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In Search of a Balanced View

The documentary film, *Happiness*, focuses on the transition from cultural isolation and tradition to technological connection and modernization. In 2012, Thomas Balmes began filming in the remote village of Laya, Bhutan, one of the last inhabited places on earth to obtain electric power. Although the government of Bhutan first made television and internet access available to its citizens in April 1999, Laya's remoteness delayed its connection to the country's electrical grid. In the film, the villagers express eagerness for installation of the power lines so that they can watch television. Balmes, however, demonstrates a bias against television that limits his exploration of technology's impact on the villagers. The director embraces the view that technology undermines human interconnection and society.

Throughout the film, Balmes presents other changes adversely impacting village life. The film spotlights



Peyangki (Garrett)

eight-year old Peyangki who is studying to be a monk. For Peyangki, the first evidence of change occurs when construction crews begin hauling in the power poles and spools of cable. He and the other village children run and play around the unsightly equipment with the tranquil village and beautiful mountain scenes in the background. At this point,

Peyangki is one of only three remaining monks in the village. The elder monk suggests that five other monks moved to the city to have "TV, electricity, or other comforts." (Balmes) The two young monks agree that they also want to move to the "big city" because they "want to watch TV."

Despite his career as a director of documentaries for television, Balmes reveals paternalistic views about television's adverse effects. When interviewed, Balmes explained that making the film gave him a way to justify

to his children why they have no television at home. (Farber) Embracing the view that television damages individuals and society, he expects his audience to disapprove of the harm that technology will bring to the villagers' simple, peaceful way of life. The film's final scene occurs when a large family sits down together to watch a program on their new television. Accompanied by audio of a professional wrestling match, the camera closes in, one by one, on each person's face as they silently watch the screen. Whether young or old, each face has the same expressionless, unblinking stare. These images are haunting and strongly suggest that television will ruin family life and harm each member of the family.

David Byrne expresses the analogous view that technological advancements reduce "the amount of meaningful interaction we have with each other". (Byrne) In his opinion piece, "Eliminating the Human", Byrne cites the example that "Amazon, FreshDirect, Instacart, etc. have not just cut out interactions at bookstores and checkout lines, they have eliminated ALL human interaction barring the (often paid) online recommendations." (Byrne) Similarly, users of the Airbnb app can rent a place to stay without ever having to interact with anyone at any point. Byrne theorizes that removing "humans from the equation [makes us] less complete as people or as a society." While this view is compelling, it is incomplete.

Like Balmes, Byrne focuses only on certain aspects of technology's impact. Byrne makes the important point that technology-enabled services limit real human connections, but he fails to note that these services allow people to expand other types of connections. They allow consumers more convenient access to better products, more variety, and lower prices, while sellers have access to new markets. These connections can have significant benefits for both individuals and society. Balmes attempts to portray community life and the interactions



Peyangki bathing in washtub (Happiness)

between villagers before modern technology first arrives. The villagers live in poverty and endure harsh conditions, spending long hours tending their livestock. During cold weather, the lack of indoor plumbing makes bathing unpleasant. The director shows the villagers' excitement for improvements in cleanliness

and entertainment but expects his Western audience to dread the harmful and invasive forces of change. While the film presents valid concerns, Balmes makes no real effort to explore future positive impacts of technology. Ironically, modern technology gives Balmes the opportunity to create his film as well his subjects the opportunity to view it. However, the only scene depicting technology in a positive light occurs during Peyangki's visit to the distant city of Thimphu. He needs to contact his mother and is able to call her on a cell phone. Balmes does not address the potential for modern technology to provide greater access to needed information, education, medicine, and other means of improving the villagers' lives.

The Bhutan government wants to provide easy access to news and information as well as internet education and training, even in the country's most remote regions. (Jamtsho and Bullen) Accelerating economic growth and reducing poverty is a key goal for improving Bhutan's Gross Domestic Happiness. A report on



Peyangki and his uncle trekking to Thimphu (Happiness)

information access and literacy indicates that the government considers cable television and internet technologies to be tools in helping meet this goal (Royal Government of Bhutan). The report states, "The Government of Bhutan acknowledges and recognizes the role and benefit of media and ICT [Information and Communications Technology] in today's information age,

given the difficult geographic terrain of the country and scattered settlement pattern of majority of population who live with limited physical communication." (Jamtsho and Bullen) Hindered by limitations in the country's infrastructure, progress remains difficult to measure. Nevertheless, the government of Bhutan understands that the rest of the world has embraced technology, and the country must change to secure its future. Balmes, like Byrne, focuses on human and cultural losses due to technological advancement. They do not effectively address the motivations for modernization.

Although their own lives have been enriched through modern technology, Balmes and Byrnes express a type of nostalgia for bygone days. Byrne's lack of balance is more acceptable because he acknowledges that he is expressing "a theory". (Byrne) His overriding concern is that eliminating human interaction makes us "less complete as people and as a society". (Byrne) Balmes, however, uses a documentary format to express his own

negative views about technology. He does not explore the potential for positive change or any cultural differences between the villagers and his audience that might explain their divergent attitudes about modernization.

Balmes' cinematic techniques provide the audience with lush and lingering images of spectacular mountain views, traditional village life, and captivating facial expressions. While these techniques help him deliver an effective message, the message is one-sided. A loss of traditional culture and the resulting detrimental effects are important components of change, but they are not the whole story. The reality of change is that it creates both losses and gains. In neglecting the potentially positive effects of technology, Balmes' film is as much propaganda as documentary.

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