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Imagining The World We Want: Social Values and Mass
Media

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Trumpeter

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In this century, human activity has presented the world with two truly dangerous possibilities. The first, nuclear warfare, has largely been averted. Now, unbridled industrial development is threatening to precipitate worldwide environmental collapse. Excessive resource exploitation is destroying habitat and bringing about species extinction on a massive scale. Emissions from technological and industrial processes are adversely affecting the atmosphere.

The situation clearly demands immediate social and economic reform. However, such reform presupposes that environmental responsibility becomes a fundamental and unassailable part of our value system. As a communications tool, mass media can be made to serve this purpose.

At present, earth-friendly values are only latent – that is, debated but not fully acted upon in the centres of power. Bringing environmental values into full public view through sustained and controlled use of media would change that balance. Provided it uses clear, direct and inclusive language, such a communications initiative would help give environmental responsibility the popular status it deserves and provide the moral framework for unified and purposeful action.

Changing The Inner Landscape

The fabrications of industry permeate our daily lives: highrises, computers, telephones, kraft dinners, electric toothbrushes, disposable diapers. Industry also has an intimate connection to our values. Automobiles provide mobility. Television entertains. Career choices can bring personal fulfillment. Our culture used to think this was the pinnacle of evolution, but now admits that industry and its supporting values are threatening to destroy the planet.

The sheer momentum of our way of life makes the situation difficult to remedy. Industry has enormous influence and well-developed protective reflexes. When seriously challenged on ethical grounds, industrial leaders are not above raising the spectre of economic decline. In the eyes of many, society therefore seems in a state of denial, even paralysis.

Whatever the case, it's clear that the fabric of our value system must change so that people can live their lives in an environmentally responsible manner. But in order to change our value system, it is necessary to come to grips with the forces that shape it.

We must challenge our sense of who we are.

For example: society has a well-developed taste for material comfort, convenience and power. Dare we admit that industry simply exploits these tendencies? If we can acknowledge this, then it's possible to see that deliberately developing other latent values could literally change the modern landscape. Society needs only to provide itself with the moral alternatives.

One way of doing this is through the strategic and sustained use of mass media, the modern grapevine. Such measures would combine artistic principles with their commercial equivalent – advertising.

Art & Advertising

The arts are trusted and taken seriously by society, while advertising has the power to communicate a specific message for a prescribed amount of time. Effective social marketing combines these characteristics.

The creative arts deal with social values. At times, they simply entertain and reassure us. At their best, they play an important social role by celebrating the ideas that bring us together as humans.

As a communications medium, the arts are a one-way street. This means they can establish and popularize new ideas simply by being granted adequate public exposure.

Advertising is also a one-way form of communication. It uses artistic techniques to reinforce the perceived value of a product or service. Of course advertising also goes on to suggest that people part with their money. To achieve this objective, advertisers take great pains to appear familiar, unthreatening and personal. This is a commonplace gambit – and most effective when the advertiser caters to the value system of the "target market".

However, from a strategic standpoint, this arrangement has significant shortcomings. Advertising is so self-referential and style-conscious that it winds up occupying a narrowly defined territory. Its style and content become predictable, and its sincerity remains forever suspect. Environmental interests can therefore command significant attention in the mass media simply by being honest, direct and straightforward.

Keeping It Simple ...

For environmentalists, effective use of media requires a sacreligious approach to massive amounts of documentation:

Satellite and ozonesonde data show that much of the downward trend in ozone occurs below 25 km (i.e., in the lower stratosphere). For the region 20 - 25 km, there is good agreement between the trends from the Stratospheric Aerosol and Gas Experiment (SAGE I/II) satellite instrument data and those from ozonesondes, with an observed annual-average decrease of 7 + 4

Translation:

Ozone depletion is not uniform.

Direct:

Many religious doctrines are oriented toward the spiritual heavens and rooted in a time when human population and industrial activity were not major threats to the environment. Nevertheless, present day churches are beginning to identify environmental responsibility as a major social concern. Perhaps some of our most basic beliefs are about to be updated.

Getting Grounded

Effective marketing communications requires a good knowledge of sociology because prevailing social values finally decide what can be successfully "sold" through mass media. This is why successful businesses take pains to know their customers in order to manipulate their desires regarding success, happiness and security. On perhaps a less calculating level, the non-profit sector now uses similar insight to raise funds for causes such as child welfare and public health. In such instances, manipulation of guilt is widespread and to a degree effective – simply because guilt about those issues permeates the social conscience.

Environmentalists, in contrast, are faced with the challenge of altering the values governing social behavior. This requires great care; isolating and attacking industrial activity – itself an extension of our desire for control over nature – can breed paralyzing conflict unless deeper issues are also addressed.

It is essential that society regains the grounded psychological framework necessary to make earth-friendly decisions straightforward. It will then be possible to stop humanity's industrial assault on the planet.

Lead Us Not Into Temptation

It's hard to resist taking a potshot at the status quo – it's like shooting fish in a barrel. However, the sellers of high profile advertising space will not allow it. Even if it's for a good cause, a billboard like this would be seen as a direct attack on a most valued customer. Consequently it would not see the light of day in mainstream media – where it is needed most.

A less satisfying but more effective tactic would be to ignore mainstream values altogether and present compelling alternatives on their own merits.

It Ain't Rocket Science

Progressive social activists are now using marketing communications – or advertising – as a means to improve their links with the public conscience. They have come to terms with advertising's reputation for celebrating the banal, and now see the craft for what it is.

When used effectively, advertising involves three simple communications principles. Appeal, the first of these, hooks the attention to create a receptive mood. Sexual imagery is a common appeal device, but others engage interest in such things as humour, guilt, refinement, comfort and power.

Clarity, the second principle, is the way an idea is framed in terms that can be easily understood and absorbed by the mind for later reference.

Repetition, the third and most important principle, is, for lack of a more delicate metaphor, the hammer that drives in the nail. Without repeated exposure, especially in today's world, the mind simply does not retain the information. Furthermore, repetition can make up for shortcomings in clarity and appeal. Who has not found themselves humming a radio tune they detest?

Future World

Systems analysis shows that when organizations reach a critical level of complexity, they either collapse under their own weight or simplify. Modern society is at that threshold. An overly complex way of life must be made to serve us – or be discarded. Obviously, technology will have to become rigorously earth-friendly, but society must also reevaluate basic assumptions regarding population, employment, competition, and other issues. Current practices are not sustainable – and are at the root of irresponsible treatment of the environment.

When threatened, societies normally coalesce and find solutions. The role of government and news media at such times is to bring reality into focus and encourage action. Today's politicians and news organizations are not quite ready for the task, however. Earth-friendly beliefs are not a fully functioning part of the social framework. In some circles they are considered weak, unrealistic, subversive, even unmanly. Government policy and mainstream news media simply follow these beliefs. Consequently individual citizens feel isolated and doubtful in their views concerning environmental reform. There is a perception that there is no common will to change the industrial and economic rules that we ourselves have created.

Using mass media in a strategic and sustained manner would make public and respectable the concept of environmental responsibility, and foster the sense that, as communities, we are willing and able to take nature into account. As creatures of this planet, we possess that awareness as part of our heritage. It's now a matter of remembering, en masse, that an earth-centred value system is required to deal with a rapidly approaching future.

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