

# The Second American Revolution

On December 20 and 21, 1990, a small group of concerned citizens gathered in a borrowed Washington, D.C. conference room to launch what they called the *Cultural Environmental Movement*. Their intention: to address the problems of an increasingly centralized, globalized and mass-marketed media environment, and move toward a more democratic cultural policy.

by George Gerbner

**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. It is not that anymore. We have just begun to take the measure of that transformation.

Now, for the first time in human history, our children are born into an environment of images and messages independent of their home, their school, their church, their neighborhood, and often even of their native country. Stories about life, the world and the values we seek are now largely mass-produced and mass-marketed. The most frequent storytellers are no longer parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, teachers, friends or clergy with their own stories to tell, but 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 sig-

nificant 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 market-place 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 this extra dividend for the products we buy even if we've never read or watched the ads.

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 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.

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, the U.S. Constitution, democratic law, and the basic principles of liberal education and self-government. 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 U.S. Constitution's 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 decisionmaking and against outside cultural domination. Helping local movements, especially in the most vulnerable countries, to invest in their cultural as well as 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 towards a realistic democratic agenda. ■

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