

THE CULTURAL ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

by George Gerbner

In December of 1990, a small group of concerned citizens met in Washington, D.C. to launch what they called the "Cultural Environmental Movement." The Movement's purpose is to address the problems of an increasingly centralized, globalized and mass-marketed media environment, and to move toward a more democratic cultural policy.

Our cultural environment is the system of stories and images that cultivates much of who we are, what we think, what we do, and how we conduct our affairs. Until recently, it was primarily hand-crafted, home-made, community-inspired. But no longer. It is now the product of a complex mass-production, mass-marketing process. We have just begun to take the measure of that transformation.

For the first time in human history, our children are being born into a home whose everyday cultural environment does not come from their family, their school, their church, their neighborhood, and often not even their native country. Three out of four American kids grow up without a full-time parent but with television an average of seven hours a day. Most of the stories about life and values are told not by parents, grandparents, teachers, clergy, or others with their own stories to tell, but by a handful of distant conglomerates with something to sell. These startling developments have changed the way we learn, grow up, and relate to each other.

For many people, these developments appear to be an enrichment of local horizons, a sense of involvement in the mainstream culture. For most of us, they also mean a greater common outlook, homogenized and detached from other views of life. For media professionals, these changes mean a growing compulsion to present life in salable packages. They still enlighten and entertain, occasionally even challenge—but, on the whole, only as long as their stories fit marketing strategies and priorities.

This media condition did not emerge spontaneously. Yet its consequences were never anticipated or publicly deliberated. In fact, it was a radical departure overriding significant public opposition, a fact little noted in our history books. Its worldwide fallout and human implications have only recently been studied and are just beginning to be understood.

The new cultural environment means the blurring of diverse outlooks and interests, the blending of perspectives into a cultural mainstream, and the bending of that mainstream to the service of global investors and sponsors. No longer are media separately-produced and selectively-used local communications. As electronic technologies erode traditional markets, they further consolidate ownership, content, reach, and power. They integrate into a system transcending local and national boundaries. They animate our imaginations, cultivate our conceptions of reality, guide the shaping of public policy, and define life's choices as effectively as the physical environment decides life's chances.

As consumers, we pay for this. The price of most goods includes an amount that exceeds the cost of selling them. This "levy" finances the media marketplace wherein advertisers buy our time and attention and sell their wares and values. The price of a bar of soap includes the cost of the "soap opera" that tells us about both the soap and a way of life.

We pay when we wash, not when we watch, and we pay even if we never watch or do not like what we watch.

For advertisers, this is a business expense, tax deductible whether it is useful or not. For example, the largest single influence over most media is the market power of tobacco-money-driven global conglomerates whose cultural clout is protected and supported by the public treasury. This is taxation without representation. To society, it is a way of preempting alternatives, divorcing payment from choice, and denying public participation in media decision-making. Taxation without representation triggered the first American Revolution. The same process, on a larger scale and with a deeper human impact, inspires the Cultural Environmental Movement—the second American revolution.

The Movement is concerned with these distortions of the democratic process. Their damaging consequences, the problems that marketing priorities cannot resolve and often exacerbate, include the cultivation of mentalities and behaviors that drug, hurt, poison, and kill thousands every day—portrayals that stereotype and dehumanize. Media violence creates a cult of desensitivity, intimidation, and terror. This drift leads us toward the inevitable environmental crunch, the silent crumbling of our infrastructure and the neglect of vital cultural and social systems. Make-believe media politics corrupts the democratic process and perpetuates the growing siege mentality of our cities.

*We must mobilize Americans
to act as citizens as effectively
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How can we heal the wounds of all the stories that hurt and tear us apart? How can we build on our strengths and break these debilitating constraints? How can we work toward a freer, fairer, and more liberating cultural environment?

We must reclaim the rights gained through centuries of struggle and conferred by law, the Constitution, and the basic principles of liberal education and self-government in a democracy. We must mobilize Americans to act as citizens as effectively as commercials mobilize us to act as consumers.

Individual effort, local action, and national constituencies acting in concert can help to begin that long and difficult task. We invite further suggestions to our proposals for specific lines of action. These include:

- Building a new coalition involving: international media councils; teachers, students, and parents; human rights groups concerned with the rights of children, women, and the elderly; minority groups and religious organizations; environmental and legal associations; consumer groups; creative voices in the media, arts, and sciences; and others committed to broadening the freedom and diversity of the media mainstream.
- Opposing domination and working to abolish existing censorship, public or private, both of and by the media. That includes exposing the media's use of the First Amendment as a shield for power and privilege, extending rights and facilities to interests other than the most powerful, profitable, and

popular. Including those people most in need of a decent voice in cultural decision-making.

- Extending cultural liberation to other nations by cooperating with national and regional groups working for the integrity of their own decision-making and against outside cultural domination. Helping local movements, especially in the most vulnerable countries, to invest in their cultural, economic, and political development; opposing coercive trade policies that make such development more difficult.

- Supporting journalists, artists, and other creative workers who are struggling against presenting life as a commodity designed for a consumer market. Working for diversity in employment and media content.

- Promoting media literacy, awareness, critical viewing, and reading as educational objectives at every level. Collecting, disseminating, and publicizing information. Evaluating relevant programs, services, and teaching materials. Helping educators and parents' groups to install teacher-training in these areas and commit school officials, textbook and audio-visual companies, and media executives to meet media-education objectives.

- Placing cultural policy issues on the socio-political agenda. Supporting and, if necessary, organizing local and national media councils and other forums of public discussion, policy development, representation, and action. Creating and experimenting with ways of community and citizen participation in media policy-making. Sharing experiences, lessons, and recommendations. And, finally, moving toward a realistic democratic agenda.

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“Know whence you came. If you know whence you came, there is really no limit to where you can go.”

—James Baldwin,
Letter to My Nephew

◆ TAKE A!M ◆ TAKE A!M ◆ TAKE A!M ◆

CONTEST #3: "E Vomitus Unum"

Euphemisms. We need euphemisms.

Examples: Raiphing. Hurling. Disgeoring.

RULES OF THE GAME:

1. Gross is okay; funny is better. Originality rules.
2. One winner (editor's choice).
3. One prize fits all.
4. Winning entry will appear in next issue.
5. Deadline: May 1, 1992.
6. Close personal friends of the publisher are ineligible.
7. *Good luck!*

Sorry, there were no winners of Contests #1 and #2.

TWitchings TWitchings TW

Who's *really* who? According to The New York Times, the who who's behind **Time Warner's** throne is one Oded Aboodi, a former accountant who in 1980 became Steve Ross's financial adviser. Aboodi has no title at **TW** and describes himself as "a non-exclusive employee" who gets a "modest" salary. He also gets not-so-modest fees for deals he negotiates on behalf of **TW**: \$8 million for his role in the original **Time Warner** merger, and a "very large" fee (he refused to disclose how large) for his handling of the talks leading to last year's \$1 billion joint-venture investment in **TW** by C. Itoh & Co. and the Toshiba Corp. Also according to The Times, Aboodi's influence was apparent in the February overthrow of **TW** co-CEO Nick Nicholas Jr. Aboodi is said to enjoy a very good relationship with Gerald M. Levin, who replaced Nicholas in the throne room.

Just how royal a fee Aboodi got for his part in the palace coup is any peon's guess.

A fondless farewell to Nick Nicholas Jr., who sails away from **Time Warner** in a \$15 million parachute. And a great big wet-kiss welcome to replacement heir apparent Jerry Levin, who gets the dual title of co-CEO and president of **TW**. Steve Ross, in absentia, continues as co-CEO and chairman.

Time Warner announced a fourth-quarter *profit*—its first since taking on \$11 billion in debt when Time Inc. acquired Warner Communications in January 1990—of \$45 million, compared with a loss of \$34 million for the same period a year ago. Revenues for the quarter rose 3%, to \$3.39 billion, from \$3.29 billion a year earlier. Its fiscal-year loss of \$99 million was much narrower than the \$227 million loss reported for the previous year. A steep drop in interest expense is credited for most of the gains.

At the time the \$11 billion debt was incurred, TW's interest payments were running them \$3 million a day.

Self-censorship on a grand scale: Richard M. Clurman, author of "To the End of Time: The Seduction and Conquest of a Media Empire," speaking on one particularly chilling effect of the **Time Warner** merger, writes that according to the provisions of the contract signed by the managing editors of all of Time Inc.'s magazine titles, each of them "could be fired for running a negative review of a **Time Warner** book or movie, or speaking critically to a reporter about anyone or any aspect of the huge enterprise." And so, "the managing editors of some of the most widely read magazines in the U.S.—in theory, at least, the upholders of free speech and freedom of the press—had agreed to be muzzled by their employer."

"Time" ... "People" ... "Entertainment Weekly" ... Keeping America safe for demography.

“The danger of a conflict between the white and the black inhabitants perpetually haunts the imagination of the Americans, like a painful dream.”

—Alexis de Tocqueville,
from Democracy in America, 1835