



Humanity's Dysfunctional Nervous System

Geoffrey Holland

In the modern world we know, the mass media – television, radio, and the internet – function as humanity's collective nervous system linking billions of people worldwide. The problem is these media are failing big time when it comes to serving the public as honest brokers of information and understanding.

Some perspective....

At the end of 19th century, less than 120 years ago, the world human population was 1.7 billion. The fastest communication was via Morse code telegraph. The fastest transport between population centers was via rail at about 40 mph. That applied to developed countries. Movement and communication in less developed parts of the world were still glacial compared to that. There were no telephones, no radio, no TV, no internet anywhere on Earth.

Much has changed. The human population has exploded to 7.6 billion, headed to 10-12 billion by the end of this century. One can travel by air from any place on Earth to anyplace else on Earth in a day or less. Communication between individuals is now virtually instantaneous. We live in the era of the 24-hour news cycle. Mass communication across the globe now means

that everyone can know whatever is going on any place else on Earth almost from the moment it happens.

What has not changed are the structures by which we organize ourselves. Politically, we are divided into nation-states, whose governing institutions are generally guided by self-interest, with a handful of historically dominant nations engaged in exploiting the resources and wealth of many of the less developed nations.

What are we left with in the early part of the 21st century? A global human civilization rife with economic, ethnic, and gender conflicts, that is seriously out of sync with our planetary biosphere's ability to provide. We've strip mined the life from our oceans. We're squandering our precious top soil and our fresh water supplies. We're flooding our atmosphere with climate altering pollution.

The over-reach gets worse every passing year as we add 75 million more humans, all needing a piece of the shrinking resource pie. Our devastating impact on the Earth, the only home we have, is out in plain sight for all with open eyes to see.

So, why are so many humans unaware of or indifferent to our increasingly tenuous relationship with the living biosphere we all depend on? Why should we be this way when we have the ability to reach most of humanity almost instantly through the modern media?

In the U.S, a big piece of the answer lies in the economic and regulatory framework that has long defined how television, radio, cell phones, and the internet function in our society. All of these media types depend on wireless broadcast frequencies that are considered part of the government owned commons that are regulated by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC).

Like so many parts of our regulatory structure, the FCC is subject to the political power and influence of the industries it is tasked with regulating. FCC oversight is in the hands of five commissioners, all of whom are political appointees of the President. The nation's regional TV, radio, and telephone outlets are owned by corporations licensed to operate by the FCC. The internet is subject to rules generated by the FCC.

Where does that leave us? The short answer... with a crazy quilt of media that is focused on generating profit pretty much to the exclusion of all else. This means the millions of viewers, who tune in to network TV every night are not the customers. The actual customers are the corporate sponsors, who pay for commercials designed to influence the buying habits of viewers. Profit for broadcasters depends on putting sponsor needs first.

This is why we find network TV programming to be dominated by mind numbing tripe like *American Idol* and *Survivor*; by sensationalized, formula driven crime dramas; and by a plethora of forgettable game shows. Job one for broadcasters is to deliver desirable viewer demographics for commercials paid for by sponsors.

When it comes to the news and commentary we get from radio and the TV networks, the information we are fed is more often than not filtered so as not to offend corporate sponsors. That includes distortion, obfuscation, or outright omission. No better example of that is Fox Broadcasting, which has shaped its news operation to assertively deliver an alternate reality that among other things denies climate change and science in general.

The media is almost entirely owned by a small number of large corporations, all of whom can be counted on to put their profit driven self-interest ahead of all else.

Even public broadcasting [e.g. PBS and NPR] is compromised to some extent because it is substantially dependent on corporations for financial support. For instance, *Nova*, the long running PBS science series has Koch Industries as a primary sponsor. It would be foolish to think that Koch's involvement doesn't impact the programming choices made by *Nova's* production team.

Bottom line: The media we have is hopelessly out of step with what we desperately need... a mass media purged of empty calories, that delivers the same unvarnished truth to all the world's people.... a media that helps all in the human family to understand that we are in big trouble on a civilization scale.... a media that inspires with programming that encourages two fundamental ideas – dignity for all and shared responsibility for planetary stewardship.

Pushing back the tide of global scale challenges requires all the world's people pulling together in the same life-affirming, sustainable direction. That translates to a mandatory commitment to planetary citizenship among all the Earth's nationalities, ethnicities, and spiritual callings.

The ability for mass media to so effectively link the world's billions of people has a critical role to play in promoting planetary citizenship. Unfortunately, 'dysfunctional' truly is the correct word to describe the current state of the media. Instead of numbing our minds with professional wrestling, *Dancing with the Stars*, and the fate of *The Bachelor*, we must reinvent the public media so that it informs us honestly about the forces at work in our lives and inspires us with clear direction of how we as planetary citizens can put ourselves on a path that is life affirming and sustainable.

It seems certain that if we don't learn to live within the planet's ability to provide, the collapse of civilization as we know it is inevitable. Avoiding such an ignominious outcome begins with a recognition that the media we have is wholly inadequate to need.

“Imagine what it would be like if TV actually were good. It would be the end of everything we know.”

Marvin Minsky, *American Scientist*

The MAHB Blog is a venture of the Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere. Questions should be directed to joan@mahbonline.org

MAHB Blog: <https://mahb.stanford.edu/blog/media-dysfunctional-nervous/>