

ENVIRONMENTALLY SPEAKING

Peter Schwartzman

A view of the world: tinted glass, a cubical box, or a microscope?

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Through what material do you look at the world? Metaphorically speaking, there are many materials to choose from—including the open air, a cubical box, clear glass, various shades of tinted glass, and a microscope. The choice of material (or medium) that one chooses to peer through turns out to be an extremely important factor in determining what one "sees" and how one feels about what one "sees." The material chosen also plays a vital role in how our planet appears to us as well, for the Earth is much too large to "look" at in one piece and, at the same time, much too small for us to ignore its weaknesses and limitations. Thus, it is very important that we come to terms with the material through which we see the world.

Each of us chooses to view the world in the way we do, but most of us do not consider the importance and significance of choosing our materials. Let's investigate a handful of materials in order to determine which of them best describes your choice. Upon describing and critiquing these media, one's choice may appear satisfactory, incomplete, or, even, misguided.

First, some of us look at the world primarily through a cubical box know as the television. As reported recently, people in the industrialized world spend ~3 hours watching television every day; this works out to 9 years over a 75-year lifetime in front of this cubical video box (Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi). For many, this box appears to provide comfort, relaxation and entertainment after a long, taxing day at work. For an increasing number of children, it acts as a surrogate parent in families where both (or single) parents work one or more jobs and excruciatingly long hours. But what does one learn about the world and, more specifically, about the environment through this box? Potentially a lot, but surprisingly little. The vast number of shows available do not deal with real world problems — like hunger, deforestation, climate change, political representation of historically underrepresented groups (i.e., women and people of color). Now while recent world events have increased the coverage of international questions (such as, the buildup of hostile armies, the inhumane treatment of women, and world trade relations), much of this treatment is relegated to a small number of channels, which are owned by a select few multi-billionaires. More often than not, only a limited number of political persuasions and perspectives are voiced, and, in particular, views from other people from other parts of the world are not presented for more than a sound bite. This severely limits our understanding and full appreciation of the issues.

Worse yet, a good portion of what people watch today is commercials. Unfortunately, the vast majority of these do little but attempt to convince us that we need something to make ourselves happy, like a new and improved, crunchier, cheesier, potato chip, or a bigger, faster sport-utility vehicle (SUV) with a "higher"-fidelity sound system. And when we consider that U.S.

children are watching 3 hours of commercials a week (or 20,000 ads a year) (Durning), one must consider if this has anything to do with why our children and we (i.e., past children) are so narcissistic (self-gratifying) and materialistic. (According to the cubical box, if we spend sizeable amounts of money on ourselves, we are destined to feel better.) Perhaps if we spent more time looking at the world through other media, we wouldn't suffer from these selfish and consumption-oriented tendencies.

Some of us fortunately go beyond the cubical box for our information regarding the world. Among this group, there is a subset of folks that read books, newspapers (like *The Zephyr*), magazines, websites, and listen to radio programs. Given that these folks are broadening their options, we'll refer to them as those that look through "windows" rather than boxes. However, as is true for the "box"-people, these "window"-people may still be greatly limited in what they may find in these additional media. In metaphorical terms, their "windows" are tinted in our society to varying degrees. If one reads and listens to a broad range of items, then it is more likely one will have gotten a fuller picture of the world. Once again, however, most of the more widely circulated magazines and newspapers are owned and operated by a ridiculously small number of extremely well-off individuals. Extraordinary wealth in itself doesn't prevent these media from publishing "unbiased" material but it likely results in far fewer articles and exposés that question the status quo or present alternative voices. Thus, if the reader/listener doesn't make an extraordinary effort to access a broad range of materials, they suffer from the lack of perspective. In this way, a tinted window significantly reduces what our citizens "see."

When looking at our world, a distinct few use a microscope to get insight into matters at small scales. Scoping out the intricate details of a problem is a very worthwhile venture because, in doing so, many important nuances and particulars become evident. In fact, most of scientists today dedicate their lives to the bringing to light finer details about the mysteries of the planet and the universe. Yet, using a microscope isn't without its own limitations. Many problems, including a large number of the environmental problems that present themselves to us today (such as climate change, water availability,

and ecological destruction) require a much broader lens in order to see, a "macroscope," rather than a microscope, perhaps. These problems surely need to be examined at all scales, but the scale that may be most critical is the one that pieces all the problems and potential solutions together to form the "full" picture. The trite, but insightful, cliché goes,

one "can't see the forest for the trees." One scientific field alone cannot be expected to provide the key to the door of salvation. Therefore, a microscope must be used wisely and not exclusively.

So if a cubical box won't do and a window or microscope are also limiting, what should we look through? The answer lies in the inclusion of all media, a collective lens which I refer to as "open air" viewing. Not only does "open air" demand a view without arbitrary elements restricting visibility, it also requires a recognition that we live in a world without impermeable barriers; a recognition that has recently made headway, albeit in a very hostile way. If we allow ourselves to see through a more varied collection of materials, we provide

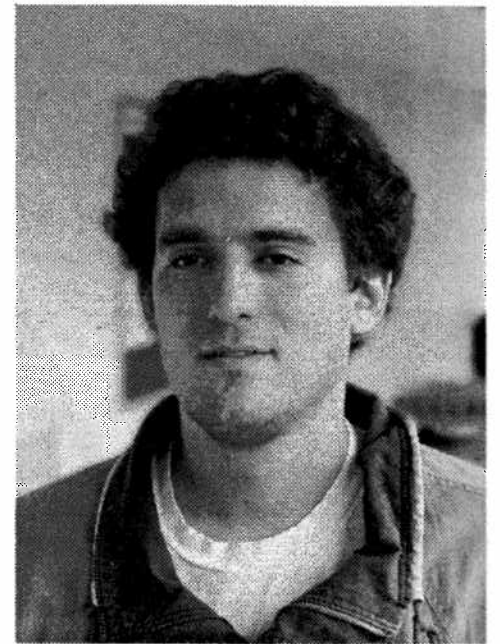
ourselves the potential to "see" the "vision" that each media offers. In each media, some pieces and perspectives will be found but others will not be. People need to reach out and access as many forms of materials as they can. To do otherwise is to consciously decide to "tint" the glass and create superficial barriers.

This questionable action provides a look at a partial, somewhat "artificial," world rather than at the "real" world.

Not only must we look through a broad set of media, we also all need to spend more time looking into a mirror as well. In our country where wealth per capita is very high and where nationalism dominates the landscape, it is easy to look at "others" as less-"fortunate" and less-"civilized." As Daniel Quinn, the author of many eye-opening books, including *Ishmael* and *Beyond Civilization*, asserts so poignantly, "there is no one right way for people to live." If we can agree to this persuasion, it becomes imperative that we take a serious look at ourselves on a regular basis to determine if it is we that must rework, reformulate, reconsider our way of doing things. If we do this honestly and unselfishly, we might better "see" how others may be better off without big brother's ever-present influence and counsel. Additional time spent reflecting on our nation's power, influence, and impact on natural as well a societal systems (such as the Earth's air, water, energy, etc.) might foster a humility that all living organisms, particularly the humans overseas, would appreciate.

There is little doubt that our country is one of the most diverse nations in the world; diversity here defined broadly to include religious, ethnic, lingual, and cultural differences. However, the multitude of differences that are found in our society are often not recognized for the wisdom and insight that they might provide. Throughout many sectors of our society, assimilation and conformity are lauded ideals and underrepresented groups are often thus marginalized. Therefore, it should be no surprise that cultural differences can often prevent people from communicating or learning about one another. Without proper engagement with one another, we are destined not to learn about each other and this choice is one that maintains the "window" in a heavily tinted state. Open-mindedness means nothing if the glass is too dark to see anything.

If you haven't yet decided what material you look at the world through, consider the following questions. How much television do you watch? How much of this time is spent watching programs that are educational and, most importantly, inclusive of differing viewpoints versus programs that represent the dominant culture and viewpoints? How often do you



read books, newspapers or magazines? How often do these works tend to be written by people educated in the United States? How often do these works tend to be written by people unlike yourself, in terms of ethnicity, class, sex, or nationality? How often do you look at other ways of living with ridicule or, worse, with revulsion? Alternatively, how often do you look at other ways of being "human" with interest, tolerance, and, perhaps most importantly, open-mindedness? These are often tough questions to answer but it is only when one looks in the mirror carefully that one can begin to be self-critical and corrective.

Ultimately, why does it matter which material we choose to peer through? It matters precisely because the choice determines what one will see. And if one is content seeing only what a select few "others" (as in the major networks and newspapers in the United States) want you to see, then you are working with only a small piece of the world picture. Since most of us don't have the money nor the time to travel to see environmental problems in other lands, it is imperative that we try to make the most of what we can see from our "comfortable" sofas. This can be accomplished by looking locally, communicating with those with alternative perspectives, and making the extra effort to obtain and digest a broad array of written and visual accounts of our Earth and all its inhabitants, including humans.

Works Cited

Durning, A. (1992) *How Much Is Enough?: The Consumer Society and the Future of the Earth*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Kubey, R. & M. Csikszentmihalyi. (2002) "Television Addiction." *Scientific American*, 286: 74-80.

Recent Area Deaths

| Name | Age | Address (Galesburg unless noted) | Date | Funeral |
|------------------------|-----|-------------------------------------|------|---------|
| Abrahamson, Robert L. | 76 | 816 N. Academy St. | 2/15 | HPW |
| Bednar, Dorothy C. | 91 | 1667 N. Prairie St. | 2/14 | HPW |
| Carlston, Alice L. | 97 | formerly 1384 N. Henderson St. | 2/15 | HPW |
| LaFollette, Wesley T. | 68 | Clewiston, Fla., formerly Galesburg | 2/14 | HPW |
| Lundeen, Marjorie L. | 89 | 423 N. Kellogg St. | 2/15 | HPW |
| Vamer, Charles L., Sr. | 78 | 132 W. Dayton, Oneida | 2/12 | HPW |

LOCAL FUNERAL HOMES:

FMD — Fletcher & McDougald Funeral Home (309) 342-2417
 HPW — Hincliff-Pearson-West Funeral Home (309) 343-2101
 HHD — Hurd-Hendricks Funeral Home, Knoxville (309) 289-4121
 WFH — Watson Funeral Home (309) 342-1913

Information is supplied by the various funeral homes.
 Please call their number directly for additional details.