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# TRANSFORMING MASS MEDIA

D U A N E   E L G I N

Over the past several decades, countless books, tapes, and self-help workshops have focused on the critical connection between our mental and physical well-being. The connection between mind and body is now broadly recognized: For example, the Internet search engine Google gives well over a million responses for the phrase “mind-body.” Many people apply a daily awareness of the mind-body connection to their personal health. Unfortunately, this important wisdom from the personal realm has not been applied with equal effectiveness when it comes to our mind-body health as a nation.

Stated simply, here is the mind-body challenge I see at a social level: I believe that the collective mind of our society is manifested primarily through the mass media. In other words, the mass media are the most direct and visible expression of our social “brain” or collective mental functioning as civilizations. In the United States, ninety-nine percent of all homes have a TV set, and the average person watches nearly four hours per day. Television has become



our primary window onto the world and the mirror in which we see ourselves. Most people in the US get most of their news about the world from television. Like it or not, television has become the central nervous system of modern society. When we turn on the television set and search through the channels, we are literally moving through the stream of consciousness of a civilization. We all swim in this electronic ocean, and it has a powerful influence on our collective well-being. Just as our mental habits impact the health of individuals, so, too, do our collective mental habits impact the health of entire civilizations.

At this pivotal time in human evolution, it is vitally important that the mass media and their messages serve our psychological and spiritual health, and not distort our collective intelligence, imagination, and evolution. However, the collective mind of our consumer society is dominated by the profit-making interests of the mass media. With profits as the primary guide, our social mindset is moving out of touch with the real world. To illustrate, in the past generation in the US, divorce rates have doubled, teen suicide rates have tripled, a number of crime rates have quadrupled, and there is an epidemic of obesity. At a global level, physical evidence of ill-health includes global warming with increasingly powerful storms, the extinction of a vast number of plant and animal species, and the rapid depletion of critical resources such as fresh water and cheap oil.

The American Dream celebrated through advertising in today's mass media is fast becoming the world's nightmare. The bottom line is this: If we are to build a sustainable and compassionate future, it will require corresponding changes in our social mindset, and in the messages and images of "success" and the "good life" that are portrayed through the mass media.

For the past thirty years, I've been exploring the process of "awakening" at a civilizational scale, and I have concluded that the mass media are the primary carriers of our collective "thought stream." In turn, how we use the mass media can foster either collective greed and fear, or collective awakening and compassion. For the individual, awakening involves developing a capacity for reflective consciousness or paying attention to the flow of thoughts and feelings as we move through life. Similarly, for a civilization, awakening involves developing a capacity for reflective consciousness at the scale of the entire society and the ability to collectively witness thoughts and feelings as we move through life.

What is required for the mass media to serve our collective awakening? After several decades of organizing, I've concluded that the basic challenge is with us as citizens. For example, most citizens are ignorant of the fact that television broadcasters that use the public's airwaves (ABC, CBS, NBC, and FOX) have a strict legal responsibility to serve the public interest of each community before their own profits. Currently, most people complain passively about the media, not recognizing that citizens have the legal right and the affirmative legal obligation to hold the media accountable for serving the public interest and the health of our collective mind. However, with a new "politics of collective consciousness," we could mobilize electronic town meetings and other forms of dialogue to come together as communities and transform the heart of the media—broadcast television.

## A MENU OF PERSPECTIVES

Here are five different ways of framing the issue of the mass media and the mental health of civilizations:

1. THE EVOLUTIONARY CHALLENGE IS TO SEE THAT THE MASS MEDIA ARE MANUFACTURING DESIRE, AND THAT THIS IS CREATING A PSYCHOLOGY OF MASS CONSUMPTION THAT CANNOT BE SUSTAINED.

By programming television primarily for commercial success, the mindset of our civilization is simultaneously being programmed for ecological failure. Rather than awakening the public to the challenge of sustainability, the television industry is distracting us from this critical concern. Instead of educating for a workable future over the long run, the television industry is promoting consumption in the short run. The average person sees roughly 25,000 commercials a year. These are more than ads for a product; they are also advertisements for a consumerist lifestyle, and for the attitudes and values that support that lifestyle. As we move into a new era where the challenge is to live sustainably, we need new

programming that reflects the new realities.

Psychologist Carl Jung said that schizophrenia is a condition where “the dream becomes the reality.” Has the American dream of a consumerist lifestyle become our primary reality? Is this manufactured reality increasingly out of touch with the reality of nature and our soulful existence? Are we building the foundation of our global consciousness literally upon a schizophrenic base? Are we implanting a deep and unnecessary conflict into the structure of our collective psyche? The American people (and much of the rest of the world exposed to American television) are being placed in an impossible double-bind: The mass media that dominate our consciousness tell us to buy ever more, while our ecological concern for the planet inclines us to consume ever less. We are literally creating a schizophrenic civilization that is divided against itself.

2. THE EVOLUTIONARY CHALLENGE IS TO TRANSFORM THE LACK OF REFLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE MEDIA.

The media do not hold a mirror up to themselves. The last taboo topic on television is television itself and its own practices, ethics, and priorities. Never do we see the cameras turned around to look back and investigate how the television system is doing its job. Television turns a blind eye to itself, and thereby is able to hide many of its practices and policies that are so detrimental. Reflective consciousness is healing for the individual, and can be healing for the media that make up the social brain of our civilization.

3. THE EVOLUTIONARY CHALLENGE IS TO SEE WHAT IS MISSING FROM THE MASS MEDIA.

The media focus on sensational events and personal conflicts, and generally fail to report on the really big stories of our time. In turn, if we don't hear regularly televised reports about climate change, species-extinction, resource depletion, and so on, then the general public will assume that these areas are not yet critical. However, just because the mass media ignore urgent trends does not mean they will conveniently cease to exist. These largely ignored but

## MASS MEDIA AND COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS

The idea of “collective consciousness” is already being studied but under a number of different names and labels. For example, one person might describe his or her interest as exploring “learning fields” and the “group mind” in a classroom setting. Another person might be interested in “group synergy” in professional sports, orchestras, operating rooms, and other teamwork situations, and how it can be cultivated. Another may be investigating the changing “collective sentiments” of an entire civilization. Despite differences in language, all can recognize that they are exploring a similar mystery—the ecology of consciousness that permeates our living universe, and in which we all participate.

Although we recognize the reality of “collective consciousness,” the public has yet to come to grips with the pervasive and powerful influence of the mass media on our collective knowing and self-image as a society. If we are to choose the path of democracy and communicate our way into a more promising and healthy future for the world, then it requires that we ask difficult but immensely important questions: Are the mass media creating a level of desire for consumption around the world that cannot be sustained? If media-generated desires cannot be sustained, then how will those who are left out respond? How well does the “media mindset” of consumerism fit the reality of our changing

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world? Does our use of the mass media accurately reflect our evolutionary intelligence as a species? Is the mass media's focus on consumerism diverting our cultural attention, dumbing-down humanity's self-image, and holding back our social evolution? What is a more positive and elevated view of humanity's potentials? How might the mass media nourish and strengthen our culture and enable us to cope with unprecedented ecological, social, and spiritual challenges? How can communities "take back" the public airwaves for purposes of mature visioning and exploration of a more promising future?

This is an inquiry into the most practical and direct expression of our collective consciousness in our everyday lives. The quality of our shared, social attention is the most precious resource that we possess as a society. Instead of taking our collective consciousness for granted as an unchangeable given, it would be to our great advantage to inspect, explore, and call forth the most healthy qualities of consciousness that we can muster. To place the health of our shared consciousness on our social agenda requires us to stand back from unconscious immersion in our collective mindset and recognize our capacity to evolve our civilizational consciousness. Because we have never before had the ability to consciously evolve our collective consciousness, this is an unfamiliar territory for everyone—citizens, political leaders, media managers, educators, and others. Research that helps us understand the nature and evolution of collective consciousness will be a decisive factor in enabling us to build a more sustainable and compassionate future. —DE

immensely powerful trends are, in this generation, forever changing the Earth as a natural system and social system.

4. THE EVOLUTIONARY CHALLENGE IS TO SEE THE LACK OF LOVE BEING COMMUNICATED THROUGH OUR PRIMARY TOOLS OF MASS COMMUNICATION.

Our global future depends on love—which blossoms when there is mutual understanding; which develops when there is authentic and meaningful communication; which builds upon a foundation of mutual respect. Therefore, we need to bring a loving consciousness into the mass media if we are to have a future that is sustainable and compassionate. If the mass media fail to actively cultivate qualities of empathy, mutual understanding, and communication, and instead foster a callous disregard for life (with mindless violence and exploitive sex), then we will create a self-fulfilling reality of suffering. The challenge is to discover ways of using the mass media that nourish, strengthen, and enrich the life of the individual soul and our capacity for collective service.

5. THE EVOLUTIONARY CHALLENGE IS TO SEE THAT WE ARE NOT CULTIVATING HEALTHY "FACTORS OF SOCIAL ENLIGHTENMENT" VIA THE MASS MEDIA.

Applying insights from meditative traditions, a healthy "social brain" will be characterized by qualities such as mindfulness, equanimity, and concentration. For example:

**MINDFULNESS.** Are the broadcast media being used to foster awareness of the condition of the larger world, or are the mass media largely oblivious to the big picture, inattentive to critical trends, and unmindful of where the world is headed?

**CONCENTRATION.** Are the mass media being used to mobilize public attention and focus on critical choices that need our attention? Or are they used to distract the public so that we cannot focus our societal attention on critical concerns? Are we able to cut through the turbulence of our social chatter and distraction and, with

penetrating attention, bring a steady focus to concerns vital to our future?

**EQUANIMITY.** Are the mass media reactive, wildly thrashing our societal attention about? Or do the media remain relatively calm and steady in the midst of social turbulence, chaos, and distress? Instead of being thrown off balance, are we able, as a society, to remain steadily present and responsive?

Just as these qualities or factors can be cultivated by an individual, so can they be cultivated by an entire civilization, too. These are vitally important factors of social awakening, and they may well determine whether civilizations will be able to respond successfully to the global ecological crisis rapidly closing around us.

I have explored several ways of framing the mind-body connection between our mass media and our social body. Nothing short of our evolutionary intelligence as a civilization is being tested as we work to build a mature and compassionate social mind that is in alignment with a healthy and sustainable social body.

## TRANSFORMING OUR SOCIAL MIND

We have seen that, although the power of positive visualization is widely recognized in the realm of individual mind-body medicine, we have been slow to apply this wisdom to the healing of our social mind-body. As a society, we have yet to appreciate the power of the collective self-images that are presented in the social mirror of the media. Whatever they may be, the persistent self-images that we present to ourselves through the mass media set into motion a self-fulfilling process of realization. Looking ahead, this means that we cannot consciously build a positive future that we have not first collectively imagined. We are a visual species. When we can see it, we can become it and build it.

Here is just one example of the kind of television programming that I believe could stir public consciousness into authentic reflection about how we are using our collective mind. To balance the aggressive onslaught of consumer commercials, alternative commercials that I call “Earthvisions” could be developed. Produced by nonprofit organizations and local community groups working in

partnership with local television stations, Earthvisions could be 30-second mini-stories portraying some aspect of a sustainable and meaningful future. They could be low in cost and high in creativity, and done with playfulness, compassion, and humor. They could focus on humankind’s connection with the web of life, or on positive visions of the future from the perspective of future generations, or on awakening an appreciation of nature and sustainability. In my opinion, the public would be delighted with these refreshing perspectives. Once underway, a virtual avalanche of Earthvisions could emerge from communities around the world and be shared over the Internet. Other media—such as public-access TV, newspapers, radio, and specialty publications—could be used to enrich the dialogue.

We could also develop a rich array of programming beyond 30-second spots. For instance, television comedies could offer a humorous look at everyday life in a sustainable society, such as the challenges of living in an “ecovillage community.” Television news-magazine shows could be developed that focus in-depth on themes pertaining to a sustainable future, and on our evolutionary journey as a human family. Dramas could explore the deeper tensions and larger opportunities that families and communities may encounter as we begin designing ourselves into a promising future. Viewer-feedback forums could enable local communities to give regular feedback to television broadcasters regarding programming that truly serves the public interest.

In conclusion, by bringing inspiring stories, positive self-images, and hopeful visions of the future into the mass media, we simultaneously bring those healing visions into the collective mind of our civilization. Healing our collective mind-body connection requires a new and far more conscious relationship between the public and the mass media. Transforming our relationship with the mass media is far more than a matter of taste; it is essential for the success of our evolutionary journey as an awakening species.



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