

The Last Taboo on Television

By Duane Elgin, November 1994

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Every forbidden topic imaginable has been covered on television, except for one. The last taboo on television is television itself—and how it is profoundly biased toward high consumption ways of life that the earth cannot sustain. In the U.S., the average person sees 25,000 commercials a year on TV. Commercials represent 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 a mass audience that is then appealed to by mass advertising to promote mass consumption which, in turn, is devastating the Earth's biosphere. By programming television for commercial success, the television industry is also programming the mindset of civilizations for ecological failure.

Virtually all of the world's problems are, at their core, communication problems. Therefore, the future of the world will depend largely on the quality and depth of human communication. I agree with Lester Brown, author of the respected State of the World book series, who said that to respond to the global ecological crisis, "The communications industry is the only instrument that has the capacity to educate on a scale that is needed and in the time available." At the heart of the communications industry is television. In the U.S. 98% of all homes have a TV set and the average person watches more than four hours per day. Television has become our primary window onto the world: most of the people get most of their news about the world from television. Like it or not, television has become the central nervous system of modern society. The question then becomes, how well is our "social brain" responding to the immense challenge of sustainability?

The unrelenting consumerist bias of television distorts our view of reality and social priorities, leaving us entertainment rich and knowledge poor.

Television may be our window onto the world, but the view it provides is cramped and narrow. Television may be the mirror in which we see ourselves as a society, but the reflection it gives is often distorted and unbalanced. Our evolutionary intelligence is being tested by how well we use this powerful vehicle to communicate collectively about our future.

Just how urgent our situation has become was made clear by a 1992 Warning to Humanity that was signed by over 1600 scientists, including a

majority of the living Nobel laureates in the sciences. They said that "human beings and the natural world are on a collision course" and said that without a "great change in our stewardship of the earth" the natural world would be "irretrievably mutilated" and this would result in "vast human misery." If the deep future of human civilization is now at stake, then what is the mass media doing? Currently, the communications industry is actively participating in the "irretrievable mutilation" of the planet by aggressively promoting a lethal addiction—obsessive consumerism.

World leaders are wrestling with how to stabilize the planet's population and achieve sustainable development. In an historic bargain, poor countries are being urged to curb their birth rates and rich countries are being urged to curb the rate at which they use up the world's resources and pollute the planet's environment. Yet, how can we in the wealthy nations be expected to consume less when the media that dominates our consciousness continuously tells us to buy ever more?

This linkage is one of the paramount political and social issues of our time, and yet it is rarely mentioned. Television almost never turns its cameras around to look at itself and its blatant and unrelenting consumerist bias. Building a sustainable future requires at least two major changes:

Viewer Feedback Forums. We need to create publicly sponsored, televised forums that hold the mass media accountable in the court of public opinion. Using live polling and citizen feedback in both local and national "feedback forums," citizens can use the power of moral persuasion and public opinion to promote a more mature and balanced diet of programming.

Earth Commercials. To balance the onslaught of aggressively pro-consumerist commercials, we need "Earth commercials." These could be ads for other species of animals, the rain forests, appeals from our great-great grandchildren, and so on. They could be done with humor, creativity, playfulness and intelligence to awaken our awareness of the web of life and the needs of future generations.

Most people understand that our planet is in trouble and that we will soon have to make dramatic changes in our manner of living, working and consuming if we are to live in harmony with the Earth. Never before in human history have so many people been called upon to make such sweeping changes in so little time. If a problem recognized is a problem half-solved, then we can make an enormous leap forward by breaking the last taboo on television and including "Earth commercials" and "viewer feedback forums" in our diet of communication for the 21st century.

Explanation: The article is not easy to map because the author uses multiple conclusions. One is that television’s promotion of mass consumerism is leading to the destruction of the planet. Another is that only television can solve the problem that television has created. Another difficulty with the article is its repetitive nature: rather than provide a clear chain of reasoning with evidence for premises, the author repeats assertions. (He mentions “consumerist bias”, “obsessive consumerism”, and how television is profoundly biased toward high consumption ways”).

