharing, learning and building collective perspective. As most with a television set will attest, there is little in everyday conversation that can compete with television's hypnotic attraction. Doris Lessing the South African novelist captures the socially disruptive power of television in her autobiographical account of its arrival in her household in 1950s London:

Before I left Denbigh Road I saw the end of an era, the death of a culture: television arrived. Before, when the men came back from work, the tea was already on the table, a fire was roaring, the radio emitted words or music softly in a corner, they washed and sat down at their places, with the woman, the child, and whoever else could be inveigled downstairs. Food began emerging from the oven, dish after dish, tea was brewed, beer appeared, off went the jerseys or jackets, the men sat in their short-sleeves, glistening with well-being. They all talked, they sang, they told what had happened in their day, they talked dirty - a ritual; they quarrelled, they shouted, they kissed and made up and went to bed at twelve or one, after six or so hours of energetic conviviality... And then from one day to the next - but literally from one evening to the next - came the end of the good times, for television had arrived and sat like a toad in the corner of the kitchen. Soon the big kitchen table had been pushed along the wall, chairs were installed in a semi-circle and, on the chair arms, the swivelling supper-trays. It was the end of an exuberant verbal culture. (1985: P342)

The collapse of verbal culture is most apparent in those

nations most saturated by television, where its attractions appear capable of pushing out even the most intimate of social relationships. In the United States, the most televised nation on earth, half of the population now report watching television while eating dinner, and more than a third watch while eating breakfast or lunch.. Indeed, in the United States, people devote more time to watching television than they do to talking with their spouses (four to six times more) and playing with their children (an average of twenty minutes each day compared with four hours of television viewing). In Britain, a nation almost as media saturated, 46% of people say that at the end of a working day all they want to do is watch television. And increasingly, television viewing is being done in isolation. In the United States studies suggest that from one third to one half of all viewing is done alone and American teenagers watch less than 5% in the company of their parents. 32 % of British three year olds now have a television in their own room (See Bunting, 2003, Putnam, 2000).

Television's sensational ability to capture our attention has reached the point that it is the number one leisure time pursuit in much of developed world with people giving it increased time with each passing year.

The absorption that television commands clearly involves a withdrawal from intimate social connectedness but this disruptiveness is not just limited to the home, it is clearly visible in broader patterns of community vitality, or what has become known in western parlance as 'social capital'. Social capital refers to the overall health of social connectedness – feelings of common purpose, common identity and common commitment. Healthy communities are characterised by high levels of social capital and regular mutual contribution. It is unfortunate then, that by all recent accounts, watching television is deeply implicated in the literal collapse of positive civic participation in almost all of its forms.

Foremost in a large body of work documenting these

relationships is the authoritative work of Robert Putnam. In 'Bowling Alone', his encyclopaedic survey of "the collapse of American community" in the latter half of the 20th century, Putnam charts a dramatic decline in virtually every measurable dimension of civic participation. From voting to visiting friends, from having neighbours to dinner to joining clubs and giving money to charity, Americans have, since the arrival of television in the late 1950s, demonstrated a dramatic withdrawal from collective participation in their communities' lives. In dozens of specific indices, the pattern is the same – a steady increase in social capital during the immediate post-war period until 1957, the point at which television saturated the country. From this point on, all measures of commitment begin to fall off markedly. In explaining the source of this civic disengagement Putnam writes

Considered in combination with a score of other factors that predict social participation (including education, generation, gender, religion, size of hometown, work obligations, marriage, children, income, financial worries, religiosity, race, geographic mobility, commuting time, home ownership and more) dependence on television for entertainment is not only a significant predictor of civic disengagement, it is the single most consistent predictor that I have discovered. (2000: p.231 - original italics)

In fact Putnam goes further to conclude that from the evidence

More television watching means less of virtually every form of civic participation and social involvement. .. Other things being equal, each additional hour of television viewing per day means roughly a 10 percent reduction in most forms of civic activism. (p.228).

Television's power to force social withdrawal relates directly to its attentional attractiveness. We literally become unwilling or unable to 'pull ourselves away' from its captivating immediacy. And indeed this is the whole purpose of commercial television - to grab more and more attention. In seeking to do this, both

programming and advertising become ever more sensational and intrusive – and increasingly difficult to extract oneself from. In fact attentional capture has been so perfected that the American Psychiatric Association considers commercial television viewing to be a formally addictive disorder - as the behaviour tends to become habitual, compulsive, increasingly ungratifying and difficult to break. Driven by commercial imperatives, the cuts and edits and sound bites become shorter and more sensational. Sex, surgery and violence become more explicit. The lifestyles and special effects become more fantastic and above all, the pace of change constantly accelerates. Each advance is driven by the competitive need to maintain audience attention from moment to moment and hence to be able to sell audience mindshare to business.

There are numerous implications that follow from this tendency to take the person ‘out’ of an interconnected social world, but one must be noted immediately. To the extent that attending to television removes the individual from active social interaction, it weakens their ability to contribute to on-going lived culture in its traditional forms. Bhutanese culture only has meaning to the extent that its unique representations provide the dominant living discourse of daily life. When individuals become lost to television, giving attention to it in essential isolation, they fail to participate in, and so sustain, the living culture around them. The danger is that they might come not to care for its slow celebrations, nor attend to the complex and subtle lessons that tradition has to teach them. All around the globe people forego local dialects for the international language of ‘cool’ and the young in particular, are targeted by increasingly intrusive representations idealising priorities wholly foreign to their parents’ culture. David Korten explains the threat in the following words:

(Corporate) techniques have an elegant simplicity. They centre

on manipulating the cultural symbols in which our individual identities and values are anchored. Before mass media, these symbols were collective creations of people relating to one another and expressing their inner feelings through artistic media. They represented our collective sense of who we are. The more time we spend immersed in the corporate-controlled and packaged world of television, the less time we have for the direct human exchanges through which cultural identity and values were traditionally expressed, reinforced and updated. Increasingly, those who control mass media control the core culture. (1995: p.155)

The effects of commercial television should not be underestimated and it is interesting to note in this context that in surveying the collapse of community more deeply, researchers have uncovered a telling dynamic. The decline in civic participation that comes with television's arrival reflects an overwhelmingly inter-generational shift. Closer analysis of the downward trends observable across the developed world reveal that older generations (those who might be said to have come to maturity before television permeated the collective consciousness) have maintained very high levels of community contribution. The overall trend to withdrawal comes from those raised, at least in part, by commercial television. These televised-to generations exhibit an ever-greater reluctance to identify with, and commit to, active community life.

In a very important sense then, television's effects suggest that in seeking to capture mindshare ever more effectively, the medium tends towards an erosion of social and cultural engagement – and that this effect extends beyond the simple metric of time spent passively in front of the set. This lack of engagement threatens to atrophy both culture and community as these depend utterly on continuous, self-regenerating participation by the majority. If social and cultural needs are not attended to, they cannot be maintained. The message embedded in numerous inter-generational studies is that television has been a central player in a dynamic that has seen the failure of a more community-oriented culture to transmit itself from one generation to the

next.

Much of television's potency in these realms comes from its cultivated reliance on speed and sensation. Pre-television cultures operate at a pace that is wholly different from that of the flickering screen. Reflected in the light of television's excitements, traditional ways can come to seem comparatively dull and constraining. For Bhutan, where the transmission of cultural understanding entails cultivating a slow and subtle appreciation of life, there is a distinct risk that all things traditional will be deemed boring, out of date and irrelevant by a new generation drawn into the contrary attractions of speed, change and easy sensation.

Television and Enhanced Materialism

The impacts of television do not stop at mere distraction from active cultural participation for while distracted, attention is shifted to forging a wholly new set of cultural associations. The public mindshare that television programmers capture is not an end in itself but rather a means by which broadcast organisations earn their commercial revenues. The majority of these revenues come from selling audience attention to businesses in order that they can attempt to mould and shape new desires in the viewer. But in order to fully understand this logic we must take a brief detour into the broad history of capitalism as a hegemonic social arrangement.

The historical expansion of capitalism has necessitated a balance between maximising the means of producing commodities and maximising the capacity to absorb that production through greater consumption. Via a complex interplay of human, physical and virtual technologies, the capacity to expand production has proved to be immense, meaning that now most segments of the global market are saturated by over-production. In the last half-century the central question for capitalism has become not how to produce goods, but how to distinguish and dispose of them once produced.

The solution has come in the form of techniques of mass persuasion, technologies forged to stimulate demand and drive consumption – in short, commercial advertising. We now occupy a world dominated by the symbols, brands and suggestions of advertising. And as a competitive form, it constantly seeks evermore sensational means of capturing attention. As Todd Gitlin says of advertising

...the ironic challenge for television networks is how to “break through the clutter”. But of course the clutter is not a force of nature; it is an artefact of the frenzy of competition. The clutter consists of nothing but the sum of all prior attempts to break through the clutter. So the clutter of images and manufactured sounds is the engine that drives ads into hitherto virgin spaces. (2002: p.89).

Thus, advertising is constantly forced towards new and more incisive formulations for convincing the broadest possible number that greater consumption of ever more goods is essential to well-being. In the global economy, billions of dollars are spent annually on developing advertising techniques, more than is collectively spent on global education. Legions of highly trained psychologists build careers in the fields of consumer persuasion, bringing rafts of research to bear on the micro processes of manipulating product appeal, image and loyalty.

What these researchers have come to appreciate in this constant drive for persuasive perfection is that particular traction is to be gained from forging positive associations between products and our most basic human needs. The vast majority in society want love, acceptance, respect and esteem from others. They want romance, happiness, success and a sense of positive purpose. And given the fundamental nature of these felt needs - they are literally the lowest common denominators of human motivation - people will give inordinate attention to the means by which they might be satisfied. Knowing this, television advertising around the world has come to be suffused with carefully crafted

suggestions that happiness, social acceptance, success and respect are all necessarily associated with very high levels of material consumption. In the parade of advertising, those who have what we do not always appear happier, more popular, and more successful than we are. Stimulating feelings of comparative deprivation has become a dominant strategy in expanding markets. Compared to the levels of fulfilment displayed in advertising and in mainstream programming, the life of the average viewer can only seem bland and unfulfilled. And while television's content works to inculcate this basic feeling of distance from how things might ideally be, it simultaneously offers up its ways for bridging that gap – the consumption of endless material products. Of this process Clive Hamilton, director of the Australian Institute says

Modern consumer capitalism will flourish as long as what people desire outpaces what they have. It is thus vital to the reproduction of the system that individuals are constantly made to feel dissatisfied with what they have. The irony of this should not be missed; while economic growth is said to be the process whereby peoples wants are satisfied so that they become happier – and economics is defined as the study of how scarce resources are best used to maximise welfare – in reality economic growth can be sustained only as long as people remain discontented. Economic growth does not create happiness, unhappiness sustains economic growth. Thus, discontent must be continually fomented if consumer capitalism is to survive. This explains the indispensable role of the advertising industry. 2003: (p.79).

Although each separate advertisement targets its appeals to a distinct offering, the unrelenting message throughout them all is that consumption and possession represent the only true routes to lasting fulfilment. Of the materialism that results psychologist Tim Kasser says.

...The minds of materialistic people become saturated with shows and ads exhibiting levels of attractiveness and wealth well above the norm, and thus beyond the level of attainment of the average viewer...Put in terms of discrepancy theory, ads

create an image (being like the person in the ad who has the product and a great life). Marketers and business people are banking that advertisement-induced discrepancies will convince us to buy the new improved detergent or take out a lease on the new car, so that our discrepancies can be reduced, and so their bank accounts can be enlarged. (2002: p.54)

In Kasser's extensive empirical work, the materialism that television directly shapes, has been found to be a deeply dysfunctional mode – one associated with depression, anxiety, insecurity, physical illness, social isolation, a lack of empathy and a general dissatisfaction with life. In summarising a lifetime of research on its nature he writes

Existing scientific research on the value of materialism yields clear and consistent findings. People who are highly focused on materialistic values have lower personal wellbeing and psychological health than those who believe that materialistic pursuits are relatively unimportant. These relationships have been documented in samples of people ranging from the wealthy to the poor, from teenagers to the elderly, and from Australians to South Koreans... The studies document that strong materialistic values are associated with a pervasive undermining of people's well-being, from low life-satisfaction and happiness to depression and anxiety, to physical problems such as headaches, and to personality disorders, narcissism and anti-social behaviour. (2002: p.22)

That materialism is a singularly unprofitable route to happiness is evident also in the considerable literature that attests to consumptions inability to significantly boost national happiness. The extensive researches of a considerable numerous scholars points to the clear conclusion - that beyond a very basic level of wealth (one essentially enabling security and sustenance), increases in consumption have no significant ability to increase happiness. Rather progress towards this ultimate goal comes from cultivating other satisfactions including friendship, self-understanding and a sense of positive contribution - ones at best unaffected by materialist fixations and at worst wholly undermined by them. (see for example McDonald 2003,

Diener and Seligman, 2004)

It is important to note the significant implications of this misdirection of purpose, for as capitalism moves to securing consumption on the basis of unconscious and false associations between products and effective need satisfaction, it moves beyond the pale of ethical legitimacy, even as defined in its own narrowly curtailed terms.

Ideologically, the ethical defence of free market capitalism rests upon claims of uncontaminated 'consumer sovereignty'. In this framework, the consumer is the ultimate authority as they are uniquely qualified to make the most rational decisions as to what their needs are and how they might best be met. The ethical role of business then, is one of pure *service* to society as it works to deliver ever more efficient means for meeting genuine public needs. However, with the introduction of associative advertising, business violates this arrangement by actively cultivating the needs its aims to satisfy. The famous economist J.K. Galbraith (1958) calls this the Dependence Effect and notes

The direct link between production and wants is provided by the institutions of advertising and salesmanship. . . These cannot be reconciled with the notion of independently determined desires for their central function is to create desires – to bring into being wants that previously did not exist. (in Hoffman and Moore, 1984: p. 441)

With this shift towards cultivating demands in order that consumers serve the predominant profit interests of business, capitalism loses much ethical authority. By falsely insinuating materialism as the necessary means to satisfying our deepest common needs, it creates an inefficient illusion that is deeply damaging to the individuals true capacity for happiness. Indeed to the extent that an unconscious and excessive materialism prevails, it effectively blocks rather than facilitates the effective satisfaction of our most essential non-material needs.

Television and Ethical Suspension

If commercial television is to fully activate consumerism it must also distract consumers from the effects of that lifestyle on the larger interconnected whole. Despite its claims that it is an educational instrument, television is primarily used for entertainment and distraction. Soap operas, movies, celebrity trivia, sex, game shows, reality TV and sports typically constitute the most popular television fare. Although it is true that television contains many news channels and documentaries these too have largely succumbed to the pervasive imperative of retaining consumer attention. The result is evident in the relative decline of integrative analysis and the relentless rise of the shrinking sound bite. On the whole, complex perspective is increasingly removed in mainstream programming as disconnected sensationalism comes to dominate the 'news'. Graphic disasters, explosions, particularly horrifying crimes, celebrity happenings and other such easily digestible fare, amply satisfy the fleeting demand for disposable information. Indeed, as global media ownership becomes concentrated in the hands of fewer competitive players - the Rupert Murdochs and Conrad Blacks of the world - the line distinguishing propaganda from perspective and fact from fiction, becomes increasingly difficult to discern.

It is fair to say then, that the larger and more complex issues raised by capitalism's attempts to maximise consumption are not suited to television's mode. What perspective is made available gets quickly washed away by the larger torrent of which it is only a small part because, as David Korten points out

Television has been wholly colonised by corporate interests. The goal is not simply to sell products and strengthen the consumer culture. It is also to create a political culture that equates the corporate interest with the human interest in the public mind. In the words of Paul Hawken, "Our minds are being addressed by addictive media serving corporate sponsors whose purpose is to rearrange reality so that viewers forget the world around them. (1995 pp. 157-157)

In essence, television cannot afford to do more than give the

most fleeting attention to the broad impacts of consumerism. Consider the ecological situation for example. It is an unfortunate but inescapable truth that we live on a planet that is limited in its capacity to regenerate resources and recycle waste. The modern growth-fixated economy fails utterly to acknowledge these limits - for as soon as they are admitted, the ethical legitimacy of endlessly expanding consumer appetite evaporates. Looking at even a few of the most prominent environmental indicators strongly suggests that the global ecosystem is under severe stress as it tries to cope with excessive industrial throughput. These trends are however, rarely brought together and connected to materialism. Thus, through televisions unreality we are allowed to ignore the fact that our current levels of consumption demand destroying the ecological integrity that future generations depend upon.

The clear moral implications of behaving in this manner are strategically avoided as capitalism continues to focus solely upon expanding market capacity in the name of short-term profit. What we see here is the basic failure of capitalism to engage a sufficient ethical restraint. In fact we see more than this, that this ethical suspension is critical to the capitalist system - and particularly critical in the mind of the consumer. For the consumer to consume maximally they must be freed from any debilitating concerns including ethical ones. It does not pay to connect poor coffee farmers to the price paid for the luxury beverage in the consumer's hand, nor global warming to the 'bigger and better' four wheel drive. And it is hardly constructive to connect images of battery farming with a romantic dinner for two.

In discussing this tendency to distraction, Michael Billig notes a basic complicity on the part of the consumer to deny any ethical challenge to their own indulgence. This is most effectively achieved by severing all connection to the processes of production that brings goods to the consumer in a competitive global economy.

The very term consumer capitalism exemplifies absent-mindedness. If commodities are to be consumed as items of pleasure and as confirmations of the identity of the consumer, then the consumer must routinely not think about the labour relations involved in the production of what they are consuming. This means forgetting about the social relations which lie behind the commodities...The economically determined pursuit of pleasure demands a repression of the ego in order to push out of consciousness those sociological realities and an incipient sense of conscience which would spoil the consuming party. (1999: p320-321)

Ethical dilemmas can only “spoil the consuming party” and so they are willingly avoided. But it is not only in denying the relationships to the environment or production that capitalism's impacts are negated. Television is most notably silent concerning its own role in undermining the consumer sovereignty so necessary to capitalism's legitimacy.

In capitalist ideology, the market must always grow as this maximises the potential for profits. Throughout its broad history, but particularly in the past forty years, capitalism has managed to engineer a radical social transformation in much of world, as its advance has pushed aside traditional restraints. In the process, the ethical ideals of cultural and democratic governance have been forced to the sidelines. Now mainly free of larger institutional control, global capitalism recognises no restraint to its expansion and intensification. Critically, given the resulting centrality of the consumer to capitalism's purpose, it seeks to avoid confronting any deeply incriminating associations. Television cultivates the ideal state of ethical suspension necessary for global business to continue its unsustainable throughput. The consumers it cultivates become maximally greedy, wholly oblivious and ultimately harmful to the collective interest. Furthermore, they have become mindless of their own indignity. As Peter Herschok so vividly puts it

As markets become increasingly extensive and dense, consumers begin to function as producers of waste. Or, more graphically stated, they begin to serve as organs of elimination

by means of which the residue of profit seeking – whether material or experiential – is summarily disposed. (2003: PP.47-48)

The many Bhutanese who point to the pleasures of television and its brilliance in their lives are right to do so. But as the above evidence suggests, there is a less obvious and more worrisome process at work beneath the endlessly absorbing surface of sleek entertainment. While it distracts, imported television threatens to act as a severe corrosive in Bhutan, dissolving lived culture and its priorities, to replace them with a particularly profitless fixation on material accumulation. The impact may not be apparent as yet, but it is the undeniable end-point sought. Given this, it is a medium that the Bhutanese should handle with considerable care.

Part Two - Television, Materialism and Gross National Happiness

It is well known that the Royal Kingdom has declared its intention to seek a form of development that allows for a more meaningful expansion of human capacity than mere consumerism - and that its ultimate aim is to achieve high levels of Gross National Happiness. GNH has come to be contrasted with GNP or Gross National Product, the conventional western measure of market scale. In clarifying the difference, Bhutanese officials have reiterated an essential insight - that economic growth is not a balanced goal in and of itself, and that if pushed too far, this mode is destructive to both the individual and the collective interest. Currently, GNH is a loosely developed ideal, but it has been consistently associated with basic Mahayana Buddhist principles of material moderation and spiritual accomplishment. The Second Noble Truth of Buddhism states that all suffering comes from desire, and the subsequent Noble Truths explain the means to diminishing appetite in order to achieve happiness. To the extent that the ideals of GNH are consistent with the ideals of Bhutanese Buddhism, it represents a framework fundamentally opposed to the ideology of globalising capitalism.

But in order to clearly see the essential conflict, some further elaborations on Buddhist sensibilities are in order, as is a clearer exposition of the exact meaning of GNH. To begin with the latter, it is evident that the concept has an immediate and intuitive appeal. But despite the fact that numerous articles on Bhutan's plans to achieve GNH have appeared in serious newspapers and magazines around the world, the concept has advanced little beyond broad outline and uncritical support. If Bhutan is to forge a truly unique middle way between modernity and tradition, it must more consciously articulate the principles inherent in its national policy of facilitating Gross National Happiness.

Some useful articles have been written on these issues, explaining most commonly that GNH ultimately rests on four pillars – good governance, living culture, a sustainable environment and a healthy economy. But how exactly these factors might relate and inter-relate has not been specified. This poses a problem for developing the conscious precision necessary to effectively meet the shifting challenges globalisation presents. Television provides a useful and urgent case study in how a philosophy grounded in GNH might be operationalised.

When considering GNH in broad terms, it is clear that the priority of happiness is linked to a balanced conception of material and non-material maturity - one uniquely Bhutanese and explicitly Buddhist in form. In this sense happiness becomes inseparably involved with a whole constellation of other accomplishments. As Peter Hershock writes

In the Majjhima Nikaya, for example, it is said that “with mindfulness comes wisdom, with wisdom comes tireless energy, with tireless energy comes joy, with joy comes a tranquil body, with a tranquil body comes happiness, with happiness comes attentive mastery, with attentive mastery comes equanimity.” – as well as the other immeasurable relational headings (brahmavihara or appamanna) of compassion, appreciative joy and loving-kindness. (2003: p.54)

Happiness then is an integral aspect of a much more complete maturity. It is a worthy end state to seek, particularly for others, but it exists only as a co-product of a more pervasive transformation. Happiness is part and parcel of being generous and respectful, as it is of being non-violent and wise. To seek GNH then, is really to seek the fullest possible development of the individual’s potentials for clarity, wisdom and positive contribution. Inherent in this process is the corollary need to undo the restraints or ‘poisons’ that prevent maturity’s flowering. In classical Mahayana Buddhism the most important hindrances are greed, ignorance and harmfulness and Bhutan’s cultural heritage revolves around practices designed to minimise the impacts of these dysfunctional tendencies. Volumes of Buddhist texts speak to the complex dangers of these three hindrances and attest to the need to keep them under control. Those poisoned by them, consumers in modern terms, are trapped in immaturity and unhappiness and spread these ailments among others. From a Buddhist perspective and thus from a GNH perspective, cultivating excessive consumerism is wholly inappropriate.

The issue of commercial television is not primarily one of whether it insinuates materialist orientations, nor of whether these are deleterious to the individual – the answer is clear on both points. Rather the immediate issue is whether Bhutan has the will to seriously engage with the realities of television and prevent it from undoing the fabric of Bhutanese life. To maintain cultural sovereignty is to maintain the pre-eminence of one’s own culture and the ethical insights that lie at its core.

Where the core referents that inform indigenous purpose come to be dominated by foreign criteria (like capital gain) then a culture begins a slow and usually unremitting decline.

Commercial television then, should not be allowed to enter the Bhutanese consciousness unchallenged on any terms but its own because ideological systems always win by their own referents. Television broadcasts its own justifications – that it is wanted, informative and fun – and to argue against it in these terms is difficult, if not churlish. Only when television is challenged by more holistic terms does it reveal its weakness, both as an ideology and as an ethical force. In order to grapple with television or any other aspect of the global economy, Bhutanese officials have to continue to see the issue clearly in terms of their own cultural priorities. After all, television draws mass numbers away from reflection and the cultivation of interconnectedness. Attentiveness, the prerequisite for skilful advance is shattered by television's intrusiveness. And desire, that most foundational problem, is enflamed and enraged by its manipulations. The deficiencies are obvious when tested in Buddhist terms, but largely invisible when viewed in television's own terms.

If engaged culture is co-existent with maintaining indigenous sovereignty, then what about the other pillars of GNH, what for example is the role of good governance in the context of television? It is logical to suggest that in general, good governance in a Buddhist culture must involve acting to empower and sustain the grounding necessary for clarity, wisdom and positive contribution to flourish and inform decision-making. This of course represents nothing new for Bhutan as traditional governance has always involved a close co-operation between monastic and civil authorities. In the Bhutanese context, government must eventually rule on the propriety of television in terms of its potential to help or hinder an advance towards the sustainable maturity necessary for GNH to prevail

When it comes to commercial television and advertising,

Bhutan needs to keep in mind that globalising capitalism is a highly combatative cultural form and that it inevitably seeks cultural re-arrangement to achieve its global expansion. The demands on government correspondingly require high degrees of vigilance in order that the more invasive intrusions be identified and contained. In the face of aggression, protection becomes a necessary governing virtue. If the deep and humane values of Bhutanese life are to be sustained, then the strident call to abandon them in the name of a grasping self-interest must be countered. Commercial television aggressively seeks its mindshare, and seeks to draw it away from the more functional reflections of Buddhism. The most basic requirement of Buddhist 'good governance' in this context would involve protecting the public consciousness from any expansion in foreign televisions calculating manipulations. If television is to play a positive role in any context it must be governed effectively, and by criteria that counter its constant movement towards complete attentional capture. Within a framework of GNH this could be done in any number of ways. Pressure to allow satellite broadcasting to spread commercial television beyond the towns can be resisted. Licences can be limited and advertising can be controlled. There is no reason why these things or others cannot be done if deemed pragmatic by reference to higher-order outcomes.

With regard to the other components of GNH - the environment and the economy, we can again see how the engagement of cultural values and sensibilities are essential. The economy and the environment have come to be linked in an unfortunate opposition in recent times. This opposition reflects the limited capacities of the biosphere to cope with unsustainable levels of production and consumption. In a limited natural system, economic growth comes at an environmental cost, and environmental integrity comes at an economic cost. From this essential trade-off, an inevitable conclusion follows - that beyond a finite capacity for expansion, further short-term material consumption can only come at the cost of long-term sustainability. For a perspective

that recognises interconnectedness and seeks the well-being of all sentient beings, a restraint of material desire is necessary if all are to thrive. To deny the need for moderation in consumption, in the present context, is to deny Buddhism's legitimacy. It is exactly the end-point consumer capitalism seeks.

In the final analysis then, we return to a basic point. Among the four pillars that support GNH, economy is distinguished by its singularly unrestrained nature and its corresponding tendency to corrupt its companions. The state of the global commons is illustrative of the miseries that occur if its aggressiveness goes unchallenged. As economy expands it devours ecological sustainability, corrupts responsible governance and hollows out the core of all restraining culture. If Bhutan is not to fall prey to the global imbalance, the actively destructive force of material consumption must be contained in order that the complimentary goods of ecological health, social harmony and wise culture are allowed to make their contributions to national happiness.

GNH is a dream that can only thrive to the extent that the Buddhist culture that informs it continues itself to thrive. Globalising capitalism uses television and its attention grabbing power to shape attitudes detrimental to Buddhist accomplishment. As such, it must be engaged with and restrained. Television represents not a merely beguiling and entrancing medium, but a major cultural intrusion. Simply put, it represents a fundamental threat to the on-going viability of Buddhist culture and all the higher attainments (including GNH) it seeks to facilitate. In closing, it is appropriate to remind ourselves of Neil Postman's sober warning with regard to the medium

When a population becomes distracted by trivia, when cultural life is redefined as a perpetual round of entertainments, when serious public conversation becomes a form of baby-talk, when, in short, people become an audience, then a nation finds itself at risk; culture-death is a real possibility. (1985: p.161).