



# THE COLONIZATION OF CONSCIOUSNESS

## Mass Media & the Manipulation of Attention

*C o n s c i o u s n e s s   a n d   t h e   M e d i a*



The media have come to play a pivotal role in an ongoing "colonization of consciousness." They are far from being value-neutral, despite old arguments that they are merely "tools" that can be put to a number of different uses.

Unfortunately, we have good reasons to question this view of media as tools, as well as the idea that private individuals have a right to inform and entertain themselves however they want—so long as doing so neither directly infringes on others' rights nor seriously compromises social cohesion. In this article, I will examine this complex issue from a Buddhist perspective on awareness and attention, focusing on the interdependence among the media, the global economy of "commodity fetishism," and the advertising industry.

### The Trance of Advertising

Advertising's primary function is to stimulate consumer appetites by fostering a sense of lack or want for which it promises remedy: goods that have been produced by someone else (typically an anonymous "other"), somewhere else (usually very far away),

and services rendered by trained professionals. Is there anything wrong with this?

Advertising effectively disposes us toward both craving or heedless wanting and ignoring the interdependence of all things. It fosters seeing ourselves as "freely choosing individuals"

on whom the world economy ultimately pivots. Through fashion and a never-ending search for "the cutting edge"—the next new thing—advertising guides us toward experiencing every aspect of our lives as open to substitution. No matter what we have, there is always more and better. And the means by which we acquire the goods and services through which we better ourselves is the almost immaterial act of purchasing. We do not need to condition soil, bury seeds, and carefully water and weed the garden for months to eat organic produce. We can ignore the interdependence among climate, landforms, plants, and animals that are crucial in small-scale agriculture because a nearly instantaneous swipe of a debit card can "produce" a frozen gourmet meal for us to enjoy. As a crucial part of the global economy of commodity lust, advertising fosters a type of awareness through which our relationship with things is reduced to the act of taking possession. Advertising and the media establish a feedback loop for institutionalizing suffering. ➤

## The Restructuring of Awareness

Note that this assessment does not depend on advertising content. At the root of advertising's moral status is not *what* we are conditioned to want, but rather *how* it disposes us toward *wanting* and then *getting what we want*. My critique is not directed at *what is advertised*—whether private schools or pornographic videos—but at *how advertising effectively restructures awareness*.

Without this restructuring of awareness throughout a society, there would be no market for the great variety of commodities conveyed by mass media. Without mass media, there would be no forum for advertising that draws large populations into commodity fetishism. Mass media thus play a crucial role in consolidating a commodity-driven market economy that systematically undermines relational depth, breaking down the immediate and mutually helpful relationships through which members of a community contribute directly to one another's welfare, and replacing them with a unilateral dependency on externally and generically supplied goods and services. Mass media train populations to (passively) consume "meaningful" experiences rather than to directly engage in the (actively) shared production of meaning.

But does media-supported advertising create a sense of want or lack rather than simply giving distinctive shape to an already-existing condition? Which is cause, which effect? It is the nature of human beings to want, to desire something better, but most have no clear idea of what this means. The media, coupled with advertising, give attainable form and content to this innate sense of incompleteness.

## Exporting Attention

Indeed, the media restructure awareness in such a way that we experience a chronic "crisis of expectations"—an infinite spiral of rising demands and experiential poverty. Contrary to our commonsense intuitions, by intentionally engaging in satisfying our wants, we treat ourselves to yet more mass-mediated consumption—aggravating an epidemic of boredom, restlessness, and dissatisfaction. Ironically, this leaves us only deeper in want. Our "cure" has started making us sick.

Americans will soon spend an *average* of sixty percent of their waking hours in direct media use. This does not

## CONTROL OUT OF CONTROL

THE MASS MEDIA ARE BEST UNDERSTOOD as complex systems of technologies, patterns of relationship that institutionalize values across a wide range of human experience and activities. They cannot be value-neutral.

We are effectively blinded to the fact that successful technologies are prone to so deeply institutionalize their core values that they cross the "threshold of utility"—they begin to create problems that only they are able to solve. They then cease being useful and effectively become necessary. All technologies have thresholds of utility beyond which they begin producing the conditions for their own necessity, and render us increasingly dependent on them.

The core value of our technological lineage is *control*, and through technology, we create conditions for experiencing independence from, and power over, our circumstances. For telecommunications and mass media, this means the power to determine the circumstances and nature of human experience itself. These technologies have been so successful that we now "enjoy" a historically unprecedented control over the kinds of entertainment we have available, the amount and kind of information we can access, and the degree to which we remain (or elect not to remain) in contact with co-workers, family, and friends.

But, as control-based technologies cross the threshold of utility, control becomes practically essential. We find ourselves experiencing our situation as increasingly in need of control or change. At the same time, this means we find ourselves living in increasingly controlled environments, and thus increasingly subject to control. Technologies biased toward control allow us to experience what we want, and to avoid what we do not want. But "karmically" they establish and maintain a cycle of experiencing a lack or want, and then getting what we lacked or wanted. The entire cycle is deepened with commitment to the value of control.

—PDH

include any media use required in the workplace or at school. By tragic contrast, on average, US fathers spend less than three hours a week one-on-one with their children. The time given to direct community service is lower still.

The deep penetration of the media into our day-to-day lives marks a catastrophic export of attention from our families and local communities. This is true regardless of program content. Each hour spent consuming mass-media commodities is an hour not spent attending to our own immediate situation, or actively and jointly improvising changes in its meaning. When left untended, families and communities, like gardens, will eventually go to ruin.

But distraction away from our immediate situation is not the sole consequence of intensive mass media. It has been argued that the information revolution has brought us great experiential variety, exposing us to ideas and cultural forms that would have been unknown to us without the media. But what conditions need to prevail for us to be open to this great volume of new experiences? Jerry Mander (in his book *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*) argued that a key characteristic of television viewing is its association with passive awareness. A common term for heavy television watching — “vegging out” — captures the essence of Mander’s critique: As an experiential medium, television commands us to drop our critical alertness and simply accept what is given, as it is given. It is no accident that many people use television to fall asleep.

Although television supplies new experiences, it does so in such a way that we are discouraged from actively assessing their meaning for us. Television — and indeed every other form of mass media — is essentially a supply channel. It does not permit us to directly contribute to the content of our experience. Our choice is utterly digital: to watch or not to watch, to *pay attention* or not. The initial cost of this is severe enough: an atrophy of our capacity to actively and critically engage our perceptual field. But the longer-term cost is perhaps even more troubling: We are being trained to experience even the most intensely dramatic events as requiring *nothing more* than our attention. That is, we are being trained to *remain unmoved*, to feel no compulsion

to take contributory action.

Thus, although we “get to know” the people and places to which the media provide access, we do not become truly intimate with them. Our relationship is, finally, voyeuristic. We may know as much or more about the lives of “soap” characters or sports figures as we do about many of our family members, friends, and neighbors — having followed their careers and having read entire books about them. But we cannot help them in moments of need, or, for that matter, harm them — not unless we cross into the invasive terrain of stalking. Our love affair with the media is, at bottom, a training program for narcissism and nihilism.

## Boot Camp for Consciousness

Spending more than half of our waking hours in mass-mediated modes of awareness is a training regimen that now rivals any military boot camp in terms of imposed discipline. Viewing television programs and films from the 1960s and 70s, we are inclined to lose interest because of their slow pace, dramatic timidity, and lack of “realism.” We have become acclimated to video-production technology that permits such rapid cutting between scenes that our attention seldom rests on any image for more than a few seconds. In order to follow the thread of today’s nonlinear programming, it is imperative that we not stop to think about anything seen or heard. On the contrary, the sheer volume of information to

which we typically expose ourselves cannot be taken in unless we unreflectively submit to its rush.

**The media determine when we pay attention and for precisely how long . . . we are allowed no time for acts of criticism or imagination.—P.D.H.**

Contemporary video media in particular exercise a kind of temporal dictatorship or tyranny that prohibits ongoing critical reflection. Quite literally, the media determine when we pay attention and for precisely how long. Ideally, we are allowed no time for acts of either criticism or imagination. Like new recruits into the military, we accept being commanded in this way because we would otherwise be punished — banished from what is really current and no longer free to benefit from the new experiences the media deliver.

## Impact of Globalization

In the era of material colonization, the efficient extraction of natural resources entailed engineering a breakdown of both the local economy and indigenous value systems. Otherwise, these resources could not have been “freed” for export, and the colonized population could never have been rendered dependent on the colonial power for many of its subsistence needs. Likewise, the colonization of consciousness establishes a feedback loop that brings about a fragmentation of families and local communities without which attention could not be readily extracted and directed in ways beneficial to those controlling the circulation of goods in the global economy.

Rapid technology-driven globalization has led not only to cultural hegemonies and homogeneity, but also to fragmentations of felt community and long-standing patterns of meaningful interdependence. Positively, this has freed many millions of people from traditional forms of order. For example, global educational and employment opportunities for women have grown tremendously; nearly all people now enjoy previously unprecedented experiential variety.

But increasing experiential variety has come at the cost of lost diversity.

Like the species in a zoo or the goods in a shopping mall, we coexist with one another, but are

no longer fully interdependent. We have forfeited the dramatic commons on which we are able to immediately contribute to one another’s welfare—the key characteristic of any diverse community or environment. And, for the most part, we have done so quite willingly, insisting that it is an exercise of our freedom.

During the era of material colonization from the 16th through the 19th centuries, technologies were developed for mass commodification of natural resources and the influence of global distributions of manufactured goods. Over the first half of the 20th century, labor was subjected to massive commodification and power directly exerted over patterns of consumption. During the late 1970s and early 80s, this gave way to a pattern of postindustrial eco-

nomics in which information became the most basic commodity in the world market, and in which power came to be exerted over knowledge flows and the production of conceptual capital. In the last decades of the 20th century, we began witnessing the colonization of consciousness itself. As a result, attention has become the prime export commodity, and (largely corporate) power is being rapidly consolidated around the production of meaning. We are now in the midst of an almost unrelenting export of attention as productively diverse communities are systematically reduced to consumer markets. In the global economy, consumers perform the simple, but necessary, function of producing and eliminating waste.


## A Global ‘Technotopia’?

Taken to an extreme, the mass-mediated colonization of consciousness will lead to the realization of technotopia—a world in which we will know no galling hardship, no agonizing disappointments, no shortages, and no sense of loss. This would mean the end of “trouble” as we have known it until now. But it would also mean the end of compelling dramatic tensions, a collapse of our life stories into what we can refer to as maximum *dramatic*

*entropy*—the collapse of all differences that might really make a difference. In such a state, experi-

ences in infinite variety would be ours for the choosing, but we would have no compelling reason to choose one over any other. We would have realized unlimited freedoms of choice, but forfeited our capacity for relating freely. We would realize a “utopia,” but it would be the worst thing to ever happen to us.

*A longer version of this article appears in Reason and Insight: Western and Eastern Perspectives on the Pursuit of Moral Wisdom, edited by Timothy Shanahan and Robin Wang (Wadsworth, 2002).*

PETER D. HERSHOCK is coordinator of the Asian Studies Development Program at the East-West Center in Honolulu, Hawaii. He was trained in Asian and comparative philosophy with a focus on Buddhist practice. 

And so, the better we get at wanting, the better we get at getting what we want—although we won’t want what we get. —P.D.H.