

THE MASS MEDIA AND THE MIND-BODY HEALTH OF CIVILIZATIONS

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The Mind-Body Connection for Civilizations

Over the past several decades, countless books, tapes, and self-help workshops have been developed that focus 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.” Now, many people bring a daily awareness of the mind-body connection when it comes 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 that I see at a social level: I believe that the collective mind of our society is manifest 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 apparatus as civilizations. In the U.S. 99% 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 U.S. 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 physical health of individuals, so too can they 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 and, 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 U.S., 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 the messages and images of "success" and the "good life" that are portrayed through the mass media. To explore this critical concern further, here are five different ways of framing the issue of the mass media and the mental health of civilizations.

A Menu of Perspectives

1) The evolutionary challenge is to see that the mass media are manufacturing desire and 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 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 transforming the lack of reflective consciousness in the media. The media does not hold a mirror up to itself. 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 is the social brain of our civilization.

3) The evolutionary challenge is to see what is missing from the mass media. The media focuses on sensational events and personal conflicts and generally fails 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 immensely powerful trends are, in this generation, forever changing the Earth as a natural system and social system.

4) The evolutionary challenge is 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 fails to actively cultivate qualities of empathy, mutual understanding, and communication and, instead, fosters 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 the

ways of using the mass media will nourish, strengthen and enrich the life of the individual soul and our capacity for collective service.

5) The evolutionary challenge is 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 does the media remain relatively calm and steady in the midst of social turbulence, chaos, 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 too can they be cultivated by an entire civilization. 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.

We 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 the needs for creating a healthy and sustainable social body.

Transforming Our Social Mind

Because so many people feel profoundly resigned and powerless to make a difference in giving feedback to the mass media, it is crucially important for we citizens to educate ourselves about our important and powerful communication rights. *The bottom line is this: community-by-community, we citizens literally own the airwaves.* If programming goes through the public's airwaves, the public has the right and the affirmative duty to take an active role in choosing that programming. Unlike cable television (with Discovery, the History Channel, CNN, etc.), and unlike public television (the PBS system), television broadcasters (primarily ABC, CBS, NBC, and FOX) in local communities in the United States have a unique contract with the people of each community. Based on legislation dating back to 1927, television broadcasters have an overriding obligation to "serve the public interest, convenience, and necessity." This duty to serve the public before their own pocketbooks has been affirmed by more than a half-century of law in the U.S. Supreme Court, Congress, and the FCC. Despite these laws, the reality is now turned upside down: TV broadcasters serve their profits first and put the genuine interests of the public a distant second. What is required is for the public to clearly express what is in its collective interest—and once that happens, the full force of these laws becomes applicable.

If the public does not assert its overriding rights and responsibilities as mature citizen-viewers, then the mass media will continue to program the mindset of our society for commercial success and evolutionary failure. Because television broadcasters have clearly taken their stand on the side of commerce and short-term profits, the burden of responsibility has shifted to the public to take a stand on the side of life and the long-term future. It is time for the public to make its collective voice heard in the new media environment. It is time for the public to announce that, despite whatever our other differences may be, we stand together as one in saying that we are no longer willing be passive spectators in the face of a broadcast media that seeks to exploit rather than serve the public interest.

It is time for citizens to organize themselves, community-by-community, and hold broadcasters genuinely accountable for providing programming that serves the community's self-defined interests. It is time for citizens to develop tools of mass communication—"televised viewer feedback forums"—that provide a democratic means for the public to express its collective interests on an ongoing basis with regard to how its "social brain" is to be programmed. A straightforward but extraordinary cultural shift will occur when the public begins using the public airwaves to communicate publicly to broadcasters about their legal responsibility to serve the public interest. With the public declaring its interests publicly and frequently, it will incline the television industry (and thus our collective mind and body) in a more healthy direction.