

Duane Elgin

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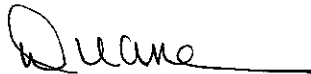
Dr. George Gerbner
Cultural Environment Movement
P.O. Box 31847
Philadelphia, PA 19104

Dear George,

I received your latest mailing on CEM activities: bravo! I want to stay in touch with your incredibly important work but cannot afford the \$100 membership currently. In the meantime, I wanted to send a couple of items that are directly related: 1) a small conference of professionals working on sustainability that will focus on the theme of "media and sustainability" and 2) a paper on media and sustainability that I recently presented in Kyoto at an international conference on future generations.

Best of luck to you in your work! Please note my change of address (for whoever is updating the computer files).

With best regards,



Duane Elgin



HOLIS REPORT

Issue #3, Winter 1994-95

THE QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER OF HOLIS: THE SOCIETY FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

Let's Discuss "The Media and Sustainability" (Feb 24-26)

Further progress has been made on our important February 24-26 weekend meeting at COMMONWEAL, in Bolinas CA, focusing on the greatly neglected topic of "The Media and Sustainability."

QUESTIONS TO ADDRESS

We have a large, complex, and evolving Message about a number of interconnected population/environment problems, resulting in the bottom-line belief that human efforts must be directed to creating a sustainable society. Is this message getting through?

Who needs to get The Message? How can it be better delivered? Is it being drowned out by other messages, both urgent and trivial? What counter-messages are negating the vision of sustainability? If so, what should be done about it?

More questions. Do we have a shared image of "the media" (TV, cable, newspapers, magazines, journals, books, libraries, the Internet)? How are the media changing? Which media are influential? Are TV and the mass media in general profoundly biased toward high-consumption lifestyles because of the way it is financed? Are conservatives using the media more effectively than progressives/environmentalists? What does it take to establish a "Green George Will" (a widely-syndicated green columnist)? Is "infoglut" the key problem in today's society and/or for creating a green voice (MM's pet idea)? Are we "Amusing Ourselves to Death"? (This is Neil Postman's 1985 book title; or think of Huxley's "soma" in multiple forms.) How can we become a learning society?

DISCUSSION INSTIGATORS

Four major presentations have been arranged by Duane Elgin, which should ignite plenty of discussion around the above questions and, doubtlessly, several dozen others. Chris Desser served as Director of the 1990 Earth Day (the largest grassroots demonstration in history); she should be eminently knowledgeable in how to create The Big Green Splash and should have insights on the upcoming 25th anniversary of Earth Day on April 22. Brad Knickerbocker, based in Ashland, Oregon, is the environmental reporter for *The Christian Science Monitor*. He has covered a wide range of green topics for the *Monitor*, perhaps more so than any other journalist in the mainstream media. Representing the "green" media will be André Carothers, former editor of *Greenpeace Magazine* and presently a contributing editor of *E Magazine*. And Duane Elgin will discuss the role of television in promoting sustainability, and the need for citizen action to hold broadcasters accountable. If time permits, Michael Marien will have some brief thoughts on the dysfunctional and obsolete structure of knowledge production. Michael Lerner, President of COMMONWEAL, may be on hand

to offer comments as a publisher of several books on sustainability and UNCED.

ADMINISTRATIVE DETAILS

Holis held its first West Coast meeting at COMMONWEAL in March 1993 and we had a wonderful time. The 60-acre site on the edge of the Pacific Ocean is spectacular, and the facilities are just a mile or so from the Pt. Reyes National Seashore. The vegetarian food was ample and scrumptious, such that we loudly applauded the kitchen staff! And the meeting room in Pacific House with its fireplace ablaze was just right for our needs. We look forward to another great gathering.

Please note the following:

- Room and board is \$100/day (\$200 for the weekend, beginning with cheese tray at 5:30 PM Friday and dinner at 6:30 PM, and ending with lunch on Sunday), payable to Jenipher Stowell, Director of the COMMONWEAL Retreat Center. You may attend for part of the weekend and pay accordingly, and bring interested friends.

- Please call Walter Corson at 202/628-4022 (as soon as possible and not later than Feb 15) if you will definitely or probably join us for all or part of the weekend, so that meals can be planned. Space is limited to the first 25 people. If you have any questions about the site or child care arrangements, call Jenipher Stowell (415/868-9205).

- Getting there: a map is enclosed. Call Walter Corson if you need a ride from and to Silicon Valley and the SF Airport on Friday afternoon and Sunday. Michael Marien may be able to take riders from and to the East Bay, also on Friday and Sunday.

- You may check in at any time after 1:00 PM on Friday, Feb 24. Turning into COMMONWEAL's driveway off Mesa Road, stay right and go directly to the salmon-colored Pacific House (the parking lot is just before you get there). The main contact phone number for the weekend is at Pacific House (415/868-9205). Alternatively, try the COMMONWEAL office (415/868-0970).

- Jenipher suggests that you bring warm clothing and good walking shoes, bathrobe (bathrooms are shared), small flashlight, soap, warm socks or slippers for indoors (no shoes in Pacific House!), and an alarm clock so you don't miss the tasty breakfast.

- Definite or probable attendees as of mid-January: Dick Meier, Robin Standish, Mary Clark, Les Milbrath, Ernest and Elaine Cohen, Sarah van Gelder of *In Context* magazine, Walter Corson, Bob Olson, Mike Marien, Duane Elgin, and our three guest presenters. George Besch, Robert Gilman, ~~William Cafferty~~, Allen Tough, and Ted Trzyna may possibly attend. Come join us.

Holis : The Society for a Sustainable Future was founded in 1992 to advance understanding of the global transition to sustainability. It seeks to do so by facilitating intense, on-going discussion among leading-edge thinkers regarding sustainability, which we define as learning to live within the capacity of the planet's life systems. Holis also seeks to promote action toward realizing a sustainable future.

Membership is open to any individual who can benefit from our dialogue and who thinks that he or she can contribute to our understanding and effectiveness in helping others to learn about furthering sustainability. Annual dues are US \$50, or \$25 for those with low income, payable to Holis, and sent to Christa Slaton. In addition to paying dues, all new and renewing members are asked to fill out our "Annual Information Form," to be reproduced in our annual *Member Directory* and this newsletter. Members attend Holis meetings, vote on administrative matters at meetings, and receive the annual directory, the newsletter, and various reports. Supporters are also invited to make donations. In turn, they receive the directory, newsletter, and reports.

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HOLIS REPORT

The Quarterly Newsletter of Holis:
The Society for a Sustainable Future
Issue #3 - Winter 1994-95
Michael Marien, Editor
Jana Colacino, Production Editor

"Progress Toward Sustainability:"

Report of our November Meeting

A small but lively group of Holis members, meeting on November 4-6 in the Ramada Hotel in Alexandria VA, was treated to a broad range of fascinating reports of progress on various fronts. Perhaps most important was the initial presentation by **Angela Park** of the recently-formed *President's Council on Sustainable Development*, which will issue an Interim Report in mid-1995, and recommendations for a National Sustainable Development Strategy in October 1995, which could lead to the implementation of a national strategy in 1997 (this was envisioned, however, before the unexpected advent of the Era of Newt, which may or may not lead to an entirely different path of development; Gingrich, incidentally, is a "futurist", albeit one who appears blind to hues of green). **Don Lesh**, President of the *Global Tomorrow Coalition*, discussed GTC's Sustainable America Initiative, a three-year program of regional forums to create leadership dialogue and implement strategies for sustainability. He also described plans for GTC's 10th Globescope Assembly, to be held October 10-14, 1995 in Alexandria's Mark Radisson Hotel, focusing on how far we have come and benchmarks for future progress. (The next Holis meeting may be in conjunction with this Assembly.) **Jim Schulman** outlined the work of the *Community Sustainability Resource Institute* (PO Box 11343, Takoma Park MD 20913), founded in 1989 to facilitate networking on local sustainability initiatives. **Susan Boyd** of CONCERN reported on progress toward creating the *Community Sustainability Network*, which hopes to serve as a clearinghouse for information on projects, issues, and resources. Other presentations were made by **Doug McKenzie-Mohr** on Canada's *SustainAbility* initiative, **Andy Euston** on his 26 years at HUD, **Rashmi Mayur** on various developments worldwide, and **Ernest and Elaine Cohen** on grassroots progress in the Philadelphia area.

NEW MEMBERS, eh?

- **Erika Erdmann** (R.R. 1, Lockeport, Nova Scotia, B0T 1L0, Canada; 902/656-2085) is publisher and editor of *Humankind Advancing*, dedicated to promotion of a farsighted and responsible Global Vision, consistent with science, that would make a sustainable world possible. She is co-author with David Stover of *Beyond a World Divided* (Boston: Shambhala, 1991) and serves as research assistant to Nobel Laureate Roger Sperry.

- **Marlene Roy** (Librarian, International Institute for Sustainable Development, 161 Portage Ave East, 6th Floor, Winnipeg, Manitoba R3B 0Y4 Canada; 204/958-7700; fax 204/

958-7710) is serving as contact person for all of the researchers at IISD (about a dozen).

- **John Robinson** (Director, Sustainable Development Research Institute, UBC; see Holis Report #2) sent copies of his 20-page Annual Report and an 8-page quarterly SDRI newsletter. To get on the mailing list, contact SDRI, B5-2202 Main Mall, Univ of British Columbia, Vancouver V6T 1ZT, Canada; 604/822-8198; fax 604/822-9191). John is also active with the Canadian Global Change Program, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the Canadian Committee for the IIASA, and the national social marketing effort *SustainAbility*.

ODDS AND ENDS

- *The Holis Member Directory*, prepared by Doug McKenzie-Mohr, will be ready in time for our February meeting in Bolinas.

- New book of possible great relevance to our February meeting: *Selling Science: How the Press Covers Science and Technology* (Revised Edition) by Dorothy

Nelkin. NY: W.H. Freeman, Feb 1995/240p/\$15.95pb.

- **Keep Smiling:** a recent *New Yorker* cartoon depicts a tree in a forest advising a nearby tree: "That's the nature of a mature relationship, dear. Just because we haven't heard from Al Gore lately doesn't mean he cares any less."

AWAKENING THE MASS MEDIA TO BUILD A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

Duane Elgin

The Challenging World of the Future

What kind of world will the next generation inhabit? If we continue along our present course, children alive today will inhabit a planet with a warming climate that wreaks havoc on food production and produces massive waves of famine; with supplies of cheap petroleum exhausted; with widespread deforestation; with the goodwill of the human family ravaged as nations fight over access to remaining resources; with coastal cities inundated by rising seas; with millions of people migrating to resource-favored regions; with solar radiation penetrating through a weakened ozone layer and threatening the Earth's food chain on land and in the seas; with far less farmland and productive topsoil available to feed an additional 3 billion people; with a drastically reduced number of plant and animal species; and with toxic pollution spread throughout the land, water and air. In short, unless dramatic changes are made in our manner of producing, consuming and living, we will soon create a world filled with monumental destruction, suffering, conflict and despair. There is no necessity that we go down this path and hit the wall of absolute limits to growth. We have the time and opportunity to design ourselves back into nature with ways of living that are adapted to the unique ecology, culture and resources of each bioregion of the planet.

Our evolutionary intelligence is now being tested. Will the human family struggle forward only to fall back before achieving our full measure of development, the Earth's environment crippled by pollution, its abundant resources squandered, and humanity torn apart by chronic conflict? Or, will humanity consciously move through this time of testing and challenge, work diligently to restore the Earth's biosphere to its former beauty and integrity, and seek reconciliation around a future of mutually assured development? We have reached a decisive turning point in human evolution. A positive future will not arrive automatically—it will emerge only if we respond in creative new ways equal to the challenges before us.

Adapted from a paper prepared for the *First International Future Generations Forum* in Kyoto, Japan. November 22-27, 1994. © Duane Elgin, 107 A Holcomb Avenue, Larkspur, California, U.S.A. 94939. (415) 927-8308 **

Responding in Ways Equal to the Challenge

What level of response is appropriate to this challenge? If we see our home burning down, we know we must do more than throw a few cups of tea on the blaze. Analogously, if we are to build a sustainable, compassionate and creative planetary civilization, then it is essential that we respond to our global crisis in ways that are equal or proportional to the challenges we face. At least three dimensions of change are essential:

- **Sustainable Direction**—The Earth cannot sustain ten billion people striving for a high-consumption lifestyle. It is imperative that we develop workable visions of sustainable ways of living that offer the potential for an enhanced quality of life.
- **Sufficient Speed**—We have to respond fast enough to match our swiftly changing situation. Even if we move in the right direction, with human inertia it could easily be “too little and too late.”
- **Adequate Scope**—Only broad and deep changes—as great as the shift from the agrarian era to the industrial era—will be adequate. We cannot expect marginal measures to suffice (for example, cars with a slightly improved fuel economy, modest recycling measures, etc.). The changes required are sweeping and far-reaching.

Currently, most developed nations are: 1) moving in a counterproductive direction with undifferentiated economic growth; 2) mobilizing themselves at far too slow a speed to respond meaningfully to the rapidly developing global crisis; and 3) making only superficial adjustments in our ways of producing, living and consuming. How, then, are we going to achieve the level and speed of creative action that is required?

The Imperative of Voluntary Action

It is unrealistic to think we can simply regulate or legislate our way into a sustainable, compassionate and creative future for the Earth. In both the public and

private sectors, many bureaucracies are already faltering under the weight of their overwhelming size and complexity. Most citizens have seen the limits of bureaucracy and understand that if creative action is required, it can only come through the conscious and deliberate actions of countless individuals working in cooperation with one another. Bureaucracy cannot save us. To realize the changes now essential will require the **voluntary choices** and actions of millions—even billions—of persons. Never before in human history have so many people been called upon to make such sweeping changes in so little time. To act with the speed, cooperation and creativity demanded by our situation will require the respectful actions of free individuals consciously acting in concert with one another.

How can millions of persons spread around the world achieve this unprecedented level of species-teamwork to build a sustainable and meaningful future? In a word, through communication! It was our ability to communicate that enabled humans to evolve from awakening hunter-gatherers to the verge of global civilization, and it will be a new level and type of communication that will enable us to build a workable and meaningful future. At every level—local, regional, national and global—we must start communicating, in earnest, to build an authentic base of shared understanding from which to build our common future.

The human family cannot make the sweeping changes that are required—in consumption patterns, energy and transportation policies, the design of communities, international relations, and much more—without a massive increase in the level and quality of communication. People will resist making changes unless—and until—there exists broad agreement about the nature of change. As a first step, people will need to communicate their despair that we can restore the global ecology, their resentments for broken dreams of material prosperity, and their unwillingness to make sacrifices unless there is greater fairness. Only after a cathartic process of learning, communication and reconciliation will people be ready to act with the level of energy, creativity and cooperation that our circumstances demand. However, once citizens know what other citizens locally—and around the world—are willing to do, and once they are settled in their own minds as to what constitutes appropriate action, then they and their representatives in government can act with authority. Where can we acquire this unprecedented increase in human communication?

The Raw Power of Mass Communication

A communications revolution is already sweeping the planet. Within a decade we will see the integration of television, computers, satellites, fiber optics and other technologies into a new system with the potential for instantaneous communication around the planet. Already the raw power of television is staggering. For example, in the U.S. 98% of all homes have a TV set—more than have indoor toilets, stoves or refrigerators. What is more, the average person watches more than four hours per day. Not surprisingly, television provides a majority of people with a majority of their news about the world.

Roughly 60% of the world now has access to television and this percentage is growing rapidly. With the speed of light, television extends our involvement to the entire planet. Because we are a visually-oriented species—"one picture is worth a thousand words," "seeing is believing"—television embodies a common, visual language that makes it the primary source of information and understanding for the human family. Through the eyes of television, we can touch the reality of a starving villager in Africa, we can see the effects of acid rain in Germany, we can feel the despair of ghetto residents in New York city, and we can touch the reality of fighting in the streets of Northern Ireland. Television makes every viewer an active witness—a knowing and feeling participant in what is being shown. **By any measure, television has become the "social brain" or "central nervous system" for the human family.**

The Misuse of the Media's Power

Given the pervasiveness of television, we already possess the tools of local to global communication that can transform our semi-conscious drift towards ecological catastrophe into conscious action in support of a sustainable future. However, these tools are not being used to advance civilization; instead, they are being used primarily to advance consumption. In the U.S. the average person sees at least 25,000 commercials a year on TV. Commercials are far more than a pitch for a particular product; they are also advertisements for the attitudes, values and lifestyles that surround the consumption of that product. Mass entertainment is being used to capture the attention of a mass audience that is then appealed to by mass advertising to

promote mass consumption. The programming that goes with this advertising is consciously constructed to provide a psychological context that is congruent with high-consumption lifestyles. For example, advertisers for fast cars, rich foods and luxurious living will not place their ads in programs that might unsettle potential consumers with issues of poverty, injustice and ecological calamity. Not surprisingly, programming that describes the need for more ecological modes of living almost never appears on television as it would threaten the legitimacy of the culture of conspicuous consumption. By default, we are left with programming and advertising that is profoundly biased and that selectively portrays and powerfully reinforces a materialistic and consumerist view of life. **By programming television to achieve commercial success, the mindset of entire nations is being programmed for ecological failure!**

The pervasive commercialization of television programming is distorting and undermining the very foundation of civilization—the view of reality and social identity that we hold in common. The consumerist bias of television is no longer an issue of “good taste”—it is a survival issue because it is literally killing us! By promoting consumerism and simultaneously distracting people from the urgency of the global ecological crisis, contemporary television programming is actively creating a civilizational mindset that promotes the devastation of the biosphere.

Television may be our social window onto the world, but the view it provides is cramped and narrow. Television may be the collective mirror in which we see ourselves, but the reflection it gives is often distorted and unbalanced. Television may be the primary story-telling machine through which we find shared meaning in our lives, but the stories it tells are typically shallow, violent, demeaning and shortsighted. Television may function as the barometer of social feeling through which we judge the mood of our communities, country and world, but the feedback it provides is often superficial, consumer-obsessed and devoid of soulful qualities.

To repeat, our evolutionary intelligence as a species is being directly tested by how we use our powerful tools of mass communication. Will future generations look back to this pivotal period in human history and conclude that we failed to use our “social brain”—the multi-media television system—to support our healthy evolution? Or will they conclude that citizens of the Earth rose to this time of challenge by consciously mobilizing our tools of mass communication and fostering a dramatic increase in civilizational awareness, consensus and creative action?

The Positive Use of the Mass Media

The future of our physical environment will depend directly upon the future we make of our electronic environment. Lester Brown, author of the highly respected *State of the World* reports puts it plainly: "**The communications industry is the only instrument that has the capacity to educate on a scale that is needed and in the time available.**" A number of changes are needed if we are to harness the immense power of the communications industry to build a sustainable future; among them are the following:

- **Earth Commercials**—To balance the onslaught of aggressively pro-consumerist commercials, we need a corresponding number of "Earth commercials" that awaken a compassionate consciousness and encourage people to consume with an awareness of the planet's ecology and the needs of future generations. These could be produced at a low cost, with a high level of humor and creativity, and have an enormous impact in fostering an ecological consciousness.
- **Viewer Feedback Forums**—Television almost never turns its cameras around to look directly at itself and its profound consumerist bias. Ironically, the last taboo topic on television is television itself and how it is reinforcing a consumerist consciousness that, in turn, threatens the evolutionary potential of our species. We need to use television to create highly public forums with live polling and citizen feedback that hold the mass media accountable for presenting a mature and balanced diet of programming.
- **Ecologically Balanced Programming**—The number and intensity of ecologically relevant programs needs to match the magnitude and severity of the problems we face. We need a new balance in our diet of television programming. Currently, the overwhelming majority of programming is devoted to entertainment. We are entertainment rich and knowledge poor. We are like long-distance runners who prepare for marathon races by eating 95% junk food. We need a far healthier diet of images, ideas and messages that portray the reality of our changing world situation.

- **Positive Views of the Future**—We cannot build a future consciously that we have not first imagined. Currently, we are inundated with negative views of the future showing ecological catastrophes and resource wars producing famine and disease. We desperately need positive views that inspire hope and that provide aligning visions for building a sustainable, compassionate and creative future. We need fresh scenarios of the future that portray what life could be like for families, neighborhoods, cities and the world if we begin the serious work of designing ourselves into a sustainable future.
- **Ecologically Oriented Entertainment Programming**—Because television teaches continuously about the lifestyles and values that are the norm for society, we need entertainment programming that actively explores more ecological ways of living, working, consuming, relating and thinking. We need entertainment programming that explores the many different ways in which we can adapt to the global ecological challenge with alternative ways of living. The portrayal of everyday life in sustainable societies can surely serve as the creative source for for innumerable comedies, tragedies and dramas.
- **Dialogues on the Future**—Television is on the verge of moving from a one-way information system to a two-way communication system. With interactivity, televised forums could be developed where a diverse array of people can speak publicly on behalf of future generations and make appeals to the current generation to rapidly evolve our cultures, worldview, communication priorities, economic activities, and so on. These forums could include live polling and other modes of feedback that enable the average citizen of the planet to become directly involved in the dialogue.

What Is Blocking Us?

If communication is the critical ingredient for responding to a deteriorating biosphere, and if we already have all of the tools needed to enable us to communicate our way into a sustainable future, then what is stopping us? Many citizens feel the electronic media are part of the problem rather than part of the solution—they assume

television cannot be changed, that it will always be in the business of promoting consumption, and that it will never be used to promote an ecological ethic. Like the early days of the civil rights movement, the feminist movement and the environmental movement, many persons feel powerless to change "the system." Few people realize the extent to which "they own the public airwaves." In fact, if the public were to come together and hold the television industry accountable for their communication needs, change would be rapid and sweeping. Another impediment to change is psychological inertia—the natural, human resistance to fundamental change. Many people do not want to acknowledge how severe and urgent are the challenges we now face—to do so would bring disruption to lives that already seem impossibly stressed and stretched.

Overall, if we are to build a workable future through our voluntary actions, then we need to go beyond our skeptical view that television is only a consumerist medium. We need to assert that **we are more than consumers who want to be entertained—we are also citizens who want to be informed and involved in choosing our pathway into the future.**

Next Steps for Moving into the Future

The next few decades will be a decisive time for humanity and the planet. We face an unprecedented crisis where, faster than we expected, the ecological system upon which human civilization depends is unraveling with devastating consequences. Our situation is so serious and so urgent that we cannot afford to blame one another. We need to work with compassion to awaken the minds and soften the hearts of people who are strongly attached to perpetuating the status quo in business and government. While the immense problems we face make the short-term future look bleak, I am confident in our long-run evolutionary capacity as a species. An exciting and rewarding era of opportunity awaits us if we rise to the challenge of living more sustainably.

To build a sustainable future, we need to cultivate a culture of sustainability—a social and psychological mindset as citizens, communities and nations that reflects a new way of thinking about the Earth and a new valuing of future generations. Once established, innumerable actions will flow naturally from a cultural mindset of sustainability. It is primarily through our "social brain" (the television system and its

interconnected computer and satellite networks) that this mindset will be established and cultivated. How we use our tools of mass communication is not just another issue, it is the basis for understanding and responding to all issues. With mass communication we can achieve the level of mass cooperation needed to adapt our manner of living to the new global realities.

Assuming that a problem recognized is a problem half solved, then we can make a giant leap forward in coping with the global ecological crisis by simply placing the communications issue on our collective social agenda. This new way of looking at the media is unfamiliar territory for everyone concerned—citizens, political leaders and media managers. It is not surprising, then, that so far we have made only the most timid and tentative efforts to use the new communication technologies to support the awakening of a sustainability consciousness.

How can we mobilize our “social brain” on behalf of our survival as a species? We can bring a new level of determination, courage and inventiveness into imagining how we can use our new tools of mass communication to build a more conscious democracy and reflective society. We can assert our paramount rights over our own consciousness as a body of citizens and take back the most precious environmental resource we possess as civilizations—the subtle environment of shared consciousness that provides the context for all of our social actions. We can build a new social and cultural movement for media accountability that holds the communications superhighway answerable for realizing its highest function—that of enabling a new level of understanding and consensus to emerge in support of a human future that develops in harmony with the Earth.