

Revised

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DRAFT FOR COMMENT

A CULTURAL ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT? WHAT, WHY AND HOW.

The cultural environment is the climate of images and messages that cultivates much of what we think and do in common. Its media mainstream is the basis for the making of publics and the shaping of their capacity for action.

"Media" are no longer mostly separately owned and selectively used local channels of communication. They are merging into an integrated global structure, transcending national boundaries, and discharging large systems of mass-produced messages and images into the common and inescapable symbolic environment.

The process of growing up and learning about life and the world has become largely a byproduct of marketing. It admits no comparable challenge to its perspectives. It cannot meet vital needs that do not lend themselves to its purposes. It is beyond the reach of democratic policy-making.

Until recently the common culture was hand-crafted, home-made, community inspired. It is now largely mass-produced and mass-marketed. It is driven by increasingly restrictive centralized and globalized industrial policy. Creative professional effort and local citizen action can limit it but only a change in cultural policy can free it.

The media reform coalition collapsed in the late 1970s. Since then, rapid consolidation and global conglomeration have made old concepts obsolete. Today's "media" coalesce in a total cultural environment that calls for the environmental approach.

For the first time in human history, a child is born into a cultural environment largely independent of the home, the school, the church, the community, the local culture, and often even of the native country. Most of the stories are brought to most children (and their families) not by parents, teachers, clergy or community with their own stories to tell but by a handful of distant transnational conglomerates with something to sell.

This astounding historical development affects the ~~the~~ way we grow up to think and act human and learn about life's choices as profoundly as the physical environment affects life's chances.

The new story-telling process produces consumers but gives citizens little chance of participation or choice of

direction. It is financed by a "levy" added to the cost of goods we buy. We pay that levy whether we want it or not. We pay it when we buy a bar of soap to wash, not when we want to read or watch. For the advertiser it is a tax-deductible business expense -- deducted from the public treasury.

The levy is that part of the price which goes to advertise products and promote values and life-styles. But it pays for much more. It subsidizes -- and limits -- all other features of commercial media, the mainstream of our common cultural environment. It is an insufficient, inadequate, and inequitable resource on which to base an otherwise diverse culture. The problem is not so much the commerce it makes possible as the ideology and constraints it imposes.

Consumers pay that levy whether they know it or not. They pay it whether they want it or not. They pay it even if they never use the media it supports. But they have no say, as citizens, in the crucial decisions about how that levy will be used.

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 Cultural Environmental Movement is concerned with urgent problems of human socialization and action. These include the cultivation of mentalities and behaviors that drug, hurt and kill thousands every day; portrayals that stereotype, marginalize, dehumanize, and stigmatize; the cult of media violence that can desensitize, intimidate, terrorize and, when called upon, incinerate or pulverize; the drift toward the inevitable environmental crunch; the silent crumbling of our infrastructure; the costly neglect of vital institutions such as public education, criminal justice, and the financial responsibility system; make-believe media politics masquerading as democracy; and the appalling waste of human and natural resources concealed by slogans that wage "war" on everything except injustice and Third World conditions in our own midst.

The challenge of today's cultural environment requires the building of a new coalition and a broad constituency to support media education, place cultural issues on the socio-political agenda, and develop ways of participation in national and international cultural policy-making.

The movement is to counter existing censorship, not to extend it. It is to join workers in the media fighting for creative and journalistic freedom and against the pressures and constraints that compel them to present life in the most

currently saleable packages. The movement is not for dictation but for liberation.

One way to get started may be to convene a national conference of representatives of local media councils; teacher's and parents' groups; groups concerned with children youth and aging; women's, sexual, racial, ethnic and other minority and advocacy groups; educational, health, environmental, legal, and other professional associations; consumer groups and agencies; associations of creative workers in the media; and other citizen's organizations and prominent individuals committed to broadening the scope and diversity of our media-dominated culture.

Such a conference would launch a movement concerned with the mass-produced cultural environment and its relevance to problems that may not fit current marketing strategies and priorities. Some of the most prominent of these involve war and the cult of violence, health, education, justice, physical environment, the arts, public investment, cultural standardization and domination, the growing siege mentality of our communities and nation, and the widening gaps of opportunity and justice that divide us at home and in the world.

The conference would assemble people and groups with a variety of aims and perspectives but a shared interest in the common culture and its freedom from centralized dictation - private as well as public. The purpose of the conference would be to establish a minimum basis for coordinated action, and to set up a broadly representative steering mechanism for continuing exploration, consultation, and action.