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# STATE OF THE WORLD

*Transforming Cultures*

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*From Consumerism to Sustainability*

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2010

# STATE OF THE WORLD

## *Transforming Cultures*

*From Consumerism to Sustainability*

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Several million pounds of plastic enter the world’s oceans every hour, portrayed on the cover by the 2.4 million bits of plastic that make up *Gyre*, Chris Jordan’s 8- by 11-foot reincarnation of the famous 1820s woodblock print, *The Great Wave Off Kanagawa*, by the Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai.

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# Media Literacy, Citizenship, and Sustainability

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*Robin Andersen and Pamela Miller*

A series of advertisements for Italian-based Diesel brand clothing features alluring young people in suggestive poses wearing jeans, swim-suits, and other clothes while enjoying luxury, popularity, and admiration for their perfect bodies and good looks. Although the ads use common popular-cultural themes and marketing strategies that tie beauty, belonging, and happiness to a line of clothing, the models in them lounge on no ordinary beach. In the water stands a partially submerged Mount Rushmore. In other ads, models appear in a rainforest in Paris amid palm trees and lizards surrounding the Eiffel Tower, a couple sprawls on a rooftop in Manhattan while New York City is almost completely engulfed in water, and the Great Wall of China is surrounded by a vast and empty desert. Thus Diesel's 2007 Global Warming Ready campaign created scenes of consumer bliss in a future world that has been drastically altered by rising temperatures and seas.<sup>1</sup>

Commercial messages that assert consumption equals happiness even as the negative environmental consequences of industrial production occur illustrate the challenges and necessity for media literacy as a cornerstone in the transition to sustainable cultural practices.

Understanding visual language and revealing the false promises implied in such carefully choreographed ads are important tasks.

Info-literacy challenges audiences to become sophisticated “readers” of media text, especially with regard to visual images. Consumers are rarely aware that pictures are routinely “touched up,” nor do they regularly consider why emotional gratifications are not easily fulfilled in the realm of consumption. Photographs create associations and implied meanings that are fundamental to the strategies of persuasion. A picture of a group of friends all wearing Diesel clothes or drinking the same soda confers a sense of group identity and belonging. But if such messages were stated more bluntly—“wear these jeans and you will have the friends you want” or “people who drink Coke are thin, popular, and always happy”—the assertions would be hardly credible.

Learning how to critically engage with television, magazines, films, and the Internet is essential in a sprawling media landscape where users are exposed to more and more media every year. Increasingly this landscape is dominated by advertising, and gaining immunity to its persuasions is an important step along the

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*The Mount Rushmore ad in Diesel's 2007 campaign.*

path to sustainable cultural practices. But a deeper critique of consumerism is required in order to build a more sustainable culture—one that goes to the heart of consumption as a social practice.

Diesel's ads claim that the company and its brand of clothing are Global Warming Ready, but no mention is made of the environmental impact of producing the clothes. Clever ad campaigns may cause consumers to feel clever by association, but they often encourage them to think uncritically about whether the company behind the campaign follows sustainable business practices. Does it use alternative energy sources in production or distribution to reduce its carbon footprint, pay its workers adequately, or use organic fibers in any way? What industrial by-products are created, and how are they treated?

The Diesel images speak of inevitability and acquiescence to a global crisis, and their wide circulation in popular culture in place of narratives about the urgency and necessity for citizen action reinforces defeatist and apathetic attitudes to global warming. This cultural attitude complements a larger media context that offers little real information about the causes of and solutions to climate change.

Take, for example, a segment televised in 2006 by WTOK-11 in Meridian, Mississippi. It featured two “top weather and ocean scientists” who asserted that a link between the recent severe hurricane season and climate change was “all hot air.” The channel made no effort to inform viewers that this was a re-edited video news release produced by a public relations firm, Medialink Worldwide. Nor were viewers told that the client behind the video—Tech Central Station Science Roundtable—was run by the lobbying firm DCI Group, whose client list includes ExxonMobil, a corporation that has made a sizable contribution to the Tech Central Science Foundation for “climate change support.” Few members of WTOK-11's audience could have recognized that this “news” segment did not contain a particular scientific argument but instead served the political and economic interests of the oil company lobbyists who wrote it and paid for it.<sup>2</sup>

James Hansen of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration identifies a lack of public knowledge as a main obstacle to reversing climate change, pointing to the gap between what the scientific community understands and what the public and policymakers know. He argues that public understanding of the effectiveness of reducing fossil fuel use and carbon dioxide emissions is thwarted by “intensive efforts by special interest groups to prevent the public from becoming well-informed.” One study of press reporting on this issue found that the practice of journalistic balance serves to amplify a small group of global warming skeptics, many of whom, it has been revealed, are indirectly funded by special interest groups.<sup>3</sup>

## How Critical Should Media Literacy Be?

While the broader role of media literacy to create sophisticated critical “readers” of media texts is clear, disagreements about the degree

and levels of criticism have emerged over the years. Some advocates want to expand analysis into other realms, including corporate media practices and policy reform. Rejecting this approach, in 2000 the Alliance for a Media Literate America (AMLA, now rechristened the National Association for Media Education) stated that it was not an “anti-media movement” but one dedicated to finding a “more enlightened way to understand our media environment.” Not interested in “media bashing,” the AMLA created controversy by accepting funding from media conglomerate Time-Warner. That deal led to the formation of a more critical group, the Action Coalition for Media Education (ACME) in 2002. ACME seeks to broaden the concept of “literacy,” which focuses on messages, to include “education,” which includes messages, structures, and reform activism. Writer Bill Yousman identifies the central question that divides the media literacy community in the United States: “Is media literacy aimed at creating more sophisticated consumers of media, or is it about nurturing engaged citizens?”<sup>4</sup>

The consequences of these varying approaches are significant. As Yousman explains, “It is one thing to teach children how to decode an advertisement for fast food, for example, so that they may see how the image of a hamburger is artificially constructed, and doesn’t actually resemble the actual product that you purchase at the counter. It is another thing entirely to encourage an understanding of fast food as a mega-billion dollar global industry that is spreading particular industrial practices and ways of thinking about food, labor, the environment, and the like, throughout the world.”<sup>5</sup>

Sophisticated consumers make better choices about what to buy, but the potential for media literacy as a force for sustainability will depend on people around the world creating and supporting alternative choices, not the ones offered by the unsustainable prac-

tices of current global manufacturing. As media literacy develops, these issues and concerns will remain at the forefront of debates over curriculum. In the United States, media literacy is offered in many schools in 50 states. And a dynamic media literacy movement is growing worldwide, which includes community activists, grassroots practitioners, media reformers, and policymakers as well as educators.<sup>6</sup>

## Media Literacy and Global Organizations

Media literacy has become an important item in the global educational curriculum, with the support and promotion of key world bodies. (See Table 11.) Educators are no longer isolated in a few schools or regions. Indeed, UNESCO has worked for 26 years to extend the reach of media education worldwide. The agency works within the framework of the Grunwald Declaration of 1982, which enjoined global educational systems to “promote citizens’ critical understanding of ‘the phenomenon of communication’ and their participation in media.” In 2007, the Paris Agenda identified key components for media education, and UNESCO followed with the development of a Media Education Kit the same year.<sup>7</sup>

UNESCO’s current initiative, Training the Trainer on Media and Information Literacy Curricula, promotes teacher-training programs in developing countries. The agency also seeks to foster a global environment that encourages free, pluralistic, and independent media as a fundamental component of media education, extending education into adult communities. Many in global organizations realize that receiving and creating media content and having full access to new media technology will allow global citizens to reap the full benefits of Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, on freedom of opinion and expression.<sup>8</sup>

UNESCO is partnering with the UN-Alliance of Civilization, which also identifies

Table 11. Efforts to Promote Media Literacy, Selected Countries

Country	Programs
Argentina	The School and Media Program became a nationwide initiative in 2000. One effort involves distribution to high schools of a free monthly magazine with notable online/print news articles.
Australia	The Australian Communications and Media Authority is currently pursuing a Digital Media Literacy Research Program that aims to improve knowledge about digital media literacy levels and to aid development of consumer education and protection.
Austria	The Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture distributes a quarterly journal on media education to all schools. Ministry-evaluated resources for educators are accessible online and other teaching materials are available for order.
Canada	In 2006–07, Ontario's Ministry of Education instituted a policy mandating instruction in “four program strands”—reading, writing, oral communication, and media literacy—for all schoolchildren.
Finland	Government policy for 2007–11 includes specific initiatives encouraging media literacy, especially in younger citizens. The Citizen Participation Policy Programme emphasizes the cultivation of “information society skills” as a catalyst for citizenship.
France	The Ministry of Education's Centre for Liaison Between Teaching and Information Media produces teaching tools, trains educators in the process of analyzing and using news media messages, and connects teachers and students with media professionals during an annual Press and Media Week.
Hong Kong, China	The Education Department recently introduced the New Senior Secondary Curriculum, emphasizing the ability “to make critical analyses and to judge the reliability of the news and the suitability of ways of reporting used by the mass media.”
Russia	Since the early 2000s, the Russian Academy of Education Laboratory has worked to incorporate media literacy into national arts and culture-related curricula.
South Korea	Newly reformed national curriculum, mandatory for students aged 5–16, encourages media literacy practices in Ethics, Social Studies, and Practical Studies courses.
Sweden	Nordicom's International Clearinghouse on Children, Youth and Media continues to promote media literacy in youth, incite constructive public debate, and inspire research and policymaking.
Turkey	School systems first introduced media literacy programs into the curriculum as elective courses in 2006. The government's regulatory bodies have begun proactive collaboration with nongovernmental groups and educators to promote media literacy.
United Kingdom	Under the 2003 Communications Act, duties of the Office of Communications (Ofcom) include “furthering the interests of citizens, in relation to communications matters, and of consumers, by promoting competition in relevant markets.”

Source: See endnote 7.

media literacy as an indispensable tool for global citizenship. Understanding that institutional media are key generators that circulate symbols in social and political life, media literacy is no

longer an option for global citizenship but a necessity for social development and civic engagement and for sustainable societies. In the words of Divina Frau-Meigs and Jordi Tor-

rent, Project Managers for the Media Literacy Program at the Alliance, “A threshold has been reached, where the body of knowledge concerning media literacy has matured, where the different stakeholders implicated in education, in media and in civil society are aware of the new challenges developed by the so-called ‘Information Society,’ and the new learning cultures it requires for the well-being of its citizens, the peaceful development of civic societies, the preservation of native cultures, the growth of sustainable economies and the enrichment of contemporary social diversity.”<sup>9</sup>

## Media Literacy Education and Global Citizenship

A main goal of media literacy education is to find ways to encourage media users to actively engage through critical awareness and creative media skills. Citizen participation is especially crucial for addressing global issues and finding collective solutions to environmental problems. Writing about “critical citizenship,” Costas Criticos of the University of Natal in South Africa argues that “a citizen or a society unable or unwilling to be critical will militate against the growth and maintenance of a healthy civil society.” Many nations are presently affected by the influence of “global nodes of information power and practice” that contribute greatly to the marginalization of regional voices. Teaching media literacy facilitates critical citizenship, and encourages marginal voices to produce counter-discourses. Creative counter-narratives that embody the wisdom of regional sustainable practices will be key to envisioning a sustainable future.<sup>10</sup>

Fackson Banda of the School of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University in South Africa advocates a mode of media training embedded within the concept of citizenship. His proposal is rooted in postcolonial theory, with the primary aim of recovering “lost historical and contemporary voices of

the marginalized, the oppressed, and the dominated, through a radical reconstruction of history and knowledge production.” Banda calls on African media educators to reconceptualize media structures to “improve the relevance of local media to civic life, encouraging informed use of and participation in media.” Such participation can help with local community witnesses and information dissemination about local conservation issues throughout the world. (See Box 19 on environmental journalism in India.)<sup>11</sup>

The Development Through Radio project, piloted by Panos Southern Africa in Zambia and Malawi, is “aimed at cultivating engaged and engaging citizenship.” The women involved in the project were given the skills to produce radio programs and to make sense of the context of media production. The groups made audio recordings about a mutually agreed upon topic and then coordinated getting their tapes to central studios in their respective major cities. Producers at the Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation and the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation recorded responses to the women’s concerns by relevant urban-based policymakers or leaders of nongovernmental groups. They then edited the recordings into a single program for broadcast, promoting further discussion and creating an empowering, cyclic dialogue.<sup>12</sup>

While this global movement continues to grow, the full implementation of media literacy programs and the addition of citizens’ voices to public dialogue face challenges on many levels. Blocks to full participation in the information society arise every day, yet with the convergence of new media—including wireless telephones, the Internet, satellite broadcasting, and digital technologies of all sorts—virtually anyone can create media content. Only about one fifth of humanity has access to the Internet, however.<sup>13</sup>

Often because of dire financial concerns, efforts to promote media literacy must at times

### Box 19. The Evolving Role of Environmental Journalism in India

After the historic Earth Summit in Rio in 1992, unfortunately environmental journalism in developing countries like India went into a steep decline. Part of the reason was the overkill in coverage of the summit and the subsequent failure of major powers to live up to the promises made at Rio. The other major reason was that by the mid-1990s, thanks to economic reforms, India's economy boomed. Business publications sprouted, and within a couple of years business TV journalism followed suit. This spawned a massive boom in a niche area of journalism and offered hundreds of jobs with good salaries to young journalists. Business development, as opposed to sustainable development, was now attracting talent.

Suddenly environmental activism was viewed as a major obstacle to industrial development. The middle class, whose huge constituency supported environmental activism, seemed more focused on securing good jobs and building houses. This does not mean that there were no brilliant journalistic works on environment during this period—there were, but they were few and far between.

Then nature began to strike back with an unprecedented fury. The deluge that paralyzed Mumbai and the great drought of 2002 signaled to Indians that all was not well with the weather. There were alarming studies of rapid glacial melt in the Himalayas. This coincided with a continuous stream of reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change—coverage of these was helped in no small measure by the fact that the chairman, Dr R. K. Pachauri, is Indian. Al Gore's film "An Inconvenient Truth" boosted awareness among urban Indians. There was a dramatic revival on interest in these issues, and environment was on the front-burner again.

Yet most journalists were stymied by the new challenges of covering climate change

issues. People did major reports, to be sure, but they were not pushing hard enough to understand the subject. Environment had become far more complex than just forests and wildlife. Now journalists needed to understand issue ranging from economics to science and development. In retrospect, getting readers or viewers to understand the link between carbon emissions and climate change may have been the easy part.

When it came to the hard questions—such as which sectors in the industry are the highest emitters or what technologies could make a difference and whether companies were using them—journalists' efforts to find answers were by and large missing. There has been no independent media investigation of the claims of success by government and industry. There has been no great double-checking of government data on India's emission levels. Nor has there been a really hard look at the viability of the renewable energies being pushed. There have been no great guides for the public on how they can reduce their carbon footprint, for example.

It is not too late though. Following the crucial Copenhagen conference, the baton to do business-as-radical rather than as usual will fall on public initiative driven by perceptive media coverage. Just as in the United States, where a recalcitrant government was forced to act when states like California passed their own legislation on climate issues, public pressure will build to enormous levels as natural catastrophes strike India. Journalists can play a constructive role in channeling their anger and their desire for change by exploring ways out and offering solutions. With political pressure on environmental issues inadequate, journalists will have to play the role of both torchbearer and public watchdog.

—Raj Chengappa  
Managing Editor, India Today

rely too heavily on corporate entities, as is the case of Argentina, where media literacy courses are sponsored by Telecom and Microsoft but also by Coca-Cola and Adidas. Such funding could no doubt result in the exclusion of critical discussion of corporate practices, such as Coca-Cola's many environmentally and socially irresponsible practices. Stakeholder negotiations are key, as are media regulatory bodies able to address ethical and content issues without suspicion of censorship.<sup>14</sup>

### Media Literacy Is the Literacy of Our Time

As media engagement is understood as a global necessity for sustainability and citizenship, collaborations across cultures and borders become essential. Robin Blake of the U.K. Office of Communications, which regulates media in the United Kingdom, has identified a research framework for shared knowledge that includes four key research areas for media literacy: social, political, regulatory, and commercial. Another essential component is documentation of the role played by long-standing grassroots practitioners who often spearhead citizen media across the globe. The work of such independent media producers is being documented in the series *Waves of Change*, which features examples of grassroots radio in Bolivia, El Salvador, South Africa, and the United States and of groups producing community video and television in India, Brazil, and Mexico. Information about past and present grassroots efforts to promote sustainability and media literacy throughout the global village is also made available online.<sup>15</sup>

David Gauntlett, a U.K. media literacy educator who works with children and video production, discovered that youthful audiences have internalized environmental problems and their solutions in a one-dimensional "narrative": the problem has been created by individuals and must be solved by individuals.

Gauntlett's analysis reveals an increasingly narrow range of acceptable environmental content and an important "absent narrative" within television coverage. Left unaddressed is how to account for political and economic forces and instances of polluting industries that fall within government and legal regulations. Moreover, how should society address institutional practices such as the car-centered transportation system through an individual problem/solution framework when alternatives such as affordable and efficient public transportation are not available?<sup>16</sup>

Challenging environmental suppositions based in media stories is only a starting point for Gauntlett. He moves from the negative critique into positive creative solutions. The larger project is to overcome "passive paralysis," a consequence of the "sit back and be told" culture. Believing that the media literacy paradigm must include a fundamental transformation of engagement with media, Gauntlett encourages students to create alternatives, not to "sit around watching as the world gets worse." Or as media educator DeeDee Halleck puts it: "Don't watch TV. Make it."<sup>17</sup>

Such educators envision a transformed relationship to media in a new "making and doing culture," one that demands an expansive perspective able to envision positive proposals for a better future. By connecting to the world and seeking solutions to its problems, people reveal their presence in the world. Promoting counter-narratives that creatively address issues such as climate change is a powerful antidote to the cynical agreements often embodied in media, such as the Diesel ad campaign. Media are the means by which people communicate and share knowledge and creativity with the global public. Increasing access to media, learning how to use them, and creating public and legal structures that democratize them will allow people to cope with the challenges of finding sustainable cultures based on human and environmental priorities.

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