Abstract
Whereas Jacques Ellul’s work on the role of myth in propaganda about the technological society has been largely overlooked, it presents an effective means to analyse the ways in which the information society is symbolically constructed. The French thinker’s examination of mid-twentieth-century propaganda has much relevance in studying current rhetoric about the ‘information revolution’, ‘global information infrastructure’ and ‘knowledge-based society’. Not only did he prove prophetic in his description of the increasing intensification of technique in various aspects of life, but also his work offers significant insight into the ways the integrally capitalist vision of ‘global information society’ is being publicized around the world. The promotion of new media on a transnational scale by government, industry and media can be usefully studied within a myth-based framework. Unlike other writers on myth and communication Ellul underlined the religious roots of myth, therefore drawing attention to the ancient origins of contemporary notions. He suggested that ideology in itself was not able to mobilize individuals, but was dependent on the psychological/spiritual force of myth to move people to action. Propagandists use networks of various myths, which operate interactively with each other to reinforce prevailing ideologies. This article uses a set of technological myths identified by Ellul (science, history, nation, work, happiness, youth and the hero) to show how they can be used in developing a framework to analyse and challenge current propaganda about information society. Such applications of the French sociologist’s work on myth, propaganda and technological society will encourage the broadening of scholarly activity beyond the strictly positivist confines of dominant social science.

Keywords
Jacques Ellul, myth, technology, information society, propaganda, utopia

The views of Jacques Ellul on propaganda and myth have significant potential for understanding the ideological promotion of information society in the present.
While he is often cited on issues of technology and globalization, Ellul’s unique observations on the role of myth in technological society reside in general obscurity. The references to him by political economists are usually in the context of the autonomy of technique, sociologists generally talk about his work on alienation, political scientists about the role of the state in technological society, communication scholars about propaganda, and theologians about morality. Studies of myth in contemporary life have also generally failed to draw from Ellul’s insights on this topic. He contextualized, within the twentieth century, the age-old nature of myth as a basis for providing meaning. The French sociologist presented a loose network of myths that can usefully serve as frameworks for analysing the manners in which technology is conceptualized and promoted presently. His passionate exploration of propaganda in technological society demonstrated the ways in which technique is presented as a means to attaining utopia, akin to the relationship between religious ritual and paradise.

Whereas this sociologist is most well known in scholarly circles for *The Technological Society* (*La Technique ou l’enjeu du siècle* 1954) and *Propaganda* (*Propagandes* 1962), a large proportion of his other work deals with theology and ethics. He was primarily concerned with the issue of maintaining moral values in contemporary civilization. *The Technological Society* and *Propaganda*, both works of social philosophy, reflect his concern about the spiritual condition of human beings in the twentieth century.

A brief scan of Ellul’s life helps put into context his particular intellectual approach to technological society. He was born in Bordeaux on 6 January 1912. In his long and varied career he was a member of the French Communist Party during the mid-1930s, a fighter for the French Resistance during World War II, the Deputy Mayor of Bordeaux between 1944 and 1947, and a professor at Bordeaux University’s law school and its institute of political studies later in life. By the time he died in 1994 he had published forty-three books and numerous articles.

This thinker’s concern with the spiritual bases of life is noteworthy considering that he found religion relatively late in life, at the age of twenty-two. His faith evolved out of the Death of God movement and the response of the neo-orthodox theologians Bultmann, Barth, Niebuhr and Tillich. Ellul’s active commitment to Christianity led to membership in the National Council of the Reformed Church in France. He was also a consultant to the Ecumenical World Council of Churches from 1947 to 1953. However, his ecumenism did not extend far beyond Christianity. Much of his corpus is overtly Christian, but a few of his works including *The Technological Society* and *Propaganda* adopt an approach that can be described as spiritual humanism. In the translator’s introduction to
The Technological Society

John Wilkinson notes that Ellul sought to bear witness, in the Christian sense, ‘to testify to the truth of both worlds and thereby to affirm his freedom through the revolutionary nature of his religion’ (Ellul 1964: xx).

**CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE**

Ellul’s work is becoming increasingly relevant in light of the growing interest in exploring the manner in which information society is symbolically constructed. This article deals specifically with the French sociologist’s discussions of the use of myth by the proponents of technological society and will seek to extend his mode of analysis. Quite distinct from the recent cultural, sociological, economic, political, political economic and philosophic examinations of technology, there is a growing body of literature that examines it from perspectives of myth, spirituality, religion and ethics. Apart from those critics of technological society who have used the notion of ‘myth as falsehood’ (e.g. Smith 1982), a significant number have explored the concept of myth as a mode of conceptualizing the world. They have generally attempted to demonstrate the manipulation of myth to promote the ideological purposes of technological interests.

There is a range of approaches among scholars who have discussed spirituality and religion to describe or critique the relationship of human beings with technology. Rushkoff (1994) and Kurzweil (1999) foretell the merging of the soul and the silicon chip. Davis (1998), Stefk (1996) and Dery (1996) write about the ‘technomystical impulses’ of New Age ‘technopagans’ who reassert the ascendency of the spiritual in the face of post-Enlightenment materialism. However, Wertheim (1999) challenges the spiritualizing of technology and argues that it cannot support religious world-views. Noble (1997) suggests that the millenarianist notions of technological development blind us to our real and urgent needs, and he urges that we disabuse ourselves of the ‘religion of technology’. In another vein, Hopper (1991) suggests that the substitution of a humanly constructed future for an other-worldly one has created disillusionment which continual technical innovation seeks to deflect. In this he draws from the arguments of Christian theologians such as Tillich (1988), who criticized the moral and ethical ambiguity of technological civilization. Sardar (1996) echoes this thought in his critique of western materialism manifested in cyberspace. Mowlana (1996) finds that the information society and Islamic community paradigms have philosophic and strategic conflicts in the conceptualization of human relationships. And Pannikar’s (1984) Buddhism-inspired analysis of western technology suggests that the machine enhances power but diminishes freedom. It is freedom that Ellul sought to reassert in the face of technique.
The Technological Society and Propaganda were written within the broad context of mass society, which was the subject of numerous treatises in the early and mid-twentieth century. However, Ellul’s work was quite distinct from others such as the Chicago or the Frankfurt School in his particular blending of Marxist and theological thought, which sought to develop a critique of the fundamental sociological engines of contemporary society. He went beyond a mere examination of technology to present an analysis of the basic mode of technique, which he defined as ‘the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity’ (1964: xxv). Technique is the overarching feature of contemporary western civilization, according to Ellul; it describes not only the modalities of technology but also the nature of present-day social, political and economic organization. The rationalism, functionalism and secularity engendered by the Enlightenment shape technique. It privileges decontextualized, quantitative measures and forms of analysis over qualitative ones, and has led to the erosion of moral values and to the mechanization of traditional rhythms of life. Political and commercial propaganda (advertising) has taken the place of the debate of ideas.

Ellul held that technique has promoted the atomization of society and the reciprocal concentration of power in the nation-state. Whereas the status of the individual has been elevated vis-à-vis the group, the human being has paradoxically lost autonomy to technique. She has become alienated by living in societal conditions that are bereft of meaning. While Ellul borrowed from Marx, he criticized him for embracing technique as a weapon against the bourgeoisie, thus promoting subservience to the greater evil. But rather than seeking to destroy technique, the former’s quest was to enable human beings transcend technological determinism. He hoped that his readers would begin to regain a sense of responsibility and freedom from technique by merely becoming conscious of the control it has over their lives (1964: xxxiii).

In this lies one of the major problems with Ellul’s work. Struggle against technique-dominated society takes place at the personal level in Ellul’s scenario, despite the admission that ‘an uncommon spiritual force or psychological education is necessary to resist its pressures’ (1964: 377). The absence of structural strategies with which to confront technique may perhaps be an extension of his theological existentialism, says Mowlana, but in placing ‘the onus of choice and salvation on the individual’ he leaves us ‘intelligently unhappy’ (1997: 10). And what appears to make the individual’s task even more daunting is that technique has sought to colonize even his spiritual endeavours (1997: 415–27). This appears to lead to a dead end – no resolution seems possible; we are only made aware of the problem.
Ellul does not appear to provide a revolutionary way of overcoming the hegemony of technique. The value of his unique contribution, however, is to be found in his extensive exposition of the use of deep myth for ideological purposes. His examination of the ways in which myth was used in the mid-twentieth century has much resonance in the study of contemporary rhetoric about the ‘information revolution’, ‘global information infrastructure’ and ‘knowledge-based society’. The promotion of new media on a transnational scale by government, industry and media can be usefully studied within the conceptual framework put forward by Ellul. Not only did he prove prophetic in his description of the increasing intensification of technique in various aspects of life, his examination of propaganda in technological society offers significant insight into the ways the integrally capitalist vision of ‘global information society’ is being publicized around the world.

The leaders of industrialized countries speak in glowing (almost religious) terms about the potential of the Internet to create prosperity for all. Al Gore was among the earliest to present a vision of universal access to health care, university education, and employment through a ‘National Information Infrastructure’ (Government of USA 1993). At the July 2000 Group of Eight summit in Tokyo, one of whose main agenda items was to deal with the enormous debt problems of the poorest countries on the planet, the ‘world leaders’ magnanimously offered – in the fashion of Marie Antoinette – the dream of development through global electronic networking.

Indeed, we are in the midst of a worldwide effort, organized by many different companies and governments in many different ways, to make computer communication a transcendent spectacle, the latest iteration in [David] Nye’s . . . ‘technological sublime’. Everything from advertising to trade shows, from demonstration projects to conferences, speaks of a campaign to market the magic, to surround computer communication with power, speed, and the promise of freedom.

(Mosco 1998: 61)

Industry giants such as Microsoft, Cisco Systems and Nortel promote the view that one merely has to ‘build and they will come’; in this they continue to ignore the rapidly growing disparities between those who are able to use information technology for their benefit and those who are not (United Nations Development Programme 1999). The mass media have become panegyrist to the ‘new economy’, whose CEOs are made out to be superstars among celebrities. *Wired* magazine predicts a future in which ‘digital citizens’ or ‘netizens’ will ensure greater democracy and the World Wide Web will become the index for all human knowledge.
The new media are viewed as being the answer to humanity’s problems; they will create the perfect society. Viewing technical innovations in this manner is not new, as Marvin (1988) has demonstrated. Utopic visions have long accompanied technological evolution. ‘Utopia’ was the imaginary island envisioned by Thomas More in the 1500s. Its inhabitants had created an earthly paradise by adhering to a pious life and a communal spirit as well as to technical pursuit. In the following centuries, the Enlightenment gave rise to the notion of utopia that could be attained through continual technological and social development. Bury noted in his landmark study about the idea of human progress that at its basis it is a theory which involves a synthesis of the past and a prophecy of the future. It is based on an interpretation of history which regards men as slowly advancing . . . in a definite and desirable direction, and infers that this progress will continue indefinitely. . . . It implies that . . . a condition of general happiness will ultimately be enjoyed, which will justify the whole process of civilization.

(1920: 5)

The idea of progress views continual technological developments leading to increasing comforts, the elimination of disease and the eradication of poverty, i.e. heaven on earth. Even though this was mainly a secular notion, Bury suggested that it drew inspiration from the linear conception of history in dominant Christian discourse. After the expulsion of Adam from the Garden of Eden his descendants had been offered redemption at a particular moment in time by Christ, who would return sometime in the future to lead the faithful back to paradise after ruling on earth for the period of a millennium.

The utopic vision of progress is characterized by a millennialism that conceives of a progressive movement towards ultimate fulfilment. Whereas religion offers the individual the dream of paradise, she is promised material comforts in an earthly utopia in the secular domain. The means of progress for the righteous is good deeds and correctly performed ritual, while for the adherents of the technological world-view it is hard work and the proper use of technology. Contemporary propaganda implies that technological improvements within information society will ultimately lead to the arrival of the perfect state in which all desires of consumers will be fulfilled. Wertheim notes that many characterizations of the Internet are drawn from biblical descriptions of heaven (1999: 256–61).

Most cultures seem to make sense of their temporal existence in terms of the ultimate end of their collective existence. The narrative themes of end-times and of a messiah-like figure are pre-biblical and are to be found in many religions (Thompson 1996: 3–16). Utopic dreams appear to be integral to universal human
myth. Even though the particular idea of progress is only a few hundred years old, it fits into ancient ways of thinking. In this, the age-old millennial myth is integral to contemporary discourse about information society (Karim 2001).

**MYTH**

In Greek, the word for ‘myth’ denotes ‘narrative’. The limited scope of this article does not allow for elaboration upon the numerous views on the nature of myth. In accordance with Ellul’s use of the term, this essay views myths as providing frameworks for various sets of meaning – they help make sense of what we experience. A key issue that I would like to address is whether myth is historically determined or whether it has essential, unchanging and universal characteristics. The mythological lores of various peoples are indeed shaped by their respective histories, cultures and environments. Whereas some mythic narratives make sense across cultures, there are others that do not. Certain stories may cease to be of value after centuries of forming the basis of a world-view. But then there are also those particularly resilient mythic themes that seem to recur over time in different forms around the world (Campbell 1968).

In Ellul’s understanding of myth it is impossible to create an entirely new myth (1965: 199). It is only elaborations of existing myths that emerge from time to time. Ellul indicates that there are certain myths, e.g. that of paradise (1964: 191), that form the basis of others; although he does not provide us with a consistent system of the evolution of myths. Nevertheless, this perspective opens up the possibility of tracing the origins of sets of myths to certain central myths of humankind. We can conceive of some core myths as providing meaning for the basic aspects of human consciousness. These first-order myths include notions of the self, the other, time, space, knowledge, creation, destruction, causes and effects. These fundamental cognitive frameworks seem to be ahistorical and integral to human existence.

They give rise to a second order of myths (see Table 1): that of the self to kinship, community, nation, race; the other to gender, nature, divinity, enemy; time to history, beginnings, endings; space to distance, geography; knowledge to learning, science, wisdom, gnosis; creation to life, birth, rebirth; destruction to death; causes to actions, work; effects to reward, punishment, etc. These second-order myths do not form exclusive frameworks of meaning; they may overlap or interact with each other sporadically or continually. Many of them are shared universally; however, large numbers of people no longer adhere actively to the myths of divinity, gnosis or afterlife, and those of gender, nation, race and distance are the subject of much debate. Second-order myths therefore appear
prone to historical change. From them emanate other levels of myth, which I will discuss later.

Jacques Ellul’s attempt to outline some of the basic myths used in technological society’s propaganda seems more promising than Barthes’ approach in helping us understand the relationships between myth-based messages in information society rhetoric. Viewing myth from the perspective of semiotics, the latter is primarily concerned with its ideological tendencies rather than its nature as a fundamental receptacle for meaning. Indeed, Barthes tends to conflate myth and ideology. To him myth’s ‘function is to distort’ (1973: 121). This limited view of myths permits him to study them only as fleeting phenomena, all of which are subject to history.
Barthes provides some fascinating analyses of the ideological dynamics of myth in popular culture, advertising and news, demonstrating its ability to depoliticize, dehistoricize and naturalize ideological messages. But, even though he is sometimes cited in studies addressing the role of myth in the promotion of information society, his approach is limited in providing the basis for a thorough-going examination of the topic.

Ellul, on the other hand, draws to our attention the fundamental cognitive power of myths whose origins lie at the basis of human consciousness. He also provides a useful distinction between myth and ideology, and attempts to explain their interactive relationship. However, he does not present a systematic method for his analysis of myth, and in places even seems to contradict himself. Nevertheless, it is possible to apply the broadly based conceptual scheme that he used in his study of the mid-twentieth-century civilization to the study of the contemporary information society.

Ellul’s understanding of myth is influenced by his conceptions of spirituality. For him, human beings pay attention to myth because it responds to their sense of the sacred. The very secularization of society has heightened this sense because people have an essential need for a continuing connection with spirituality. This need is fulfilled ironically by technological society’s magnificent achievements, which fill the individual with a sense of wonder.

He is seized by sacred delirium when he sees the shining track of a supersonic jet or visualizes the vast granaries stocked for him. He projects this delirium into the myth through which he can control, explain, direct, and justify his actions . . . and his new slavery. (1964: 192)

Technique does not eliminate religious tendencies but subordinates them to its own purposes. In displacing spirituality, technique itself becomes an object of faith. It comes to embody the sense of mystery that was once the province of religion (1964: 141–2). This is manifested presently in the mass amazement expressed towards the capabilities of the Internet; it seems magical, even miraculous, in enabling activities that were supposedly impossible. The superlatives attached to the capabilities of electronic networking are generally considered to be beyond question, quite like religious attitudes to divinity. Uncritical consumption of media reports with selective data, that show the remarkable progress engendered by technique, becomes part of the mystical devotion to ‘the power of fact’ (1964: 303), which is characteristic of post-Enlightenment empiricism.

In Propaganda, Ellul dwelt extensively on the manner that propaganda, as technique, is used to mobilize masses. The function of propaganda, he maintained, is to provoke action. It does this by arousing mythical belief because myth incites
strong emotions in people. Pre-propaganda continually feeds audiences with mythical narratives, creating psychological readiness. Education, advertising, movies, magazines, the discourse of public institutions and the modes of technology operate collectively as sociological propaganda to create conformity. Even intellectuals are not immune (1965: 76). Finally, active propaganda, which directly and vigorously draws on myth, moves people to action in a specific direction. The effects of communication have been debated for many decades; Ellul resided in the camp that held that propaganda does work.

The evidence of propaganda’s effects is to be found not only in totalitarian states but also in western democracies, which use the myths of peace, freedom and justice to ensure obeisance to the ruling elite (1965: 243). Democracy, which is supposed to foster the expression of opinions, itself has been turned into a myth. Mass participation, which was a feature solely of religion, has been adopted by democracy: ‘anti-mystique becomes . . . mystique’ (1965: 244). In this, democracy becomes religious: ‘The content of this religion is of little importance; what matters is to satisfy the religious feelings of the masses; these feelings are used to integrate the masses into the national collective.’ (1965: 251) Within this context, Ellul suggests that the ‘American myth . . . [presents] exactly the same religious traits as the Nazi or Communist myth’ (1964: 422).

Religious beliefs, which provide answers for the unknown, enabled human beings to face fear. They also provided meaning for the vagaries of life and death, and fostered a sense of community. In secular society, propaganda functions in a similarly totalizing manner. It provides meaning for everything for the inhabitant of technological society and addresses his ‘most violent need to be reintegrated into a community’ (1965: 148). The creation of community through electronic communication is a primary theme in information society discourse. As propaganda takes the place of religion, it leaves the individual incapable of engaging in critical thought. ‘In this respect, strict orthodoxies always have been the same.’ (1965: 167)

The French sociologist sought to distinguish myth from ideology. He viewed ideology, in its basic form, as ‘any set of ideas accepted by individuals or peoples, without attention to their origin or value’ (1965: 116). It also has the characteristics of cherishing particular ideas, relating to the present, and being dependent on belief rather than proven ideas. Myth differs from ideology in that it

is imbedded much more deeply in the soul, sinks its roots farther down, is more permanent, and provides man with a fundamental image of his condition and the world at large. Second, the myth is much less ‘doctrinaire’. . . . The myth is more intellectually diffuse; it is part emotionalism, part affective response, part a sacred feeling, and more important [sic]. Third,
the myth has stronger powers of activation, whereas ideology is more passive (one can believe in an ideology and yet remain on the sidelines). The myth does not leave man passive; it drives him to action.

(1965: 116)

In order to motivate people, ideology necessarily has to link itself to myth. It so doing it grafts contemporary political and economic elements to the psychological/spiritual force of core human beliefs. Ideology cannot create a new myth — it is forced to ally itself to an existing one, which it then strives to elaborate in the propagandist’s preferred direction (1965: 119—200). Therefore bourgeois ideology interacted with the already-existing Christian myth of (spiritual) progress and the Enlightenment’s myth of science to give rise to the industrial myth of (technological and social) progress (see Figure 1). This hybrid myth was vital in harnessing mass society to the project of large-scale industrialization in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The more recent myths of information society and globalization have been derived from similar interactions, but more on that later.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Christian myth of spiritual progress</th>
<th>←→</th>
<th>bourgeois ideology</th>
<th>←→</th>
<th>myth of science</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Figure 1  Ideology and the myth of progress

Ellul also distinguishes myth from another psycho-sociological motivator, namely, the ‘collective presuppositions’ of technological society. He identified these as the following:
• Everything is matter
• History develops in endless progress
• Man is naturally good
• Man’s aim in life is happiness (1965: 39)

These collective presuppositions are ‘a collection of feelings, beliefs, and images by which one unconsciously judges events and things without questioning them, or even noticing them’ (1965: 39). Myth goes much deeper than these tacit areas of social consensus.

It is a vigorous impulse, strongly colored, irrational, and charged with all of man’s power to believe. It contains a religious element. In our society the two great fundamental myths on which all other myths rest are Science and History. And based on them are the collective myths that are man’s principal orientations: the myth of Work, the myth of Happiness (which is not the same thing as the presupposition of happiness), the myth of the Nation, the myth of Youth, the myth of the Hero. (1965: 40)

Here we have what I have termed above as second order myths, which have for the most part pre-dated technological society but which are used in a particular manner by its propagandists. The myths of work, happiness, nation, youth and hero do not emerge from those of science and history, but operate within their dialectical locus (see Figure 2).

A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

Ellul does not dwell at length on the interaction between the myths of science and history. However, an extensive commentary on this process is to be found in George Szanto’s Theater and Propaganda (1978). The latter’s use of Ellul’s work on myth indicates how it can be effectively used as a framework for analysing contemporary society. Szanto proposes that the primary myths of science and history reflect contrary ideals and

serve society best when they function in dialectical interaction . . . implicit in the myth of Science is the concept that the absolute in human improvement can be achieved, the utopia can be built; the myth of History suggests that so long as man is based in a material universe his condition will continue to change and the concept of improvement must be modified and developed for each new generation.

(1978: 40)

He asserts that propagandists of the ‘liberal/conservative hegemony’ primarily use the myth of science in order to keep audiences passive and satisfied. Dominant
discourses of the technological state are based upon the interpretations of the myth of science in order to maintain consensus about the continuing viability of the status quo. The myth of history, on the other hand, is kept invisible from the masses as it views all situations as continually changing and changeable. And the secondary myths of the nation, work, happiness, youth and the hero – which can be viewed through either the myth of history or the myth of science – are mainly presented by liberal/conservative integration propagandists through the latter primary myth. Basing the secondary myths on the myth of science appears natural and logical to the citizen of the technological state, whose epistemological outlook has been conditioned by the predominantly rationalist, empiricist and positivist discourses of the Enlightenment.

The idea of the nation-state was developed by late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century western political theorists also working in accordance with the myth of science. It was an attempt to establish workable geographical bounds to which the individual mind could attach its loyalty and within which it could visualize the achievement of its goals. Even under globalization the nation-state remains entrenched; indeed, its legislative and bureaucratic structures are essential for legitimizing the creation of ‘global information society’.
The myth of globality, which is central to contemporary dominant discourses, does not feature in Ellul’s work, much of which was conceived prior to the current period of intensive globalization. This second order myth emerged from the dialectic between the core myths of the self and the other, and is akin to that of humanity. The myth of globality grew with the round-the-world sea voyages, the colonization of other continents by Europeans, the growing acceptance by anthropologists of the concept of the one human race and the increased ease of global communications; pictures from outer space of the ‘one world’ reinforced visually the notion of its inhabitants inter-dependence. The myth of globality has given rise to a third-order myth, that of globalization, which is historically specific to our age (see Table 2). Its earlier manifestations are to be found in the Christian concept of the universal church and that of the universal Muslim ummah. In turn, from this myth has emerged a fourth-order myth of global information society and others such as global free trade, the elimination of national borders, the global triumph of democracy, etc. These have all emerged from ideological imperatives specific to technological society.

Ellul stated that the five secondary technological myths of the nation, work, youth, happiness and the hero continually interact with each other in the discourses of integration propagandists. He saw the myth of the nation as providing the socio-political parameters within which the secondary myths can operate. The national economy becomes the primary frame for the myth of work, national security for that of happiness, and service to the nation for those of youth and the hero. Increasingly, the myth of globalization is coming to share this role with that of the nation.

The myth of work, operating within the myth of science, presents the cost and the functional efficiency of commercial goods and services as the most important economic characteristics. Interpreted through the myth of history, it would emphasize, from a Marxist point of view, the labour of the worker (Szanto 1978:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st order</th>
<th>2nd order</th>
<th>3rd order</th>
<th>4th order</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>self</td>
<td>(humanity)</td>
<td>(universal Church)</td>
<td>global information society; elimination of borders; global triumph of democracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other</td>
<td>globality</td>
<td>globalization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 Myths related to globalization
41–5) and, from a religious point of view, the spiritual elements of human activity (Shariati 1979: 97–110). The myth of history would also consider relevant the uses of the product, making the worker as well as the consumer participants in the historical process and in helping determine the future of their respective local and global environments. However, dominant discourses operate continually to subvert alternative modes of conceptualization that would threaten hegemonic structures. They use the myth of work together with the myth of the nation (and that of globalization) to portray the untroubled functioning of the systems of production and consumption as the correct and normal state of being in technological society. Interruptions such as labour strikes or consumer boycotts are usually portrayed in the mass media as aberrations. The dominant myth of work would have all members of society go about performing their assigned tasks within the national and global systems of production and consumption as if functioning like a giant clockwork machine.

Ellul identifies the nineteenth-century bourgeois world-view as the source of contemporary conceptions of the morality of work:

Work purifies, ennobles; it is a virtue and a remedy. Work is the only thing that makes life worthwhile; it replaces God and the life of the spirit. More precisely, it identifies God with work: success becomes a blessing. God expresses his [sic] satisfaction by distributing money to those who have worked well.

(1964: 220)

The second-order myth of work, drawing on the core human myth of causes, is interrelated with that of happiness, which is dependent on the core myth of effects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cause</th>
<th>History</th>
<th>Effect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>good</td>
<td>paradise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>world-view</td>
<td>deeds</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technological</td>
<td>work</td>
<td>earthly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>world-view</td>
<td></td>
<td>utopia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td>labour of</td>
<td>comfort through</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Society rhetoric</td>
<td>‘knowledge</td>
<td>consumption of the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>workers’</td>
<td>Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Economy’s products</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 3* Progress at the path to paradise/utopia
(see Figure 3). These two are linked by the myth of progress (1965: 117), which is derived from that of history. The myth of happiness is also closely linked to another second-order myth, that of utopia/paradise, which promises the ultimate reward for hard work/good deeds. Intellectual labour in the ‘knowledge-based society’ is presented as leading to a happy and comfortable life through the consumption of the very materials produced by ‘knowledge workers’.

Szanto sees the passive myth of happiness and the active myth of youth as remnants of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century romanticism that glorified individualism. These two myths engage in struggle within the person: ‘Although the myth of Happiness implies a desire for security and comfort (Science), or resolution and synthesis (History), it can nonetheless live side by side with the myth of Youth: exploration and discovery, potential, the future, risk for great reward.’ (Szanto 1978: 46) The inner creative conflict in the individual caused by the two secondary myths is used by the integration propagandist to conjure the illusion of escape from technological alienation and the constraints of political control. Apart from their dyadic interaction, the myths of happiness and youth also play a complementary function within the pentad of the secondary myths, particularly with that of the nation. Myths of globalization tend to take a back seat in propaganda of this nature. The mass media, adhering to dominant political discourses, glorify the zest of youth and its pursuit of happiness usually within the context of national laws and norms. Youth can find ultimate happiness through service to the state, which is presented as the ideal territorial locus for the actualization of utopia.

Military service to the state is glorified in the mass media mainly through depictions of selfless dedication of young men engaging in combat against overwhelming odds. Television advertisements for recruitment into the armed forces exploit the myth of youth, offering ‘exploration and discovery, potential, the future, risk for great reward’ (1978: 46). Military facilities are often made accessible for commercial film companies to produce what are little more than feature-length advertisements for various branches of the armed forces. They show young soldiers, airmen and sailors using highly sophisticated armaments with accomplished skill and bravado; in accordance with the primarily scientific interpretation of the myth of youth, the answer to the world’s problems is to be found through high-technology weaponry, not in the continual re-evaluation of socio-political circumstances through the myth of history. Media highlighting of the much-vaunted accuracy of computer-controlled ‘smart bombs’ fired by young men flying the most advanced military jets stands out as a key example of this tendency. Popular lore also encourages the notion that boys whose hand-eye
coordination becomes proficient in playing computer games will be the ace fighter pilots of tomorrow.

The myth of the hero, which is also often narrated in the context of service to the state, is a vital tool in keeping the masses pacified. In the dominant discourse of western literature, the hero, generally a young, white male, usually comes from outside to regenerate a decaying society (1978: 49–52). After having saved the community, he either moves on or settles down into it. Both these patterns work well for the integration propagandist’s purposes: they serve to further the illusion that an individual in the form of a white knight can alleviate a society’s problems. According to Szanto:

The propagandist will usually admit that the society is not perfect. But he will claim it is perfectible, a priori within the myth of Science, and the shining knight, through individual action, can save or improve or ameliorate or cleanse the society, and bring it closer to perfection. The propagandist nurtures the myth of the Hero because he knows it is impotent in fact but powerful in image – he knows that the individual alone can never alter the economic base of the capitalist state.

(1978: 50)

The hero cannot be allowed to be outside the control of the hegemony: his image is shaped in accordance with the needs of the integration propagandist.

However, within the myth of history the hero is organically united with his community, operating in the framework of practical realities. He works within the context of the group, leaving it ‘only to attain the historical perspective needed by the group, returning to it constantly’ (1978: 51). Hegemonic political discourses, which legitimate particular ways of viewing public problems, discourage this form of hero from gaining prominence in the public mind since he will be seen as operating in accordance with the requirements of the masses. They will also prevent him from appearing in opposition to the state: such a position is reserved for the ‘anti-hero’ or villain (often the role played by the terrorist or the computer hacker, or the hybrid ‘cyberterrorist’).

In the New World, the myth of the hero has been linked even more strongly than in Europe to that of the nation: this person is visualized in the context of the frontiersman pushing the bounds of the pale, denoting the eternal possibility of extending the borders under the sway of civilization. When the contemporary nation can no longer expand its territory its corporate heroes continue broadening the scope of their activities extra-territorially. This is where the myth of globalization is pressed into service: the White House’s vision of the ‘National Information Infrastructure’ (NII) was enlarged into the ‘Global Information Infrastructure’ (GII). In earlier periods, other myths based on the fundamental
myth of the self had been used to justify colonizing alien lands (i.e. extending the self) in the names of civilization and Christianity. These had interacted with the myths of progress and paradise, as does the contemporary myth of globalization.

Indeed, paradise becomes the ultimate goal and justification of technological civilization’s propagandists. ‘Complete satisfaction is guaranteed’ for those who totally integrate into information society. Advertisers tell them that they will have the jobs they want, the products and services they wish for, the personal life they seek, the body shape they desire and the lifestyle of their choice — all for the price of an Internet subscription. The armchair explorer of cyberspace, as contemporary frontiersman, finds Eldorado in the World Wide Web. Popular culture often portrays the contemporary hero as physically merging with technology; television characters such as ‘Bionic Man’, ‘Bionic Woman’, ‘Robocop’, and Star Trek’s ‘Data’ as well as the potential for genetic manipulation of human beings is fuelling visions of the new superman and superwoman. In the larger sense, technology itself is the real hero or the messiah/saviour who will reign over the earthly paradise.

CONCLUSION

The implications of information society’s propaganda are enormous. Its ultimate aim seems to be complete absorption of everyone into a perfectly working system of production and consumption that benefits only a few. It conflates data and information with knowledge and wisdom, promising a paradisical state of happiness for all who plug into the Internet. Several governments have decided that since this medium seems to be beyond control it can be self-regulated by industry. Many leading politicians appear to have staked their personal futures on the success of the information economy. It is touted as the answer to the problems of society. Whereas the moral debate on the Internet appears to be limited to content such as pornography and hate literature, the broader ethical challenges of unequal access, the differential opportunities for use, and the growing gap between those who are able to take advantage of the new media and those who are not go largely unaddressed. The myths of progress and of paradise are vital in explaining the vaunted benefits of the information society for all its inhabitants. This propaganda works because these myths draw on the fundamental modes of human cognition.

A re-evaluation of Jacques Ellul’s work in the context of the role of myth in information society helps to challenge its rhetoric at the fundamental level. His
work reintroduces an appreciation of the age-old roots of contemporary discourse on technology. Studies that seek to understand myth-based appeals in information society rhetoric will not be able to comprehend the strength of such discourse without taking into account their deep psychological/spiritual elements. Ellul’s assertion that it is possible to trace most social myths of technological society to the myth of paradise urges us to enquire into the ways in which new myths are generated from ancient founts. His attempt to describe the manners in which propagandists exploit existing myths to develop attachment to emergent ideologies provides insight into current developments. The view that various myths operate in interactive networks allows us to construct analytical frameworks that trace the emergence and use of particular myths towards specific ends. This also enables the development of counter-strategies that challenge fundamental bases of dominant ideologies. A rediscovery of the French sociologist’s work on myth, propaganda and technological society therefore permits a fresh perspective into the discursive construction of the information society. It also encourages the broadening of scholarly activity beyond the strictly positivist confines of dominant social science.

__NOTES__

3 He rewrote and expanded that book and published it under the title _The Technological Bluff_ (Le Bluff technologique, 1988).
4 Ellul’s views seem to have been inimical towards Muslims, judging from his _The Betrayal of the West_ and _FLN Propaganda in France during the Algerian War_ as well as his preface in Bat Ye’or’s _The Dhimmi_.
5 Babe (1990), Ferguson (1992), Hamelink (1986) and Mosco (1998, 1999).
6 Whereas these may be called ‘concepts’, I call them ‘myths’ in order to underline the conscious mind’s inability to produce purely objective ideas. Even fundamental myths are the result of human attempts to make sense of our environment and experiences; they enable us to interpret the world and our place in it. However, this is not to imply that every human conception can be placed under the rubric of myth; Ellul himself distinguishes myth from ideology and ‘collective presuppositions’, as is discussed later.
These orders of myths are not meant to correspond to those outlined by Barthes (1973).

Both Christianity and Islam adhered to the concept of a universal humankind.


Ellul asserts that the technological society’s propagandists present the individual’s happiness as the ultimate justification for its activities (1964: 390).

REFERENCES


Szanto, G. (1978) Theater & Propaganda, Austin, TX: University of Texas.

