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# American Mass Media and Sustainable Development

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*Abstract: The American mass media overwhelmingly promote a consumer culture, while paying scant attention to the effects this culture has on the environment. American film and television, especially, is reaching more and more people worldwide, thus promoting wasteful overconsumption on a global scale by encouraging people to abandon traditional, sustainable lifestyles and to aspire to an unsustainable consumerist lifestyle. Hollywood has produced many highly successful movies addressing major social issues, including environmental issues such as chemical pollution, nuclear radiation, and global warming, yet it fails to tie these concerns to the consumerist behavior that is at the root of these problems. Although it may be too much to expect the American mass media to actively promote sustainable development, it is surely irresponsible to promote consumerism as if it had no adverse environmental consequences. Of course, ultimate power rests with the consumer, without whom there would be no audience to make movies for; but the decision about which movies to make, and where to release them, is in the hands of production companies. They have responsibilities not only to present generations but also to future ones.*

Keywords: Media, Environment, Consumerism, Sustainability

## Introduction

**T**HE AMERICAN MASS media (AMM), particularly films and television programs, are widely believed to influence consumer behavior. This is occurring both domestically and, increasingly, internationally, as affluence levels rise in developing countries. In general, the AMM favorably or at best neutrally portray a consumerist lifestyle, and in the case of many highly successful productions, this message is reinforced by merchandizing.

In general, the AMM seek to be influential and to be perceived as socially responsible, frequently taking up “causes”. Social responsibility is increasingly taken to include environmental responsibility, as awareness of issues such as biodiversity loss, global warming, pollution, and resource depletion spreads. The AMM do address environmental issues, but, at least in big budget movies and prime time television programming, they address only disasters. In contrast to, for instance, the Japanese film industry, no attempt is made to address the everyday, taken-for-granted wasteful lifestyle that is killing our planet.

## Mass Media Influence

AMM influence on consumer and other behavior, as well as public attitudes and opinion on a range of issues, is well documented (Psychiatric Times website). Mud slinging commercial campaigns during the run up to the US presidential election clearly influence voter behavior. Televised presidential debates

sway voter opinion based on how the candidate comes across rather than anything they say. There is evidence that the rollercoaster of American public opinion on the Iraq war followed swings in the presentation of the war on the nightly news. (Foundation for the Defense of Democracies website). On a more general note, it seems plausible that most people’s beliefs about history are substantially formed by the AMM (See Rollins, 1998) for instance perceptions derived from the Western genre such as *How the West Was Won* (1962), a title that suggests a fair sporting contest, or of heroic losers dying in a just cause, as in *The Alamo* (1960) and *Braveheart* (1995). The fact that few if any of these and many other movies have any pretensions to historical accuracy is irrelevant to their influence.

An early example of movies changing consumer behaviour was an unintended result of the Motion Picture Production Code (“Hays Code”), which was adopted by the industry in 1930 in response to claims that it was promoting “immorality”. It declared: “the motion picture within its own field of entertainment may be directly responsible for spiritual or moral progress, for higher types of social life, and for much correct thinking.” (Arts Reformation site). Of course, an industry that created stars such as Clark Gable, Jean Harlow, and Jane Russell, and that put Humphrey Bogart and Lana Turner in close proximity to each other could hardly expect moviegoers not to think about sex, but it did try. Thus, when Rock Hudson and Doris Day got into bed in *Pillow Talk* (1959), they did so clad in passion-killing pyjamas, and into separate beds. Thus was born the new



concept of “twin beds” for married couples. The audience evidently wanted to emulate their idols, to the great benefit of manufacturers of beds, mattresses and bedding. A more recent example is the demand in India for “conversation ties” (wide neckties with pictures of anything from a rubber chicken to Jerry Garcia artworks) from men who had seen the news-readers on BBC News wearing them and wanted to wear them too. (Rediff Shopping website). Neither of these matters greatly in the scheme of things. A more worrying fear is that young people, in particular are induced to take up smoking because they are constantly exposed to scenes in which smoking is portrayed by movie heroes as being attractive. (National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion). More tenuously, there are claims of “copycat behavior” associated with events portrayed in the AMM. For example, two young men accused of killing their mother and cutting off her head, hands and feet before dumping her body told investigators that they had seen a similar mutilation in an episode of *The Sopranos* (2000 - ) (Entertainment Industries Council website).

### **To Market! To Market!**

In contrast to European countries, where television was initially state-funded, US free-to-air television always carried a certain amount of advertising until the advent of PBS and cable, both of which were initially commercial-free, though that is no longer the case. However, programs and commercials were easy to distinguish. Today, the boundaries between marketing, information and entertainment are increasingly blurred, with the rise of Home Shopping Network, infomercials, and Style channels devoted to fashion, makeovers, and home and garden. Commercials are modeled after news reports and MTV videos, often making them indistinguishable from the real thing (Solomon and Quigg, undated).

Movies and TV have always glamorized opulence, extravagance, and the lives of the beautiful, even if, as in *Dallas* (1978 - 1991), they were mostly ugly inside. The American Dream was originally to become successful by working hard but *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962 - 1971) invited viewers to dream of getting rich by being lucky, and *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) had the message: “Don’t work, steal!” The Olsen Twins began their careers as child actors, and continue in their profession, but increasingly they are symbols for teenage girls of glamour through looking great. Paris Hilton is famous for being rich and extravagant, and her television series *The Simple Life* (2003 - ...) carries the message that the best lifestyle is that of a rich, urban airhead.

The star system itself has also always glamorized opulence. The fabulous salaries of A-list stars are

widely publicized, as are their extravagant homes and lifestyles. Tourists pay to be driven around Beverly Hills to look at the exteriors of stars’ homes. Hollywood studios, it has been argued, created the star system in order to increase patronage, presenting its stars as glamorous primarily because, as well as beautiful, they were rich.

Merchandizing is nothing new. In ancient Rome, people were induced to part with their hard-earned *sestercii* to purchase souvenirs of important events such as busts of famous people and commemorative medallions (for examples, see the Ancient Antiques website). In England, glass makers sold engraved goblets to mark the accession of Queen Anne in 1702 at 21 times their production cost (Pandya, 2002), while for centuries companies have been licensed by the British royal family to produce Coronation mugs and plates, or to include on their labels, “Purveyors of Fine Marmalade [or whatever] to HM the Queen”. Though today, merchandizing includes figurines, clothing, toys, board games, and processed food products, the major sales are from DVDs, VCRs, soundtracks, and video games derived from movies. An early example is *Tron* (1982), the plot of which was based on a game player who becomes part of a video game (ign.com website). There are at least seven such games, according to the Tron-sector website. The first movie derived from a game was *Super Mario Bros – The Movie* (1993). It was also made into a TV show, running for 52 episodes and 13 specials, in fall 1989. Product placement was an early feature of both movies and television. Though less prevalent in television it is still a large part of the funding for many movies, with Disney frequently touting its own movies within other movies. *I Robot* (2004) from the video game with the same name (1983) was the only major recent exception, but *SpongeBob SquarePants* (2004) is described on the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood’s website as “essentially a ninety-minute commercial for junk food”

Merchandizing was originally adopted by studios as a spin-off to boost profits rather than as a critical contributor to the bottom line. But the phenomenal late 1970s success of merchandise such as figurines and storybook-and tape merchandise of movies such as *Star Wars* (1977) and television’s *The Smurfs* (1981) opened many entrepreneurial eyes. *The Smurfs* ran to 256 episodes still generates considerable revenue: over 10 million CDs were sold in the last three years alone (The Smurfs Chronicle website). Today, merchandizing is now part of the marketing plan, and concepts are incorporated into a storyline to generate merchandizing opportunities.

There are interesting parallels with sports. While the Curtiss Candy Company’s Baby Ruth candy bars (first manufactured in 1920, may or may not have

been named after President Grover Cleveland's daughter rather than the famous pitcher and slugger (see ask.yahoo website) other candy bars featured baseball stars such as Pete Rose and Reggie Jackson (for examples, see The Candy Wrapper Museum website. In 2001, Manchester United soccer club, the most famous professional sports team in the world, generates around one sixth of its total income (equivalent to over 40% of its salary bill) from merchandizing in its stores all over the world (details on the club's website). At the 2004 Olympics, major sponsors provided 570 million € (over USD750 million, Athens 2004 website) To protect the investment of two of them, spectators who brought in bottled water or soda not made by Coca-Cola had them confiscated, and anyone wearing a shirt with a Nike logo was asked to take it off and wear it inside out, while stewards were told not to wear non-Adidas footwear.

### Social Responsibility

The US film industry has a history of drawing attention to social problems, often in striking ways. Major examples for the period 1916 – 1946 include:

- DW Griffiths' *Intolerance* (1916) highlighted urban poverty and slum housing.
- Organized crime was presented in various films as preying on society and ending in a hail of bullets for the leader, beginning with Edward G Robinson in *Little Caesar* (1931), though Halliwell (1977) and other commentators are dubious about the sincerity of such movies.
- *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932) sympathetically portrayed a person driven to crime at the height of the depression.
- *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) showed the desperation of impoverished rural people moving to California as their economies had been ruined by the dustbowl.
- Very bravely, Warner Bros. attacked The Ku Klux Klan in *Black Legion* (1936), the first of a number of such movies.
- *Dead End* (1937) and *Each Day I Die* (1939) looked, respectively, at what used to be called juvenile delinquency and prison reform.
- The first film to address political corruption seriously was the one that many people regard as James Stewart's finest hour as the politically naïve politician who arrives in Washington, DC, and finds that he is expected to go along with a system that is totally different from what he had expected and morally repellent. And the little guy with a conscience wins, which must be the only way this film got past the Hays office.

Understandably, social criticism took a backseat during WW2, though the lack of opportunities for veterans was poignantly addressed in *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946).

### Addressing Environmental Issues

Well made disaster movies such as *The Towering Inferno* (1974) or disastrous alien invaders such as *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) tend to do well. Environmental disaster movies have also done well, on themes such as

- Nuclear radiation: *Them* (1954: mutated giant ants due to exposure to nuclear tests)
- Nuclear war: *The Day After* (1983: Lawrence, Kansas as demo target of Soviet nuclear strike)
- Population: *Soylent Green* (1973: New York with a population of 40 million)
- Species extinction: *Star Trek IV* (1986: hump-backed whales turn out to be essential to human survival)
- Biotechnology: *Jurassic Park* (1993: terrorized by cloned dinosaurs)
- Global warming: *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004: adventures in the snow)

With the possible exception of *The Day After*, all of these movies depicted extremely improbable scenarios. The dubious science behind *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) has attracted much debate. Though it mentions the very real problem of excessive consumerism, the resulting catastrophe is so far-fetched as to, if anything, discredit concerns about the effects of our everyday lifestyles on climate: its scientific misrepresentations are explained at the MSNBC news site.

Most successful movies depict acute rather than chronic situations. Whether it is romantic comedy, horror, or drama, the central element of the plot is a crisis, a turning point of such magnitude that the course of the protagonist's life is altered. But this crisis must be resolved in the third act for the audience to feel they had a satisfactory viewing experience. However, the metaphor of crisis is inappropriate to environmental issues, which are not a set of acute threats but rather a result of a way of life. Planet Earth is under threat primarily because of our wasteful, consumerist way of life, but this is rarely addressed by the AMM. Exceptions are mostly low budget, non mainstream movies such as *Logan's Run* (1976) and *Josie and the Pussycats* (2001), and horror movies such as *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). The only big budget movie to directly confront the issue is *The Mosquito Coast* (1986), which was a financial and critical failure. Satirical television series such as *The Simpsons* (1989 - ....), *King of the Hill* (1997 - ....), and *South Park* (1997 - ....) satirize consumer-

ism, but they satirize everything, without serious intent. The same may be said of *Married with Children* (1987) – Peggy is mocked but no alternative way of life is suggested for her. In her own words, “Al, don’t make me stop shopping! It’ll destroy my life!”

### **Sustainable Development and Professional Responsibilities**

A widely accepted definition from the World Commission on Environment and Development Report (widely known as The Brundtland Report, 1987) is: “Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” We are concerned that The US and other rich countries of the North are contributing to global environmental problems by their non-sustainable patterns of consumption and production. However, the poverty of the South (which is itself a product of colonialist and neo-colonialist exploitation) compounds this because the poor are forced into non-sustainable resource consumption practices. If you have one acre of land and you can’t feed your family by farming it sustainably, you will farm it unsustainably. If there is no firewood available from renewable resources, you will cut down trees. But the problem gets worse even if the poor become better off, because they will then aspire to a consumerist way of life. At present, approximately 5% of the world’s population – those who live in rich countries – consume around 30% of the annual resources. If 17% of the population consumed at that level, they would use all of the resources currently being used annually worldwide; in order for everyone to do so, we would have to provide six times our currently used resources (Global Vision website).

We believe that we have obligations to future generations. We do not have the space to demonstrate our case, but we can point to arguments about justice (Rawls, 1971), the fact that our affluence today is built on the efforts of our ancestors, the fact that most us have or will have children, grandchildren, great-

grandchildren, and the argument (Passmore, 1974) that the past, present, and future generations are bound together by a “chain of love”. Sustainable development is thus not really debatable ethically: it is an ecological, social, even evolutionary necessity, to paraphrase the father of environmental ethics, Aldo Leopold (1949).

The AMM, like any other businesses, are in business to make money. But the producers, who control the business, are professionals, and they are surely bound by ethical constraints, too. No studio would dream of making a movie or TV series glorifying slavery or child abuse, and we believe, this is not just because there is no market for such products or because they would damage the studio’s reputation. As Americans, producers are expected to hate slavery and child abuse. Similarly, we maintain, the industry should accept an obligation to maintain the earth for future generations. Many writers, directors, and actors have strong views on social and environmental responsibilities, but only A-list stars such as Leonardo di Caprio and Susan Sarandon can exercise any creative control, and even then this is largely restricted to refusing to appear in productions; if the producer doesn’t want a movie to be made, it doesn’t get made. We suggest that a first step might be to give more creative control to writers and directors, and to focus just the tiniest bit less on the bottom line, for the sake of our children’s children.

### **Conclusion**

When we showed a version of this paper to a successful US film, TV and stage producer, his first reaction was, “You’re advocating censorship!” We are not. Rather, we are arguing that, consistent with the AMM’s recognition of its social responsibilities, they should also recognize that this includes environmental responsibilities. At the very least, the AMM have an obligation not to deliberately promote mindless consumerism. And preferably, they could at least sometimes question the idea that the meaning of life is shopping.

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