

Closing Windows To The Soul
The Impact of Media on Developing Minds & Culture
By Michael Mendizza

Below was India - ancient, ever changing - with her exploding populations, pollution and the vast challenges these create. A small group of educators, most from India and some from abroad, were gathering. The purpose: to explore if it is possible to prepare children, inwardly and outwardly, for the challenges of the 21st century. The organizers of this conference were concerned. In the last three or four years television had reached even the most remote areas of India. High in the snow covered Himalayans, villagers gather in stone huts kept warm by burning wood and cow dung, to watch *MTV*, *90210*, *Die Hard*, *O.J. Simpson*, and *Bonanza* re-runs.

Indira Ghandi promised that television, as a tool of education, would help modernize the nation and then used the power of mass communication to forward her own political agenda. What began in major cities like Bombay and New Delhi is now exploding as satellite technology pour electronic images from the heavens. On roof tops in the cities, down remote dirt roads, everywhere you look, these images are being collected by metal dishes pointed skyward. Day and night they covering the land, changing the hearts and minds of all who watch.

When television first arrived in India it was accessible only to the most sophisticated. Families of the business class had already adopted western clothes, values and preferences. Their children went to private schools so the shift to MTV seemed almost natural. On the second day of the conference a distinguished man in his late 30's sat in a small group. He shook his head and began to talk slowly. He was a teacher in a small rural school. Television arrived just two years ago. The metal dish was placed next to a mud house, on the same spot where goats and chickens still roam. Inside adults sit in darkened rooms and watch sporting events and movies. In the afternoon they push the set to an open window and encourage children to watch cartoons.

The man's face, his posture and voice changed. "The children are not the same," he said. "They want all the things they see on television - the clothes and the glamour. They compare what little they have with what they see on television. Life in the village has become dull to these children. They care less about the values of their parents and of the community. They draw pictures of things they have never seen, tall buildings and fast cars. They pick up the language and gestures they see on television. The games they play are changing too. They seem less free - less happy."

With the same pride and fascination that gripped the United States in the early 50's, the appearance of television in rural India, or in any traditional culture, is a major event. And just like Western children, these young people are following the example set by adults. A bright three year old wiggled and squirmed when her parents who were educators, offered us a cup of tea. As soon as it was clear that mommy and daddy had shifted their attention, the little miss insisted on watching a video.

Closing Windows To The Soul
The Impact of Media on Developing Minds & Culture
By Michael Mendizza

This was "OK" it was explained. It was not a commercial program but a home movie of distant family. At least now the little girl would recognize her relatives. Clearly this was not the first time video was used as a distraction, as a substitute for relationship.

Here were two dedicated educators/parents deeply committed to the well-being of their child and interested in the impact media was having, especially on the very young, offering their three year-old what they believed to be a "benign" media fix. And it was done with such ease. On three different occasions while in India well meaning adults, mindful of the issues we are sharing now, suggested and encouraged John-Michael, our nine-year-old, to watch a video. John-Michael asked, just the other day, "why do people keep putting me in front of TV?" It is done over and over again. On Christmas Eve, a highly educated host at a very hip party gathered all the children in a room, by themselves, and turned on the telley. How could they resist, or why should they, when adults shut them out so easily? Then we turn around and claim that we, and our children, are powerless against such an adversary. How easily the mediated experience slips under our skin - how soon it becomes the norm, changing our lives from the inside out.

I described at the conference how media, and by that I mean video and computers, diminish our sensitivity, especially of our deepest, most essential nature. These technologies close a window to the soul, the same window through which we just might discover who and what we really are. This is done not so much by the television or computer itself, but the experiences that these devices displace. At the conference a great deal of attention was given to developing a child's *inner dimension*. I assumed by this that the goal of life, and certainly of education, is the unfolding and development of increasingly subtle capacities and perceptions. As Joseph Chilton Pearce points out, this development begins with conception as each new human being develops his/her physical, then emotional and finally symbolic and metaphoric potentials. Total attention is given to each field or new possibility. As the unknown becomes known this energy is freed to unfold the next stage, and so it goes.

This movement, from the physical to the more abstract or subtle follows the evolution of our brain and nervous system, from the primal brain, to the limbic or mammalian centers, up to the thin layers of gray where meaning is discovered in symbols and metaphors. It is a movement from the concrete to the more abstract. We only develop, however those specific capacities which appear necessary to survive in the immediate sensory/emotional environment. If the challenges presented to the developing brain/mind are rich and subtle, so too will be the inner development. Place severe limits on the sensory environment and these same limits affect the physical foundation of perception and relationship.

Closing Windows To The Soul
The Impact of Media on Developing Minds & Culture
By Michael Mendizza

Until recently, human evolution was shaped by the natural environment, that is, by the forces of nature and nearly infinite diversity she represents. A few hundred years ago, just a blink of our genetic history, machines began to cause dramatic changes in the environment, which are now feeding back and affecting not only nature, but the nature of our own development. Computers and visual media are the driving force behind this feedback cycle.

By every measure the mediated experience is sensory deprivation. We slouch passively and stare in semi-darkness. The images are flat, two-dimensional. There is the impression of movement but this is an illusion created by changing patterns of dark and light. The box, be it a television or a computer, rarely moves.

Imagine, for a moment, riding a horse through a rushing mountain stream. Feel the movement, her stride, deep breathing, her comfort and insecurity. The icy water is splashing against your wet pants. Sunlight is sparkling through the leaves. The scent of pine is in the air. There are birds, bugs, grass and bees - and you are in the center. Life is pulsing all around you. Now imagine the same scene on video. To mediate means to stand between, to represent or filter. Television and computers filter out all living qualities. Anything that is subtle or alive is eliminated. Only hard edges get through. Anger and rage push through the media filter quite easily. Compassion is much more difficult to render. Lust is easy. Affection is difficult. Fundamentalist ideologies do quite well. The mystical experience does poorly on film, tape and compact disks.

The media filter allows only coarse sensations to pass through and this sensory deprived reality is becoming the dominate influence in children's lives all over the world.

Program content is not the issue. We might get higher definition, add a few buttons to enhance the illusion of interaction, the sound may get brighter, but, from a sensory point of view, it will still all be the same. We forget that when we are watching television and computers that what we are actually watching is the screen. Every program is essentially the same sensory experience, which we repeat over and over and over again. Imagine watching the same program for 5000 hours by the time you are five years old, which is exactly what our children are doing. Imagine what other experiences their developing brains are denied in the process.

Let's be a little honest. How many actually watch television to learn, for personal growth, to expand or explore our innate human potentials? No, we watch television because we like the way it sedates us. The quality of attention, which is the essence of learning, is absent while watching the tube. The total entrainment of body-mind that lead to our most amazing accomplishments, like standing up, walking, talking, reading and driving a car is not part of the media-sensory experience.

Closing Windows To The Soul
The Impact of Media on Developing Minds & Culture
By Michael Mendizza

And yet, we encourage, even demand that young children in southern India sit in darkened rooms and watch videos of penguins thinking that this will develop their ecological sensitivity. Really, who are kidding?

What happens to your hands the first day you dig in the garden? They get tender. What happens if you keep digging? Tenderness turns to calluses. What begins as extreme sensitivity, over time and with repeated exposure, becomes insensitive. It takes more stimulation to make an impression. The experience becomes a habit, and what is a habit? It is a reflex, a mechanical, automatic response, one that requires little or no attention, the energy of learning.

Television producers and advertisers have made a science of this diminishing sensitivity and attention. Let a shot linger too long and they know that the viewer will stop paying attention. Worse still, they will stop buying the products which are the real purpose of media, make no mistake about it!

If there is a relationship between learning and attention, and I think there is, ask yourself what kind of learning is taking place when a child watches 5,000 hours of television before the age of five? With every hour one can almost feel the sensory and emotional calluses building up, as the inner light we call attention grows dim.

The intensity of stimulation by media is increasing. Programs are more sexual, more violent, more exciting because the audience is growing less sensitive through repeated exposure. Producers respond by turning up the juice, more cuts, shorter scenes, nudity, sex mixed with violence, guns, faster cars, explosions, money, glamour, drugs, more sex and more violence. This repeated exposure dulls the senses, which requires producers and advertisers to increase the level of stimulation. It is an increasing cycle of sensory habituation and stimulation, which dulls our capacity to experience more subtle perceptions and relationships.

Remember, we only develop those capacities that appear necessary to survive in our immediate sensory environment. If nothing in the outer environment demands empathy or compassion, there will be no neural pathways for the perception or expression of these capacities. The outer and the inner are and will remain in perfect balance.

Of equal importance is the impact this increasing spiral of media-sensory stimulation has on language, the use of metaphor, storytelling and the development of imagination. Visuals have replaced metaphor. Every picture eliminates the need for 1,000 descriptive words and the language environment of most children continues to shrink daily.

Imagination is subtler than a picture on a screen or in a book. Metaphors demand great inner participation before they have any meaning. Symbols, metaphors and the imagination they unfold draw our attention inward.

Closing Windows To The Soul
The Impact of Media on Developing Minds & Culture
By Michael Mendizza

Developing the sensitivity to perceive and play this inner world opens a window, which may reveal the most subtle and creative dimensions of the human mind. What begins as the make-believe fantasies of childhood has the potential of maturing into creative or even transcendent insight. This I believe is the natural order of the human mind.

The outer image is too powerful however. It is a distraction that denies access to the inner subtlety and silence of the mind. The emerging global mind and culture, with its insatiable appetite for anger, greed, jealousy, cruelty, lust, fear and anxiety, is nothing more than an extension of the limitations found in media itself. Television and computers haven't created anything new. They simply allow individuals to project fragments of their limited consciousness around the globe. In the process we are witnessing the end to cultural diversity. Television and computers are filling minds, all over the world, with the same images. It is all the same, wherever you go, and you can't get away from it.

How can children in rural India, Paris or Los Angeles discover who they are and all that they might become when the light of the living world is dimmed by images of *O.J. Simpson*, *MTV*, *Basic Instincts* and *Nintendo*? Nothing alive can be found on television or in computers. Media and computers can never give life - but they can and do take it away, especially for children under the age of ten or eleven. Remember, children all around the world are playing follow the leader and we are it...

END

Michael Mendizza is an educational and documentary filmmaker, writer, photographer and founder of Touch the Future.