Taking Account of Tech: Fulfilling Our Personhood in the Smartphone Era

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Author Biography

Dr. Zara Khan studied Political Science and social justice at the City University of New York, specializing in comparative political theory. Her main hope is to contribute to the Islamization of profane knowledge, particularly in education, politics, culture and economics. She is an educator and researcher, currently serving as Yaqeen's Director of Research in Contemporary Thought and Politics.

> But random reflections on the human condition need, like beads, to be strung on a connecting thread…this thread should be the Islamic concept of Man as God's Viceroy on this beautiful but transient earth… Are we or are we not fully responsible for everything that we do, regardless of whether we are obeying orders or constrained by fear?
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> - Gai Eaton[1]
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> The products indoctrinate and manipulate; they promote a false consciousness which is immune against its falsehood. And as these beneficial products become available to more individuals in more social classes, the indoctrination they carry ceases to be publicity; it becomes a way of life… it militates against qualitative change. Thus emerges a pattern of one-dimensional thought and behavior in which ideas, aspirations, and objectives that, by their content, transcend the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or reduced to terms of this universe.
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> - Herbert Marcuse[2]

In 2019 I presented an earlier version of this paper to an audience of mostly Arab and South Asian Muslims residing in New Jersey.[3] I wrote the paper after years of pushing back against what I saw to be the avalanche of technologization, or automation, in homes, schools, businesses, services, and workplaces.[4] The impressive array of conveniences notwithstanding, I saw danger in how our increasing over-reliance on technological tools systematically under-develops the equivalent skills within ourselves. As a society we are externalizing our knowledge, becoming abstracted from it, and creating more false needs for the substitute tools. This phenomenon is also concretely exacerbating poverty at the extraction and production end of the global supply chain. Universal use of the US

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[1] Gai Eaton, *King of the Castle: Choice and Responsibility in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1990), 4.
[2] Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 12.
[3] Zara Khan, "The Wheat and the Tares: Moral Accountability and Full Personhood in the Smartphone Era," (lecture, New Jersey Dawah 7th Annual Conference, November 29, 2019).
[4] See David F. Noble, *Forces of Production: A Social History of Industrial Automation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984). Noble shows that while labor-saving automation devices have lessened the drudgery of working conditions, they have also led to the elimination of workers themselves.

government-owned Global Positioning System (GPS), for example, transforms our travel protocol from map-literacy, route-fluency and an observant landmark-competency to blindly following directives that are uttered piecemeal. In schools, one finds ever more demand for Smartboard-centered, technology-assisted, and web-based instruction. Even among family and friends, I often find resistance to or ridicule of suggestions to abstain from elective social media or smartphone use.

So how did the New Jersey Muslims react to my claim that over-reliance on the internet and social media is problematizing our personhood and moral accountability in fundamental ways? Surprisingly well. Parents and community youth mentors resonated with my analysis of how youth are impacted. Others I could tell were reflecting on their own social media addictions. A prominent scholar of *fiqh* rightly commented that our framing of the issue must be cautious, so as not to invoke widespread anxiety and guilt over the responsible use of these tools.

Introduction

In the year since I publicly shared the first version of this paper, much has happened to force a societal reorientation toward and questioning of our technological culture. The Covid-19 pandemic has shifted more of our personal, educational and professional activities online. Remote schooling is seating our children, including the youngest of students (four- and five-year olds), in front of Zoom screens for hours daily. Director Jeff Orlowski's original documentary *The Social Dilemma* was released in which former designers and engineers from the biggest tech companies implicate social media as an existential threat to human life. And yet, despite the questions more and more people are asking about our health and well-being in light of social media and smart technology, it seems we are not reconfiguring modalities or services for human good. For example, we are not thinking outside the box of Common Core standards to imagine 2020-21 as a

year when grade school can take the form of outdoor, socially distanced land regeneration, national parks cleanup, or habitat construction for zero-income and low-income families. We are not finding government interest in localizing production to offset unemployment. Instead, we are seeking the solutions to the problems created by technology, in greater quantities and more advanced forms of the same. It is with these historical trends in mind that I'm updating and publishing the paper.

The main impetus for this paper is that we can no longer afford to avoid looking critically at something that's become second nature to us all: smart technology and social media. Culturally, the mere mention of criticizing our relationships to our phones and social media can invoke apprehension. But despite that feeling, and indeed *because* of it, we must as a community take account of smart technology and what the internet enables. Allah the Exalted says in Sūrat al-Nisāʾ[5] to speak the truth even if it is against our own selves. In this spirit let us keep an open mind as we examine and contemplate a set of questions, or problems, that our digital habits and addictions are sowing within ourselves. ʿUmar, may Allah be pleased with him, would say, "Judge yourselves before you are judged, and weigh your deeds before they are weighed out for you, and adorn yourselves for the Great Day of Presentation"—then recite, "On that day, you will be presented—nothing about you will be hidden" (Qur'an 69:18).[6]

A note on scope: this paper does not intend to enumerate the benefits and costs of social media and smart technology. The mighty currents of continuous automation and public opinion flow in technological favor. This paper presents an outlying opinion: that smart technology, the internet, and social media are harmful to the full exercise of our God-given personhood and concomitant moral accountability. When it comes to technology, we can imagine a spectrum of opinions between

[5] Qur'an 4:135 (trans. Muhammad Asad).
[6] Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *al-Zuhd* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmīyah, 1999), 99, report no. 633. I'm indebted to Shaykh Mohammad Elshinawy for sharing this insight.

extreme conservative and extreme liberal (see Figure 1). Between the two extremes we can plot two additional points: conservative and liberal.

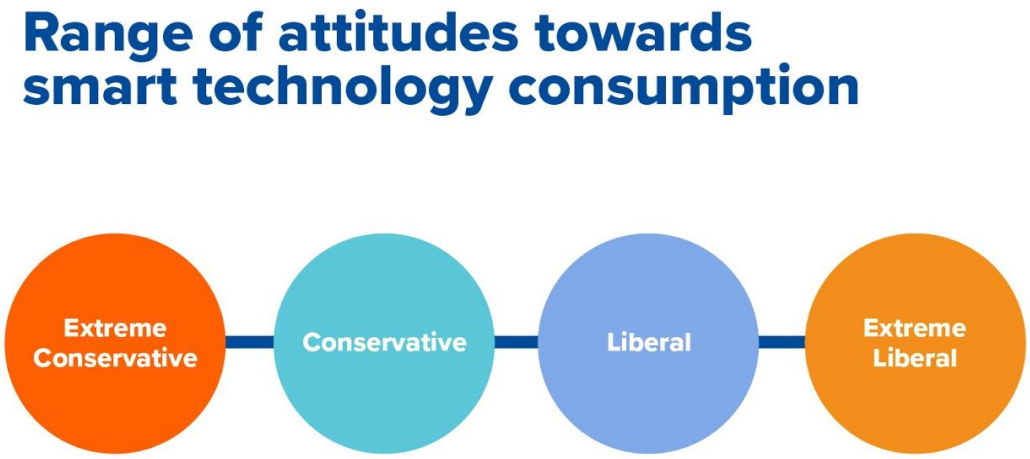

Figure 1: Range of attitudes toward smart technology consumption, from extreme conservative to extreme liberal

- The **extreme conservative** position holds that there is no good in modern technology, only harm.
- The **conservative** position holds that there are both good and harm in modern technology, but the harm outweighs the good.
- The **liberal** position holds that there are both good and harm in modern technology, but the good outweighs the harm.
- The **extreme liberal** position holds that there is no harm in modern technology, only good.

This paper espouses a conservative position toward modern technology: it accepts that there are both good and harm in modern technology but finds that the harm

currently outweighs the good. While unpopular, the position is nonetheless within the center range, distinct from extreme views in the spectrum. We have indeed reached a time of harvest, such that the flowers of our technology and our social media have come to fruition. The internet went live in 1991 on a mass scale—that's 29 years ago. At that time its reason for being was networked communication. Web 2.0 developed right after the turn of the millennium, offering online services of a more interactive, two-way substance, aiming at networked *sociality*.[7] By the time 2003 and 2004 witnessed the advent of Myspace and Facebook, we were already in the throes of a complete shift, something that will be discussed later.

To take account of our smart technology and social media consumption, the main factor I consider is full personhood, and specifically moral accountability. In light of our smartphones and social media, what does it mean for us to possess *full* personhood, and in what ways ought we to hold ourselves and each other morally accountable vis-a-vis our usage?

Personhood and moral accountability

Every civilization, every philosophy, has a theory of the human being.[8] No theory of the human being can be as complete and perfect as the one Islam offers, since its author is the Creator of human beings and of all things. Our theory of the human being is more truthful and nuanced than competing iterations that do not acknowledge our creation by Allah. Full personhood in the Islamic conception begins with our creation by Divine hands, contrary to the secular guesswork that proposes that we emerged through matter and movement alone: we understand that we have a special and exalted position in creation, such that Allah the Exalted tells

[7] See Jose van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[8] There are different theories of the human being that emanate from different traditions. Some examples include Plato's theory of our mixed-metal composition and tripartite soul; Aristotle's political animal; the Enlightenment's rational, history-making champion; Nietzche's superman; etc. Without true concepts of the Creator and the human soul, however, any theory of life is incomplete. Subsequent sciences, arts, and humanities will reflect, as we find today, a conceptual schizophrenia with no overarching evaluative criterion other than positivism and, in the ethical domain, a crippling relativism.

us in Sūrat al-Baqarah that the angels were told to bow down to us.[9] Adam, upon him be peace, and his posterity have been taught the *names of things*, grounding our intellective and linguistic faculties. We were given the gift of "the articulation of linguistic symbols into meaningful patterns… the outward, visible and audible expression of the inner, unseen reality which we call the intellect (*al-ʿaql*)."[10]

In our full personhood we human beings are the possessors of *the trust*. Allah the Exalted says in Sūrat al-Aḥzāb that He offered the *amānah* to the mountains but they trembled in fear.[11] It was human beings who took it on, foolish as we are. So the human being is *primarily*—not by arguments for common cause or some other societal good—a morally accountable creature. And this moral trust is so tremendous that it made the mountains tremble in fear; it's no small matter. With great power, as the saying goes, comes great responsibility, and this is the source of our *khilāfah*, or vicegerency. We have the moral imperative to be just and order life on earth harmoniously, so that each segment of creation is fulfilled in the rights Allah has allotted to it. In this way can we participate in the fulfillment of Allah's command and glorification of His name.

Our personhood comprises various active, conscious facets that are different aspects of a single reality. These are the *ʿaql*, *qalb*, *rūḥ,* and *nafs*—terms that don't exactly correspond to English terms intellect, heart, spirit, and appetite. This is because our terms are nurtured by the soil of the Qur'anic worldview writ large. Toshihiko Izutsu's semantic study of the Qur'an demonstrates how the key terms of Qur'anic language lead one to arrive at the overall worldview.[12] By noting the semantic fields—or webs of interdependent meaning—and seeing how the focus-words at the centers of these webs relate to one another, Izutsu demonstrates how concepts do not stand alone but derive meaning through entire systems of

[9] Qur'an 2:34.
[10] Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: National Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 2001), 122.
[11] Qur'an 33:72.
[12] Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Qur'an: Semantics of the Qur'anic Weltanschauung* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2002).

relation. So *ʿaql*, *qalb*, *rūḥ* and *nafs* are terms for articulating our creatureliness—our *fiṭrah* or innate, involuntary nature of servitude, *ʿubūdīyah*—in relation to Allah in a manner that is consistent with the *dīn*.

For example, the focus-word *īmān* (belief) is related, positively or negatively, to a number of other terms (see Figure 2). The words around the focus-word comprise its principle of differentiation, and the focus-word itself is their principle of unification. Izutsu finds that the word "Allah" is "the highest focus-word in the Qur'anic vocabulary, reigning over the entire domain."[13]

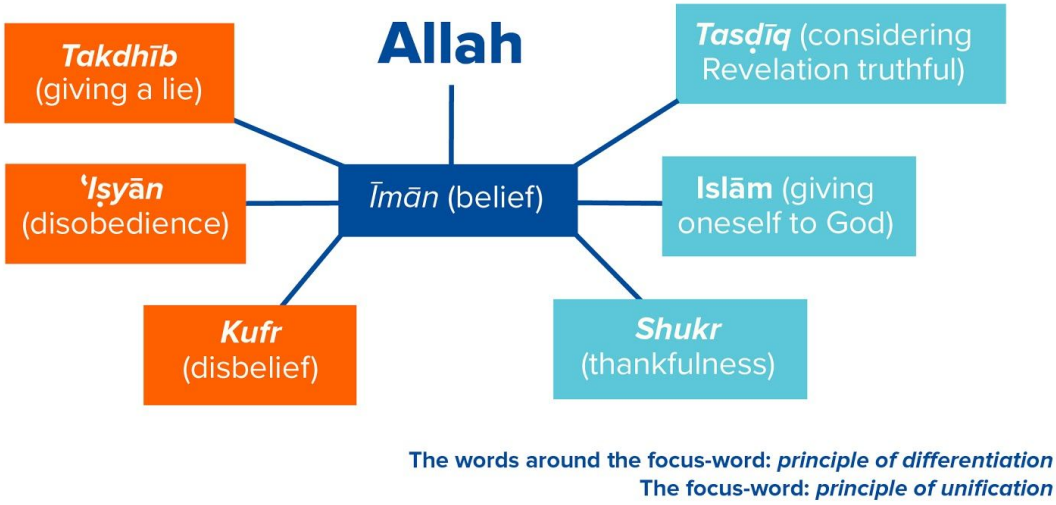

Figure 2: The focus-word "īmān" in the Qur'an

The linguistic itself is simply the other side of the conceptual within the same network. The linguistic aspect is the terminology and the conceptual aspect is the worldview; *tawḥīd* determines the taxonomy. Thus even if the *jāhilī* Arabs and the first Muslims both used the word *Allah*, their meanings were completely different based on their different cosmological orientations and relative degrees of distance from *al-Ḥaq* (Allah's name *The Real*). The two groups held different *worldviews*.

[13] Izutsu, 24.

By full personhood and moral accountability I refer to the Qur'anic theory of the human being as:

- a creation and slave of Allah the Exalted;
- the one who has been given knowledge of Allah, the cosmos, the terrestrial realm, and the self *by* Allah; and
- the possessor of the sacred trust, trusted to do Allah's work on earth before returning back to Him for judgment.

This paper investigates five specific aspects of our personhood and accountability in relation to our increasing dependence on smartphones and social media. The first factor is sight, or vision. Here sight refers not only to our eyes but is a metaphor for discernment, good judgment, and knowledge. Allah the Exalted speaks in Sūrat al-Ḥajj of a blindness that afflicts the heart whilst the eyes may be functioning.[14] In Sūrat al-Baqarah, He speaks of those who have become deaf, dumb, and blind such that they can't think or understand.[15] There are ways in which smartphones and social media blind our judgment by how they frame reality and exclude critical components from those frames.

The second aspect of personhood and moral accountability affected by smartphones and social media is freedom from addiction. Our use of these tools often devolves into abuse, producing some degree of addictive behavior in the majority of users. For this we are morally answerable, because addiction subverts the rightful guardianship of the *nafs* (lower appetites) by the *qalb* (spiritual heart of intuitive knowledge that, when polished, can know Allah). It puts the *nafs* in charge, which makes us less than full persons and deficient in our *ʿubūdīyah*, or servanthood, to Allah. It also has negative health implications and interferes in our fulfillment of our bodies' rights over us.

The third aspect is the mutual rights we have over one another and how these must be upheld in order for justice to reign. There are both concrete and abstract ways

[14] Qur'an 22:46.
[15] Qur'an 2:17–18 and 171.

that smartphones and social media interfere in the fulfillment of our obligations to one another. The concrete factors include the global supply chain, by which the production infrastructure wreaks havoc and destruction upon some in order to deliver high tech goods to others. The abstract factors include our degraded sociability and disappearing connectivity with one another.

The fourth aspect of personhood and moral accountability is our obligation to care for the natural environment. Apart from the concrete injunctions that come to us from the resplendent *sunnah* of the Prophet Muhammad, may God's peace and blessings be upon him, telling us to feed and water animals, not distress mother animals on account of their young, plant trees even if the Day of Judgment is upon us, and not throw stones at trees, the earth is our mother and we are a nation that honors our mothers. The proliferation of personal smart technology and the server farms that tether a largely intangible internet are disastrous to the environment.

The fifth aspect of full personhood and moral accountability that is problematized by smartphones and social media is the sanctity of our interior space, specifically in our God-given right to privacy and the conditions necessary to experience *khushūʿ* and *ṭumaʾnīnah* , or stillness of the heart.

Eyes with which to see

The gift of sight enables us to see and understand. Human beings are capable, through the exercise of our will, of either cleaning the instruments of our understanding through worship and remembrance of Allah, or inflicting blinders upon ourselves through *ghaflah*, heedlessness. The sound heart is one that has been cleansed of worldly attachments that can distract from *ʿubūdīyah.* In the faculty of our physical and moral sight, what is framing? Framing is the act of imposing parameters on some aspect of reality so that a portion of it is front and center and sharply focused, while other parts are systematically excluded. Movies, news media, social media and personal electronic devices all frame. Consider the

following example of the power of framing. Figure 3 shows a large outdoor gathering of men and boys in the nineteenth century. They are dressed in formal attire and appear well-to-do.

Figure 3: The framed image

However, the framing of this picture excludes a horrific reality (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: The entire image

This photograph shows the lynching of African American Frank McManus in Minneapolis, Minnesota in 1882.[16] It is also a large outdoor gathering of formally dressed well-to-do men and boys. But in Figure 3, the frame *only* reveals the gathering, excluding the lynching. By altering the context, our framing of this picture changes its meaning completely. The way we consume social media today also frames reality in a way that changes its meaning, making our sight deficient. To be sure, all media necessarily frame reality by choosing which content to expose at any given time. This paper frames the research question in a particular way and therefore excludes other relevant issues. Social media framing becomes

[16] Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.print.

particularly harmful due to our increasing embeddedness in the virtual world and subsequent abstraction from the real one.

Each of us has experienced or heard of examples of harmful social media framing. Ever since the last presidential election, the idea of the "echo chamber" resounded, ironically enough, on social media itself. In 2015, researchers at Facebook studied 10.1 million users to assess how many news stories in their feeds were cross-cutting, meaning of a perspective other than their own self-identified political position.[17] They found that despite open access to different sources, users will surround themselves with like-minded contacts and follow and click only on stories that confirm their preexisting positions. Some of this is 'motivated reasoning' when, in devotion to our political affiliations, we dismiss alternative conceptions.[18] However online platforms can cause harm on a substantial scale beyond just moving in our own circles—fostering confirmation bias, segregation, and polarization.

According to Pew Research in 2015, 61% of millennials get their political news from Facebook.[19] One may ask: what's wrong with that? How does getting one's news from Facebook affect one's sight or make one susceptible to the peripheral blindness caused by framing? Facebook is a corporation valued at $575 billion US dollars,[20] with most revenue coming from advertisements that appear on screen or in users' news feeds.[21] While this is the case with all corporate media,[22] they nonetheless operate under the auspices of agreed-upon standards of journalistic

[17] Eytan Bakshy, Solomon Messing, and Lada A. Adamic, "Exposure to Ideologically Diverse News and Opinion on Facebook," *Science* 348, no. 6239 (June 2015): 1130–32.
[18] Rune Slothuus and Claes H. deVreese, "Political Parties, Motivated Reasoning, and Issue Framing Effects," *Journal of Politics* 72, no. 3 (July 2010): 630–45.
[19] Amy Mitchell, Jeffrey Gottfried, and Katerina Eva Matsa, "Facebook Top Source for Political News Among Millennials," *Pew Research Center*, June 1, 2015.
[20] See "Facebook Net Worth 2009–2020," Macrotrends, https://www.macrotrends.net/stocks/charts/FB/facebook/net-worth.
[21] See Wikipedia, s.v. "Facebook," last modified October 19, 2020, 15:49 UTC, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Facebook.
[22] This is one reason why we ought to patronize independent, noncorporate news outlets like National Public Radio or the Pacifica News Network.

ethics, supervising the proliferation of information to greater or lesser degrees. That's not the case with social media.

According to an MIT study in 2018 that looked at rumor cascades on Twitter between 2006 and 2017, about 126,000 rumors were spread by roughly three million people, and these falsehoods were tweeted more than 4.5 million times.[23] According to the study:

> False news reached more people than the truth; the top 1% of false news cascades diffused to between 1000 and 100,000 people, whereas the truth rarely diffused to more than 1000 people. Falsehood also diffused faster than the truth. The degree of novelty and the emotional reactions of recipients may be responsible for the differences observed… Falsehood diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information, and the effects were more pronounced for false political news…[24]

While more and more people, particularly millennials and youth, get their news from social media, the dissemination of true and accurate information is not a top priority for social media conglomerates like Facebook or Twitter. Connecting people into networks and followings, and facilitating shares is the priority—whether that share is true or false. The spiritual implications cannot be overlooked.

Speaking on information literacy in Islam, Justin Parrott states that while tools in our information age have their benefits, we have to be wary of their negative consequences and dangers.[25] Parrott reminds us that: "As Muslims, the verification of truth, source methodology, and the proper management of knowledge are essential components of our religion, which is why scholars, for example, went to

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[23] Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral, "The Spread of True and False News Online," *Science* 359, no. 6380 (March 2018): 1146–51.
[24] Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral, 1146–51.
[25] Justin Parrott, "Finding Truth in the Age of Fake News: Information Literacy in Islam," *Yaqeen*, December 12, 2019, https://yaqeeninstitute.org/justin-parrott/finding-truth-in-the-age-of-fake-news-information-literacy-in-islam/.

great lengths to authenticate what the Prophet *sallá Allāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam* really said." In this regard, we must distinguish credible sources from less credible or false ones. As Muslims, we face a moral obligation to investigate the source of information before believing it, let alone reacting to it or forwarding it.

But is that how social media works? Is that how we use it? The sheer pace at which we consume social media *cannot* allow time for due diligence towards knowledge and its sources.

Additionally there are other factors by which social media affects our 'sight.' Troll factories are workplaces of low-paid workers whose job is to proliferate web content—hundreds of thousands of posts—that influence people's opinions and flood web searches by topic. The story of the Russian troll factory that professionally produced pro-Kremlin propaganda during the last American presidential election became well known.[26] In this factory, dozens of workers worked twelve-hour shifts writing posts, replaced at the end of their shift by another set of workers. Their labor inundated social media with propaganda—false information and opinions—around the clock. On the American side, British political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica used data science to sway undecided voters toward a Ted Cruz victory in Iowa and Donald Trump's national victory.[27] They did so through massive Facebook advertising campaigns.

To illustrate the concept that targeted advertising causes mindset shift and behavioral change, let us consider a hypothetical user's typical scroll on their social media of choice. Let's suppose this user prefers Facebook, as she is older than most Twitter and Instagram users. Her typical scroll down the feed will include:

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[26] Jolie Myers and Monika Evstatieva, "Meet the Activist Who Uncovered the Russian Troll Factory Named in the Mueller Probe," All Things Considered, NPR, March 15, 2015, https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2018/03/15/594062887/some-russians-see-u-s-investigation-into-russian-election-meddling-as-a-soap-ope.

[27] See Karim Amer and Jehane Noujaim's 2019 documentary *The Great Hack*.

- Mundane caveats from friend's lives, such as vacations, meals, and hilarious parenting memes;
- Reports of deadly violence in the form either of news reports or actual footage of war, protests, or police brutality;
- Retail advertisements specific to this user's preferences; and
- Environmental justice content, including scientific or agricultural photos, scholarly articles, and editorials.

This content comprises our user's echo chamber. And if she were to scroll endlessly in either direction, older posts or newer posts, the scroll would never end—itself alarming. What the endless scroll enables is limitless possibilities for distraction and entertainment. What it disables is seeing reality outside her preferences, as well as quietude of the mind without which deep contemplation of our souls and remembrance of Allah the Exalted are not possible.

In reality, deadly unjust violence is nowhere near the same degree, qualitatively, as shopping or the cultural production of parenting-related comedy. Allah the Exalted says that whoever unjustly kills a soul, it's as if he killed all mankind.[28] To receive news that someone was unjustly murdered, or worse to *see footage* of a murder, should affect us spiritually with the severity as if someone had killed all mankind. Quite the opposite occurs for most users: the constant exposure to visuals of bodily violence—in movies, series, news, video games, etc.—desensitizes us to actual bodily violence.[29] Returning to our hypothetical user, let us delineate the relative values of the various parts of her social media consumption.

- Deadly unjust violence ought to command one's action with particular urgency, and ought to call to action;
- Environmental justice—and the miscarriage thereof—ought to move one's heart, command attention, and call to particularly urgent types of action;

[28] Qur'an 5:32.
[29] Brad J. Bushman and Craig A. Anderson, "Comfortably Numb: Desensitizing Effects of Violent Media on Helping Others," *Psychological Science* 20, no. 3 (2009). See also Nicholas L. Carnageya, Craig A. Anderson, and Brad J. Bushman, "The Effect of Video Game Violence on Physiological Desensitization to Real-Life Violence," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 43, no. 3 (2006): 489–96.

- The buying and selling of goods and their advertisement comprise business, and represent good *ḥalāl* income that is necessary for human flourishing; and
- Mundane caveats are a beautiful and necessary part of life, culture, and embellishments.

Allah the Exalted wants us to enjoy our share of this life in a permissible and beautiful way. But murder and environmental crisis on the one hand, and mundane caveats and retail advertisements on the other, cannot be equated. Social media distort this gap by placing all topics and events in a democratic horizontality. In the endless scroll, we consume them in the same way.

What occurs in our endless scroll—and turns our universe of values upside down—is that values get flattened out, and the natural hierarchy of good and evil becomes democratized. Computers and the internet are often credited with the democratization of information; but the dark side of that accomplishment is that hierarchical values become co-equals. Our user may "react" with a laughing emoji at a hilarious parenting meme; with an angry emoji at footage of an unarmed young Black man shot dead at close range by a police officer; and with a crying emoji at an article about how three billion North American birds have disappeared since 1970 (that's 29% of all birds on this continent!).[30] But the only 'reacting' our user is actually doing is clicking a button. She is neither laughing nor crying nor feeling indignant with another person. Moreover, users quickly and constantly switch between "feelings"—the events that occasioned those feelings have to be forgotten right away to make space for the next batch within the endless scroll.

Looking at the screen is not actually looking at the world. And this is the gravest misguidance that our screens afford us: we consider ourselves well-informed when

[30] Kenneth V. Rosenberg, Adriaan M. Dokter, Peter J. Blancher, John R. Sauer, Adam C. Smith, Paul A. Smith, Jessica C. Stanton, Arvind Panjabi, Laura Helft, Michael Parr, and Peter P. Marra, "Decline of the North American Avifauna," *Science* 366, no. 6461 (October 4, 2019): 120–24.

in reality we don't even know who or what is right next to us. Digitally performing personhood is an affront to both our full personhood *and* our moral accountability.

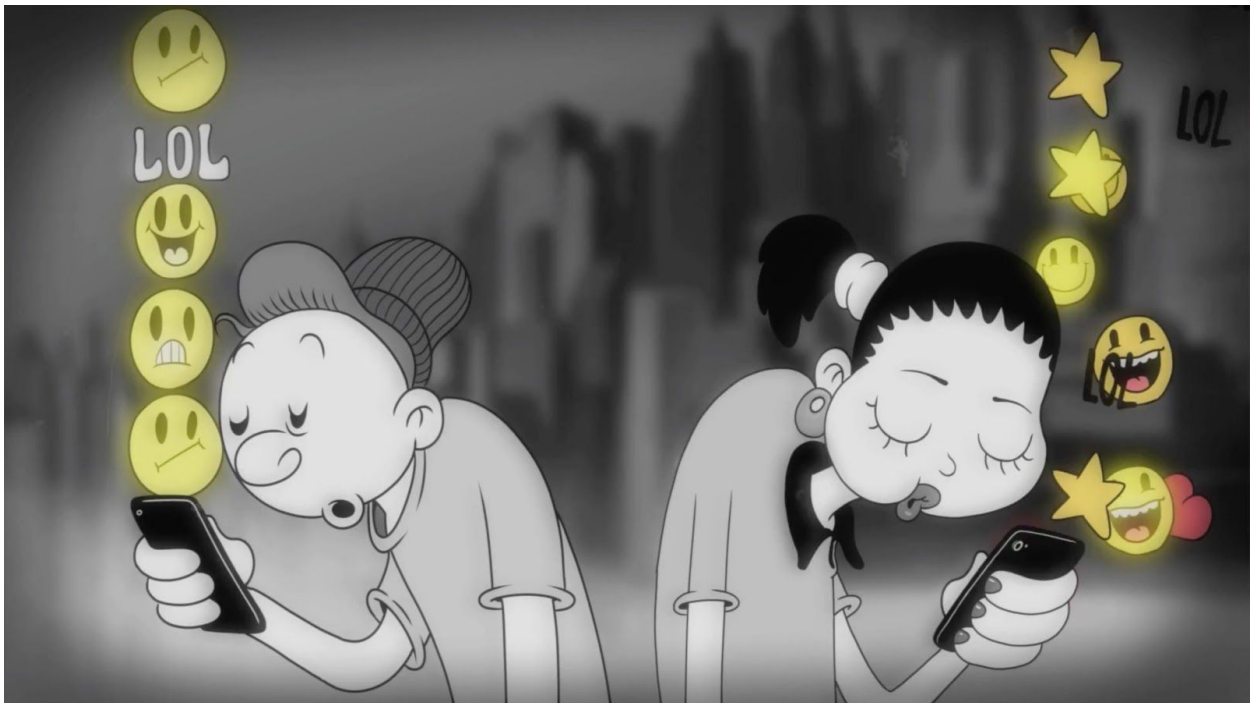

Figure 5. Still photograph from Moby and the Void Pacific Choir, "Are You Lost in the World Like Me?," October 2016.

Addiction

Internet addiction can be defined as "a compulsive behavior characterized by obsessive thoughts, tolerance, craving, and withdrawal that creates psychological, social, marital, and/or academic difficulties."[31] Environmentalist author Brian Clark Howard assembled various research findings on internet addiction in answering the question: are Facebook and internet addiction affecting our minds?[32]

[31] Chiungjung Huang, "Internet Addiction: Stability and Change," *European Journal of Psychology of Education* 25, no. 3 (2010): 345–61. Drawing on literature from Nichols and Nicki, 2004; Widyanto and McMurran, 2004; and Young, 2004.
[32] Brian Clark Howard, "Are Facebook and Internet Addictions Affecting Our Minds?" *National Geographic Society Newsroom*, November 2, 2012, https://blog.nationalgeographic.org/2012/11/02/are-facebook-and-internet-addictions-affecting-our-minds/.

Howard shows MIT Media's Judith Donath's findings on "notification abuse" among users, insofar as every "ding" represents social, sexual, or professional opportunity.[33] Answering the ding of a notification results in a hit of dopamine, and each hit recharges our addictive compulsion in a manner similar to crack, heroin, methamphetamines, and other abusive substances. "Cumulatively," she states, "the effect is potent and hard to resist."

According to the Recovery Village, a network of rehabilitation facilities in Florida, internet addiction can be of various types, pertaining to: sexual activity, information-seeking, social and romantic relationships, gaming, and net compulsions.[34] All of us may know people who are addicted to shopping or gambling online. Similarly we all have probably observed some of the signs and symptoms of internet addiction in ourselves or in our families: online activity eclipsing the importance of other activities; reaching for the internet to improve our mood; having to spend more time online to achieve the same pleasure; withdrawal; experiencing inner and outer conflict as a result of online activity; and relapsing back to our internet addiction after keeping away for some time.

The negative effects of internet addiction can reach the point where we are violating the rights our bodies have over us: weight gain; stiff or numb limbs; back and shoulder pain; blurry or strained vision; carpal tunnel syndrome; etc. Sleep apnea, as NPR reported in 2019, can result from electronic device usage, particularly in the evening and late night.[35] The LED lights in our phones, tablets and laptops mimic the afternoon sun wavelength, thereby sending a message to our brains that several hours of wakefulness remain before we can go to sleep. Using devices at night leads therefore to trouble sleeping. This affects adults, but the deleterious effects of screen addiction are compounded in our children.

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[33] Howard.
[34] Camille Renzoni, "Internet Addiction," The Recovery Village, October 28, 2019, https://www.therecoveryvillage.com/process-addiction/internet-addiction/#gref.
[35] Joe Palca, "TV and Smart Phones May Hamper a Good Night's Sleep," Talk of the Nation, NPR, March 11, 2011, https://www.npr.org/2011/03/11/134459354/TV-And-Smart-Phones-May-Hamper-A-Good-Nights-Sleep.

The American Academy of Pediatrics published a technical report in 2016 evaluating the effects of digital media consumption in children and adolescents, comparing it to the effects of television and radio media on youth in previous decades.[36] The report details several benefits and risks of digital media on children and adolescents. Benefits include: early learning, exposure to new ideas and knowledge; increased opportunities for social contact and support; and new opportunities to access health promotion messages and information. Risks include: negative health effects on sleep, attention, and learning; a higher incidence of obesity and depression; exposure to inaccurate, inappropriate, or unsafe content and contacts; and compromised privacy and confidentiality. Parents, teachers and caretakers must weigh the positive and negative effects of digital media and create responsible usage plans accordingly, taking full account of the alarming aspects.

Whereas traditional media were externally produced—in a film studio, TV network, or editorial staff—and broadcast to an audience for passive viewing, listening or reading, new digital media create social and interactive spaces in which users actively consume and create content. This evolving integration is blurring the boundaries between the external and internal environment, allowing children to "inhabit" digital media in increasingly pervasive ways, as in multiplayer online games. Over time, such changes have led to exponential increases in screen time for children and adolescents, and at younger ages: in 1970, children typically began watching television at four years of age. Today, children begin interacting with digital media at four *months*. In 2011, 52% of children aged 0-8 had access to a mobile device. By 2013, this number had increased to 75%.[37]

Another study in 2015 showed that 96.6% of 0-4 year-olds had used mobile devices, and 75% owned their own device.[38] The study also showed that most

[36] Yolanda (Linda) Reid Chassiakos, Jenny Radesky, Dimitri Christakis, Megan A. Moreno, Corinn Cross, and Council on Communications and Media, "Children and Adolescents and Digital Media," *American Academy of Pediatrics* 138, no. 5 (November 2016).
[37] Chassiakos et al.
[38] Council on Communications and Media, "Media and Young Minds: A Policy Statement," American Academy of Pediatrics, 2016.

two-year olds used mobile devices on a *daily basis* and that 92% of one-year olds had already used one. In 2016, about 75% of teenagers owned a smartphone, 24% of adolescents described themselves as "constantly connected," and 50% reported feeling "addicted" to their phones.

One study finds that 91% of American teenagers are nearly *constantly connected* to the internet via their smartphones.[39] Earlier Pew data in 2012 reported that teenagers between 14 and 17 sent an average of 100 texts each day, a number that did not include WhatsApp or Messenger communication.[40] In addition to phones, there are gaming devices. An estimated 4 out of 5 households own a video game device. But what are the effects of gamification on a developing psyche? How do games in which you shoot to kill an "enemy" whose actual identity and status is unknown and irrelevant, and in which you are instantly reincarnated after *being killed*, affect a young person's understanding of life, death, war, the 'other,' and moral obligation? Children are also targeted by advertisements, often without adult supervision (as mentioned earlier, social media is consumer-focused).

Making conscious efforts to abstain from the overconsumption of digital media—as individuals, families and communities, through various norm-altering initiatives—can help pave the way for more authentic fulfillment of our full personhood and moral accountability vis-à-vis digital technologies.

Our mutual rights

Two aspects of smartphones and social media that relate to our mutual rights over one another as human beings are social alienation and the global supply chain.

[39] Pew research in 2015 reported that 71% of 13–17 year olds were Facebook users. Furthermore, 52% used Instagram, 41% used Snapchat, 33% used Twitter, 33% used Google+, 24% used Vine, 14% used Tumblr, and 11% used other social media. See Amanda Lenhart, "Mobile Access Shifts Social Media Use and Other Online Activities," Pew Research Center, April 9, 2015, https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2015/04/09/mobile-access-shifts-social-media-use-and-other-online-activities/ .

[40] "What Teens Do with Their Phones," Pew Research Center, March 19, 2012, https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2012/03/19/what-teens-do-with-their-phones/.

When the internet first started in 2000, web platforms provided the exchange of communication for community-bound initiatives.[41] In 2020, however, we have ample evidence that online platforms don't just *facilitate* networked activities, they *constitute* social practices. In other words, social media and the internet don't just provide a neutral tool for communication and connectivity; they actually transform *how* people interact. Of course, technologies and media have *always and everywhere* followed broader developments in human societies and economies of meaning, transforming those same forces. That is not the research question at hand.

The problem we must grapple with is this: what is the intellectual ethic of our smart technology and social media? I borrow the term "intellectual ethic" from Nicholas Carr, who acknowledges that while every technology is an expression of human will, nonetheless our technologies can be divided into four categories based on how they supplement or amplify our innate capacities.[42] These are: those technologies that extend our physical strength, dexterity or resilience, such as the plow, needle, and fighter jet; those that increase the sensitivity of our senses, such as the microscope, amplifier, and stethoscope; those that modify nature to suit our needs or wants, such as the reservoir, birth control pill, and genetically modified corn; and those that extend our capacity to generate and share knowledge, such as the map, clock, abacus, and typewriter.

This last category, of intellectual technology, is the one that presently concerns us. Carr says that every intellectual technology embodies an intellectual ethic, a set of assumptions about how the human mind works or should work.[43] While neither the inventor of the technology nor its users may be aware of this ethic—they are more concerned with the technology's practical benefit—it is ultimately the intellectual ethic that has the most profound effect on us. Carr's thesis, argued compellingly and with ample evidence from neuroscientific studies pertaining to the plasticity of our brains as well as historical evidence, is that the internet is reducing and making

[41] Van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity*.
[42] Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010). I especially thank Imam Zaid Shakir for recommending this book to me.
[43] Carr, 44–45.

more shallow our capacity for deep reading and deep reflection. Our brains are being rewired to take information in short bursts and constantly shift from piece to piece. Harvard historian Abby Smith Rumsey similarly cautions that digital memory is drowning us in *a data deluge*, thereby disabling us from learning or developing strong reusable memories.[44] "We fail to build the vast vital repertoire of knowledge and experience that may be of use to us in the future," she states.[45] After all, data is not knowledge, and data storage is not memory.[46]

For the purpose of this paper, I focus attention on how excessive device time not only depletes our ability to think deeply and form a critical repertoire of memory, but also prevents us from enjoying solitude and experiencing empathy toward others. MIT Professor Sherry Turkle has argued that our technological devices are changing who we are so that we can no longer relate to one another or to ourselves.[47] Our capacity for self-reflection has been severely injured. Increasingly we are cleaning up the messy reality of real relationships with the distance and control that technology affords: she states, "we get to present the self we want to be, edit, retouch, delete."[48] We pretend empathy as we expect more from technology and less from one another, since technology provides the illusion of companionship, without the demands of a real friendship. Turkle states:

> These days, those phones in our pockets are changing our minds and hearts because they offer us three gratifying fantasies. One, that we can put our attention wherever we want it to be; two, that we will always be heard; and three, that we will never have to be alone. And that third idea, that we will never have to be alone, is central to changing our psyches. Because the moment that people are alone, even for a few seconds, they become anxious, they panic, they fidget, they reach for a device. Just think of people at a

[44] Abby Smith Rumsey, *When We Are No More: How Digital Memory Is Shaping Our Future* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2016).
[45] Rumsey.
[46] Rumsey, 12.
[47] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).
[48] Sherry Turkle, "Connected but Alone?," TED talk, February 2012, https://www.ted.com/talks/sherry_turkle_connected_but_alone?language=en.

> checkout line or at a red light. Being alone feels like a problem that needs to be solved. And so people try to solve it by connecting. But here, connection is more like a symptom than a cure. It expresses, but it doesn't solve, an underlying problem. But more than a symptom, constant connection is changing the way people think of themselves. It's shaping a new way of being.[49]

Smartphones and social media diminish our capacity to be at peace whilst alone, something that detracts from the stillness of the heart (to be discussed below). The other major problem that smart technology and social media pose for our fulfillment of mutual rights lies in the global supply chain.

At every stage in the life cycle of electronic devices, the hardware each of us need to consume the internet, we find miscarriage in the fulfillment of our mutual rights. In the extraction phase, when natural resources are mined and extracted for cell phones, documentation reveals forced labor in squalid conditions in the mine shafts of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The Washington, DC-based NGO *Free the Slaves* documented 866 cases of slavery in South Kivu province in 2013; 23% of these were children.[50] Sadly there is forced labor in other mineral reserves around the world as well. The DRC is specifically linked to technology as in 2008, it alone supplied *21%* of the world's coltan, which fulfills the global demand for iPads, Samsungs, and HP laptops. Congolese children and adults in the mine shafts are sometimes put to work at gunpoint. George Monbiot of *The Guardian* asks: "Are the components (of my next phone) soaked in the blood of people from the eastern DRC?"

In the production phase of the products economy the situation is as grim, if not more. Foxconn is a Taiwanese electronics manufacturer, the largest in the world. Since 2001, Foxconn has been producing Apple products. Within a decade of the arrangement, 60-70% of Foxconn's revenue came from producing for Apple. With

[49] Turkle, "Connected but Alone?"
[50] Jack Linchuan Qiu, *Goodbye iSlave: A Manifesto for Digital Abolition* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 21–22.

a revenue in 2017 of $4.706 trillion and a workforce of 803,000, Foxconn has colluded with local municipal governments, recruiting agencies, and vocational schools to create abnormal market conditions, limiting labor choices and funneling workers into their factories. Foxconn's labor concentrates in South China. Migrating from the rural hinterlands, workers are cut off from families and social support networks.[51]

Investigation by a Chinese labor NGO revealed that "During a survey of 1,736 Foxconn workers conducted in nine cities and twelve facilities during summer 2010, 16.4 percent reported being subject to physical penalty by guards, or managers using guards to threaten them; 38.1 percent had experiences of being detained by guards or managers; 54.6 percent felt angry about the way they were managed."[52] In 2014, the BBC investigated Foxconn and Pegatron (another Taiwanese manufacturer of Apple products) and found that workers are forced to work exhaustingly long hours. The labor NGO found that "[i]n the busy season of 2014, assembly-line workers were found to have performed 140 hours of overtime work each month, several months in a row, sometimes up to 152 hours in the most hectic month," a number four times the legal cap.[53] It was also in the first decade of Foxconn's contract with Apple that fifteen young workers aged 17-28 jumped or fell to their death.[54] If a Foxconn worker dials the police, her call is directed instead to Foxconn security. Local governments don't exercise jurisdiction in Foxconn factories.[55]

The question is: what is our moral obligation here? Gai Eaton states:

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[51] Qiu, 22–26. Making historical comparison across various iterations of human slavery, Qiu looks at sugar during the transatlantic slave trade and the global demand for technological devices today, and finds that social atomization and the deliberate shaping of wants were necessary conditions for the enslavement of both the workers and the consumers. Just as sugar consumption in Britain increased exponentially between the 1600s and 1900s, and sugar vendors succeeded in creating the demand for sugar by persuading consumers to maximize personal choice through "desocialized eating" (i.e., eating in private), so too has screen time consumption increased exponentially in the last two decades, and electronics vendors have succeeded in creating the demand for personal electronic devices by persuading consumers to maximize personal choice through "desocialized" connections and activities.
[52] Qiu, 61.
[53] Qiu 58.
[54] Qiu, 55–57. This was in the first five months of 2010.
[55] Qiu, 61.

> Of all the changes that have taken place in the human condition over the past hundred years none is more significant than the increasing difficulty we now have in tracing acts to their owners… The State, the society or the organization acts. 'They' act. But 'they' cannot be loved or blamed or touched. The need to attribute acts to men or women like ourselves finds no satisfaction. It has become essential to redefine the idea of human responsibility in relation to a society of jobholders and civil servants, a world in which the majority of men are absorbed into vast collectivities and appear to have as little personal stake in their own actions as the slaves and bondmen of other times.[56]

How ought we to qualify or limit our social media and smartphone consumption within what David Harvey calls *the web of life*?[57] This term refers to how different groups embed their sociality within an evolving socio-ecological system amidst processes of capital accumulation, social struggle, and environmental transformation. According to Harvey it is incorrect to consider forces (i.e., 'capital') in the abstract 'outside' of daily life when such forces are concretely destructive to the environment and workers. Despite neo-liberal and globalization promises, convergence in well-being has not occurred. Geographical and social inequalities have only increased in recent decades, with environmental degradations and social dislocations distributing unevenly. Let us consider our moral obligation here by analogy to Islamic maxims concerning animal slaughter: if our meat isn't *halal* for consumption if the animal was taunted, terrified, or tortured prior to slaughter, how immoral is our ownership of technological gadgets if the human workers are terrified and tortured during extraction and production? Are we complicit in the conditions of Congolese mine shafts and South Chinese factories and, if so, to what extent? *What ought we to do?*

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[56] Eaton, *King of the Castle*, 24.
[57] David Harvey, *Spaces of Neoliberalization: Towards a Theory of Uneven Geographical Development* (Heidelberg: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2005), 60–68.

Responsibility to the Earth and her creatures

Do you have a drawer or box at home full of obsolete power cords and chargers? Have you ever thrown away a computer monitor, laptop, or cell phone? A 2013 CNN report highlights United Nations intel identifying China as the largest e-waste dumping site in the world, receiving about 70% of global electronic waste.[58] Much of this arrives illegally, circumventing UN conventions prohibiting the export of e-waste from the developed world. Guiyu is a city in China's main manufacturing zone whose entire economy consists in sifting through and dismantling electronic garbage to collect reusable parts. The cost to human dignity is obvious, but e-waste recycling in Guiyu also costs the environment. The UN has called it an environmental calamity. Watson reports:

> [M]uch of the toxic pollution comes from burning circuit boards, plastic and copper wires, or washing them with hydrochloric acid to recover valuable metals like copper and steel. In doing so, workshops contaminate workers and the environment with toxic heavy metals like lead, beryllium and cadmium, while also releasing hydrocarbon ashes into the air, water and soil.[59]

Unsurprisingly Giuyu's children have above-average lead levels in their blood, which can stunt neuro-development.[60] A Greenpeace report indicated that the dismantling of flat screens releases mercury (a highly toxic metal), and that incinerating and landfilling may release mercury in a way that leads to bioaccumulation and biomagnification up the food chain, as in fish. According to the *Story of Electronics*, electronics designers make them hard to upgrade, easy to break, and impractical to repair, resulting in 25 million tons of e-waste annually.[61]

Closer to home, the environmental costs of our internet addictions are somewhat better disguised. Most people turn to online shopping for convenience. It saves

[58] Ivan Watson, "China: The Electronic Wastebasket of the World," CNN, May 30, 2013, https://www.cnn.com/2013/05/30/world/asia/china-electronic-waste-e-waste/index.html.
[59] Watson.
[60] Watson.
[61] See "The Story of Electronics," The Story of Stuff Project, https://storyofstuff.org/movies/story-of-electronics/.

time and affords more variety at one's fingertips than a brick-and-mortar store. Samanth Subramanian points out that the home delivery of goods has soared in the past decade.[62] In New York City there were fewer than 360,000 daily deliveries in 2009, and in 2019 that number exceeded 1.5 million. However, this convenience has a terrible hidden cost. The packaging of home-delivered products now makes up 30% of annual solid garbage. The cardboard alone costs 1 billion trees, and it's only growing. The $2.9 trillion in global online sales is predicted to more than double in the next five years. Environmental and human costs are always inextricably linked. As stores let workers go to keep pace with online revenue, the amount of 'flexible labor' that can be coerced into poor working conditions can also be expected to increase.

Another major environmental impact of digitization is found in the myth of the intangible cloud. In his work on the intersections of film, apocalyptic themes, and the digital era, Hunter Vaughan states: "We increasingly exist 'on the cloud,' shelving our thoughts, memories, art, and records (musical, historical, and personal) in a web of virtual archives that is immediately accessible but simultaneously has the illusion of intangibility… server farms and similar technologies that are at once seemingly virtual and remote but in actuality are very much real and material and hold our information at the cost of vast natural resource use and environmental disruption."[63]

To give a rather ironic concrete example, the 2009 James Cameron film *Avatar* seems to champion environmental justice as well as anti-colonial movements. But despite the film's eco-friendly message, there is an insidious backdrop. In real life, as Mark Bartlett states: "each minute of Avatar's 162 minutes occupies 17.28 gigabytes of storage and required a 10,000 square foot render farm with 4000 servers using one of the most powerful supercomputers in existence and 900

[62] Samanth Subramanian, "How Our Home Delivery Habit Reshaped the World," *Guardian*, November 21, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/nov/21/how-our-home-delivery-habit-reshaped-the-world.
[63] Hunter Vaughan, *Apocalypse Tomorrow: The Myth of Earth's End in the Digital Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 126.

people to produce."[64] In the last month of the movie's production, 40,000 processors were handling 7-8 gigabytes of data per second, running 24 hours per day![65] Our screen time and internet usage, whether in its hardware or its virtual storage dimensions, is neither free nor affordable. It only appears thus because the costs are externalized and framed out of our view.

Conclusion: The interior space in each of us

Thus far I have suggested that over-reliance and addictive behavior toward social media and smartphones triggers moral contradictions within ourselves. Some of these dilemmas are easily observable, such as the physical side-effects of internet addiction. Others are hidden costs, such as environmental costs exported across the globe, gross violations inflicted on the underclass of workers who mine and factory-produce our gadgets, and the social alienation, psychological distortions and tunnel-vision (or echo chamber) produced by internet and social media addiction. These moral dilemmas problematize and injure the full exercise of our personhood, where personhood here refers to our *ʿubūdīyah* before Allah and possession of the sacred trust. This is an ethical discussion of good and harm, not a jurisprudential one of lawful and prohibited. By enumerating the harms to our moral accountability entrenched in intimacy with social media and smartphones, my hope is to shift the reader's perspective on *how* to approach these tools. I don't want us all to become paralyzed with guilt or cast our phones into a modern-day bonfire of the vanities; I want us to fall out of love with these things.

The final aspect to be examined of full personhood and moral accountability in relation to smartphones and social media is the interior space in each of us. Particularly two dimensions: privacy and stillness. Many do not experience privacy concerns, as witnessed by low levels of caution and discretion in bringing smart tvs, laptops, smartphones, and Apple watches into our homes and families, often

[64] Quoted in Vaughan, 156.
[65] Vaughan, 161.

allowing them a literal seat at the table. We have no reason to believe that our devices don't transmit windows of personal information from our homes and relationships to some outside agent—whether state, market, or both. Already our locations, photographs, financial transactions, emotional bonds, preferences of every type, and searches are archived in some unknown location, the data used—or not—for some unknown purpose. We should not add to the massive data-collection by increasingly humanizing our technology and becoming more intimate with it. Reports in the past two years claim that Alexa spies on consumers,[66] cell phones send and receive data throughout the night to various third parties,[67] and Mac users grow susceptible to their microphones and cameras being hijacked via the Zoom app.[68] We ask Allah the Exalted to protect us from invasions of our God-given right to privacy. But let us also remember to tie our camels.

With regard to stillness, in order for us to fill ourselves with the testimony that there is no god but Allah and Muhammad is His slave and messenger, we have to empty ourselves of what may block it. A pond of water is the perfect medium for reflecting and containing a resplendent moon, but only when it is perfectly still and undisturbed. In this analogy, the pond is one's heart and the resplendent moon is the light of Allah's guidance and nearness, the sweet result of *dhikr* Allah.

Khushūʿ, or *ṭumaʾnīnah* is that stillness you experience when you stop searching and wandering. Of Allah's signs is that you see the earth in a state of *khushūʿ* and then the rainfall descends upon it causing it to stir and sprout. *Khushūʿ* in ritual prayer and in the remembrance of Allah is a goal sought by all believers. This is a faculty that must be cultivated, and our spiritual teachers are able to guide us in the

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[66] Geoffrey A. Fowler, "Alexa Has Been Eavesdropping on You This Whole Time," *Washington Post*, May 6, 2019.
[67] Geoffrey A. Fowler, "It's the Middle of the Night. Do You Know Who Your iPhone is Talking To?," *Washington Post*, May 28, 2019.
[68] Katie O'Flaherty, "Zoom Users Beware: Here's How a Flaw Allows Attackers to Take Over Your Mac Microphone and Webcam," *Forbes*, April 1, 2020. This is in addition to the privacy that users already voluntarily give up by irrecoverably uploading versions of their lives to the internet. This is what Valkenburg and Piotrowski refer to as the "privacy paradox." Social media leads to decreased informational privacy for users, but increased *psychological privacy*: users control when, why, how, and what they express about themselves, and to whom. See Patti M. Valkenburg and Jessica Taylor Piotrowski, *Plugged In: How Media Attract and Affect Youth* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 223.

process. What I hope to have imparted in this paper is that there are concrete and abstract ways—structural as well as psychological—that technological and social media addictions, the framing of the world that renders our sight decontextualized and our understanding atrophied, and our contribution to murderous global production cycles through our preferences and purchases of what Abdal Hakim Murad calls the modern world's *brilliant series of distractions*[69]—that all these habits associated with our digital consumption strip away vital pieces of our personhood and affront our moral accountability. As Gai Eaton stated, to live in:

> … the kind of environment in which a large part of humanity lives today—the environment created by technology at the service of immediate, short-term needs… an entirely man-made environment, in the midst of a clutter of our own products, is to be isolated in a narrow world which gives no play to the capacity we have for reaching out to what lies beyond the human realm as such… It offers only a setting in which ceaseless and, for the most part, aimless activity can take place. There is nothing in common between, on the one hand, the stupor produced by an environment which offers no nourishment and, on the other, that 'sleep of the senses' induced by a beauty which melts the barriers between one world and another—or by such concentration of attention upon what lies beyond the immediate grasp of the senses that perceived reality becomes, not blurred, but transparent. For beauty to penetrate or for concentration to become stabilized, time and stillness are necessary.[70]

Caution and wariness should be our approach to social media and smartphones. We must restrain these technologies in order to improve our physical and spiritual sight, liberate ourselves from internet addiction, improve the fulfillment of our mutual rights on one another and to the Earth, and quiet the ripples that smart technology sends through the water in our hearts, disturbing its stillness. God willing, that can lead us to cultivate *khushūʿ* within our hearts so that we can hope to be rightly guided. And Allah knows best.

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[69] Abdal Hakim Murad, "Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad – Crisis of Modern Consciousness," A Karim Omar, YouTube video, January 20, 2012, http://youtu.be/RWOKaOb33K4.
[70] Eaton, *King of the Castle*, 26–27.