

# CEM Perspectives: An Overview for Environmentalists

by Rick Crawford 8 August 1995

## What is the Cultural Environment?

Most of what we know, or *think* we know, we learn from stories we're told. That process used to be hand-crafted, home-made, and community-inspired. Now it is mostly mass-produced and policy-driven. It is the end result of a complex manufacturing and marketing process. For the first time in human history, most children are born into homes where most of the stories do not come from their communities, schools, churches, or parents with their own stories to tell, but from a handful of conglomerates with something to sell. Channels proliferate and new technologies pervade home and office, while mergers and bottom-line pressures shrink creative alternatives and reduce diversity of content. Media are coalescing into a seamless, integrated cultural environment.

The Cultural Environment is a system of symbols, images, words, concepts, stories, and values. It *cultivates* much of who we are, what we think, what we do, and how we conduct our affairs. Within it, we live out virtually our entire lives. It is a *shared resource* – and a shared pollution *sink* – that is (more or less) held in common by the people of a particular society or subculture. It shapes our language and ideology, our perceptions of the world, our self-images and relations with others, and our expectations about life. These in turn shape our buildings and land-use patterns, and the development of our technologies.

Authors such as Thoreau, Lewis Mumford, and Rene Dubos have shown us how those who develop and reproduce these artifacts – from outer environments such as cities, to inner mental environments such as worldviews, value systems, roles, and myths – are defining the cultural environments that then become the measure of all things, the standards by which we classify and evaluate every aspect of our world, and of our selves. These “cultural filters” shape, color, and distort our perceptions, thoughts, and emotions — frequently at deep sub-cognitive or pre-conscious levels.

The Cultural Environment serves as the “background context” for all human communication, with our newly transmitted symbols in the foreground. Yet the Cultural Environment is not a flat, unchanging backdrop, set behind the stage of modern life. Instead, we are *inside* it, and our communications affect it (“words have consequences”). The *meaning* of new foreground messages is derived from the cognitive background residue produced by previous messages. By influencing our interpretations and the production of meaning, the Cultural Environment *pervades* everything we do, and everything we are. In a sense, it is a collective semantic closure.

There are important parallels between the physical and cultural environments. A fish immersed in water would have difficulty understanding how pollution is changing its own internal body chemistry, and altering the motivations and social behavior of other fish. Similarly, humans immersed in both physical and cultural environments are susceptible to the “Boiling Frog Syndrome” – we are slow to notice when gradual changes degrade our environment, reducing our quality of life and our capacity for meaningful action, and eventually making these environments unfit for human habitation.

Increasingly, the evolution of the Cultural Environment is moving beyond democratic reach, as control is concentrated within a corporate “media monopoly”. Content is orchestrated across media – newspapers, TV, movies, magazines, radio, videogames, even school curricula – as the lines blur between advertising, editorials, news, and entertainment. New categories – infotainment, advertorials, edutainment, and infomercials – disguise propaganda, making it far more effective.

Research has shown that the new cultural environment blurs diverse outlooks, shapes public opinion, blends perspectives into a pervasive mainstream, and bends that mainstream to the service of those who own and pay for it. The resulting cultural pathologies provide economic and political benefits to special interests, but these distorted cultural perceptions and dysfunctional values are an obstacle to the missions of progressive NGOs. Marketing imperatives, coupled with economic concentration of power, mean that new media technologies increasingly will tend to become means of social control – solidifying the unsustainable status quo – rather than liberating forces for participatory democracy.

### **What is CEM – the Cultural Environment Movement?**

The Cultural Environment Movement (CEM) is a broad international coalition of public interest organizations and individual citizens concerned with the full range of mass media's impacts on individuals and cultures. We speak with many voices and perspectives, but we share fundamental concerns regarding the degradation of our cultural environments.

Various concerns include media's promotion of environmentally damaging consumerism, misleading images of the environment as invulnerable to degradation, the prevalence of mass-produced media violence as a cheap dramatic ingredient, and portrayals that stigmatize and dehumanize minority and majority alike.

The CEM opposes all forms of censorship, including those imposed by governments. But in America, CEM is far more concerned with censorship by the press — self-suppression of news and entertainment content not by the government, but rather by the press itself due to fear of displeasing its advertisers. The flip side of censoring damaging information is amplifying beneficial information (or simply fabricating it). Mass media outlets compete with each other to produce “advertiser-friendly” copy and programming. Without any overt conspiracy, these dynamics dominate media markets.

“Editor & Publisher” (Jan 16, 1993) reported that virtually all 150 newspaper editors in a 1992 Marquette Univ. study acknowledged interference by advertisers. 93% of editors said advertisers tried to influence the content of their newspaper articles. 71% of editors said advertisers tried to kill certain stories outright. And 37% of editors were honest enough to admit that they actually had succumbed to this advertiser pressure. More than half (55%) said there was pressure from within their own newspaper to write or tailor news stories to please advertisers.

A recent anonymous survey of Society of American Business Editors and Writers found that 75% were aware of growing pressure by advertisers to influence the content of their sections. 45% of the respondents admitted that this pressure has influenced their editorial decisions. So much for “un-biased” dissemination of factual information, an essential basis for the efficient market hypothesis.

A Nielsen survey found that 80% of American TV news directors admit they broadcast industry-produced Video News Releases (VNRs) at least several times a month. Another study found that less than half the VNR broadcasts identified their (biased corporate) origin.

*“That’s the great thing about VNRs. Everybody sees them, but nobody realizes it. You have a corporate message to get across, and there’s a TV news anchor saying it to millions of people.”* — ad agency executive quoted in “Making News”, Consumer Reports, Oct. 1991

*“This is the secret of propaganda: Those who are to be persuaded by it should be completely immersed in the ideas of the propaganda, without ever noticing that they are being immersed in it.”* — Joseph Goebbels, 28 March 1933 (quoted in “Marketing Madness”)

Today's "Information Age" is pervaded by a media *climate of disinformation*. It is characterized not only by "greenscam" programming and advertising that misleads consumers, but also by selectively censored news content, whose suppression misleads businessmen and perturbs markets.

### Mass Communications Research: The Cultivation Perspective

Historically, mass communication research began with a model of "direct effects" – Orson Welles' radio broadcast of "War of the Worlds" and nationalistic propaganda led many to fear that electronic mass media would exert a short-term and overwhelmingly powerful influence on individual viewers. When that model proved false, the pendulum swung to postulate "all-powerful *audiences*" – and indeed, evidence abounds that some audience members do perform "oppositional decoding" to render some propaganda ineffective. (But even, e.g., those who avoid TV entirely, are exposed to its influence indirectly, via their dealings with people who do watch TV.)

A third major paradigm of mass communication research is the *cultivation* perspective, pioneered by Dr. George Gerbner and colleagues. (Gerbner, Dean Emeritus of the Univ. of Penn. Annenberg School for Communication, is now Chair of CEM.) The cultivation hypothesis is that, despite differences among programs and ads, commercially-driven mass media (TV in particular) constitute a *coherent system* of images and messages that have **long-term cumulative impacts**: TV cultivates and then reinforces certain predispositions and preferences from infancy on. Repeated exposure to (immersion in) the *total pattern* – rather than to specific isolated programs – cultivates *shared conceptions of reality* among otherwise diverse publics. (see enclosed "*Television's Cultural Mainstream: Which Way Does It Run?*")

In seeking evidence of cultivation, research methodology compares light viewers to heavy viewers, after correcting for other factors (e.g., income, political views). That is, it compares similar populations that differ primarily in their media exposure. The resulting "cultivation differentials" are systematic and significant. Just as a few degrees shift in average global temperatures may have *nonlinear impacts* such as an ice age, a small shift in the cultural climate can disproportionately impact an existing balance of social and political decisionmaking.

While the majority of cultivation research published to date demonstrates a "mainstreaming" effect of network TV, newer media technologies make it economically efficient to distribute content *targeted* at populations selected for specific demographics. We can expect the public to become more divided and *fragmented*, as the remaining non-commercial values in our cultures are further degraded by the *cumulative* environmental impact of "advertiser-friendly" images and messages.

### Why should Environmental NGOs care about Cultural Environments?

As (physical) environmental NGOs, we have focused myopically on issues such as pollution, habitat/biodiversity loss, ozone holes, and global warming. We have been only peripherally concerned with *public perceptions and knowledge* of the environment, and we have virtually ignored ominous *climate changes in public consciousness*, and a dwindling of our capacity democratically to alter our society's unsustainable trajectory. We have focused too much on the *symptoms* of environmental degradation, and not enough on the *structural causes*.

The incentive structure of the growth economy drives environmental degradation. It is not sufficient to ask, "What should we do to transform our culture into a sustainable society?" Rather, we must also ask, "What is *preventing* our society from 'naturally' evolving into more sustainable modes?"

given that roughly 80% of Americans still claim to be “environmentalists”. A similar shift in perspective illuminates the subject of environmental education: We should focus more attention on the existing structure of anti-environmental “education” propagated via various media.

The existing structure and dynamics of mass media institutions prevent a “free marketplace of ideas/values”. Instead, commercial distortions promote an “un-natural selection” of ideas and values that impede our society’s ability to adapt to our *real* environment. Many of us find it more comforting to deny reality, and instead purchase our choice of mass-produced *fantasy environments*.

Marshall McLuhan was too timid in claiming that, “*The medium IS the message.*” Rather, (*increasingly targeted*) media **HAVE BECOME** the environment.

CEM is especially concerned with distortions in the flows of information that have undermined the democratic process. Marketing priorities cannot resolve, and often exacerbate these problems. NGOs, working in isolation, have neither the time nor the clout to remedy the *structural* causes. A sampling of *structural* problems includes:

- In America, there are more Public Relations flacks than journalists.
- The PR industry maintains extensive computerized *dossiers* containing detailed personal information on over 6,000 environmental journalists. Not only do PR flacks outnumber journalists, but they have far better tools for “opposition research” and manipulation. Journalistic phenomena like Gregg Easterbrook and Keith Schneider are made, not born. We should expect to see many more of them *manufactured* in the future.
- Where is the locus of power in America today? Why does Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan brief Rush Limbaugh on upcoming changes in Fed policy more frequently than he briefs Congress or legitimate journalists?
- Tele-Communications Inc. (TCI), the world’s largest cable operator, already produces and distributes two conservative TV series. It is now producing a third series called “Damn Right”, which will focus on such issues as “Privatizing the Grand Canyon.” TCI President John Malone is an avowed admirer of Rush Limbaugh. As TCI enters the Right wing news business, it is refusing to carry alternative ideological content such as the progressive “90’s Channel”, whose programs have backed trade union organizers and exposed corporate polluters.
- Media owners refuse to sell slots to progressive NGOs who attempt to *purchase* (at going market rates) space to run their own “counter-commercials”, i.e., ads that oppose the established order. Examples include numerous “uncommercials” from Adbusters that criticize overconsumption, the neo-classical economic paradigm, and industrial forestry. Similarly, when the Mdewakanton Sioux attempted to buy TV airtime to broadcast their message against a Prairie Island nuclear dump, all stations in the region refused to sell them airtime. All attempts by staunch conservatives Pat Buchanan and Phyllis Schlafly to purchase air time on the *Rush Limbaugh* show for broadcast ads against GATT’s New WTO were rejected. That’s what the corporations mean when they call it a “free market” of ideas — THEIR ideas, not ours!
- The Big 3 automakers spend more every year just to advertise cars in America than the government spends on mass transit. Advertiser-friendly entertainment programming depicts the automobile as essential for one to operate effectively in society, and pursue immediate gratification of impulses. Images portray cars driving (fast) along empty roads through pristine landscapes.
- Market imperatives force journalists to focus on seemingly isolated short-term *events* while ignoring ongoing interrelated *processes* of environmental and social degradation. One result is the artificially high salience of issues such as crime and monetary deficits in comparison with environmental issues.

- In America, the \$148 *Billion* spent annually on advertising is as much as the entire country spends on higher education. It is greater than the GNP of all but 17 countries.
- The results are similar when currency is measured in time instead of money: By the time today's teenagers reach 75 years of age, *13 of those years will have been spent watching TV*, more time than they will spend on formal education. Three of those years will have been spent watching ads on TV.

### Environmental Literacy – a Nation at Risk

The Wheat Foods Council (an industry trade group) was shocked at the findings of a 1991 nationwide Gallup poll they had commissioned:

Only 51% of Americans know that “white” bread is based on wheat,  
but 48% think that *oatmeal* is produced from wheat!

In a 1993 nationwide Hart poll — which included some members of environmental groups — not one single respondent mentioned biodiversity or habitat loss as a major environmental threat. Only 22% of Americans have even heard of an issue called “the loss of biological diversity”.

American public opinion about humanity's fundamental links to the biosphere is *anything but informed!* Flunking the oatmeal quiz is not an isolated quirk. An *environmental literacy* poll conducted today — even among members of environmental groups — would highlight the profound ignorance and misinformation that afflicts us.

The average American today has very little *direct experience* with (what we formerly termed) natural phenomena. We have been so successful at encapsulating ourselves inside artificial environments that most of our “experience” is *mediated* — it has become a *commodity* in the market. Our society has become so isolated from our forebears' original environment that most of what we *think we know* about that alleged “environment” comes to us second hand — and for the vast majority of Americans, that means via the mass media.

### Mental Monocultures: Cultivating and Shaping the Ideological Terrain

Long-term corporate PR campaigns are now bearing fruit — the ideological terrain has been reshaped so that, e.g., almost *any* Federal regulation has become an “uphill” battle. We never changed our position, but our “high ground” was eroded, undermining our territory.

The problem is *defined* as environmentalists and government, not market dynamics, and certainly not structural unemployment. Yet how absurd it is to blame spotted owls for killing jobs, rather than automation and log exports. Somehow, short-term selfish “*free market*” greed — clad only in the rhetoric of “competitiveness” — has been redefined as a *natural force* we should respect, unlike Nature itself.

Similarly, the Property Rights campaign is attempting to redraw the ideological boundaries between property rights and human rights, and between economic rights and corporate responsibilities.

One long-term cumulative impact of selective media censorship, coupled with massive, long-term public relations campaigns, seems to be an ascendance of the ideological assumption that government (democratic power) is inherently corrupt and inefficient, whereas business (economic power) is more efficient at satisfying “consumer choice”.

*“When you write about government, the attitude [of editors] tends to be ‘no holds barred’. When you write about business, the attitude tends to be one of caution. And for businesses that happen to be advertisers, the caution turns frequently to timidity.”* – Bill Lazarus, a prize-winning reporter for the Hammond (Indiana) Times

In a now-ignored Supreme Court decision (*Associated Press v. United States*, 326 U.S. 1,20 [1945]), Justice Hugo Black wrote for the majority that,

*“The First Amendment rests on the assumption that the widest possible dissemination of information from diverse and antagonistic sources is essential to the welfare of the public. . . . Freedom of the press from government interference under the First Amendment does not sanction repression of that freedom by private interests.”*

Unfortunately, we seem to have lost much of that freedom in recent decades as sophisticated disinformation techniques combined with structural consolidation of media institutions and concerted economic pressure in a low-intensity conflict against a truly informed and empowered citizenry.

There are two kinds of power: organized money and organized people. Without opposition from NGOs, the emerging “Information Infrastructure” will continue to develop in response to “market forces”, i.e., organized money will develop communication technologies to manipulate and organize people to serve corporate agendas.

Via direct mail media, the Right already has identified and *cultivated* an extensive base of small donors to electoral campaigns and to ongoing political operations like the Christian Coalition. The communications infrastructure of the future is being designed with similar goals in mind – social control via technologies for digital surveillance linked to targeted distribution of image-oriented propaganda, with delivery vehicles ranging from cable TV over phone lines to fully interactive TV.

The balance of power is likely to shift even further to favor manufactured “astroturf” lobbying over authentic grassroots action, as new technologies for targeted communication are coupled with the increasingly prevalent techniques of digital surveillance (e.g., economic transaction data that identify the consumer and her purchases routinely are collected in massive corporate databases. See “Techno Prisoners” or “Computer-assisted Crises”, my chapter in “Invisible Crises”, forthcoming from Westview press). Unless progressive NGOs band together to oppose such *structural* changes, the present trajectory of media institutions will encourage intensive cultivation and manipulation of other fragmented publics. It’s difficult enough fighting a corporation that enlists its employees and suppliers in the battle, but imagine trying to fight hordes of targeted *consumers* as well.

### **The Gospel of Consumption**

One important lesson taught by all forms of commercial media is that there exist individual, commodified solutions to all life’s problems. This maintains and boosts unnecessary consumption. Perhaps worse, it diverts efforts and vision that would otherwise be directed toward organized activism for the *common good*. But in the world as depicted by commercial media systems, there are no public goods for which to strive, only private goods available to buy.

The much-vaunted “consumer choice” offered by modernity is a sham. As the public sphere erodes, the public space available for community fragments, leaving individuals isolated inside shrinking private spaces – corporate-designed technological enclosures such as the automobile and the “home

entertainment center.” While mentally confined within these cells, individuals are “indulged with perfect liberty” to choose among the commodities advertised as individual “solutions” to collective social problems. Segmented by psychographic class into virtual Panoptic internment camps, citizens and consumers are bombarded with targeted images as symbolic substitutes for freedom and community, thereby dissipating the forces available for genuine social change.

The enclosed article by Juliet Schor (Trendicators) examines the demographics of those Americans who are backing away from the “treadmill of consumption” in order to invest more time in the non-commercial values of family and community. In a nationwide Merck poll, 75% of women and 69% of men agreed that consuming *“is a substitute for what’s missing in our lives.”*

Over the last five years, 28% of Americans have made voluntary changes in their lives that reduced their income. In another poll, 69% said they want to reduce their working hours, but cannot afford to do so. Their most commonly cited reason was *debt*. In the Merck poll, only one-third of respondents are debt-free, even after excluding mortgage debt.

What is “human nature”? Are we responsible Citizens, or merely self-centered Consumers addicted to shopping that has trapped us in personal financial debt and planetary environmental debt? Do we want a good quality of life, or a big quantity of stuff?

Who has the power to define what it means to be a human being? Scotch patriot Andrew Fletcher once said that whoever tells the stories of a nation need not care who makes its laws.

Until people routinely can experience genuine alternative viewpoints via the media, attempts to shift our society toward sustainability will remain socially and politically unattainable.

The Cultural Environment Movement was born to meet the crucial challenge of our time: to build new mechanisms of independent citizen initiative and participation in cultural decision-making. We must mobilize as citizens as effectively as commercials mobilize us to act as consumers. That means:

- Building a broad new coalition of organizations and individuals committed to broadening the freedom and diversity of communication.
- Opposing domination and working to abolish existing concentration of ownership and censorship, public or private. That includes extending the freedom of speech and access to media beyond those who own the media.
- Seeking out and cooperating with cultural liberation forces of other countries, working for the integrity and independence of their own decision-making and against cultural domination and invasion.
- Supporting journalists, artists, writers, actors, directors, and other creative workers struggling for more freedom from marketing formulas imposed on them.
- Promoting critical media awareness as a fresh approach to a liberal education on every level.
- Placing cultural policy-making on the socio-political agenda to secure the right of a child to be born into a cultural environment that is reasonably free, fair, diverse, and non-damaging.