Resilience

Published on *Resilience* (http://www.resilience.org)

The Creation of Society's Shared Hallucinations

Published by Humanity's Test on 2014-03-13
Original article: http://www.humanitystest.com/the-creation-of-societys-shared-hallucinations/ **by Roger Boyd**

This is another of my draft chapters from the book, "Schizophrenic Society", that I am working on. Please feel free to provide editorial feedback.

Since the advent of the printing press and general literacy, media organizations have constructed parallel realities for the general populace. Radio and silent films, followed by "talking pictures" and television went further by creating artificial worlds that can be seen and heard in the same way that the real world is perceived. The human mind evolved in an environment with no access to such artificial worlds and thus even though a person may know that these worlds are not real their brain will in many ways treat such worlds as if they were. For example, a 1938 radio program in the United States depicting an alien invasion lead many to believe that there really was such an invasion taking place[1].

Many psychologists have noticed the similarities between the mental state of dreaming and that of watching television or a movie[2]. Such a mental state bypasses some of the conscious mechanisms that people utilize to judge between reality and artificial representations, thus making them more susceptible to internalizing media output as if it were real. There have been many documented cases where the media has been shown to affect social reality, from the media emphasis on below-average sized women[3] to the extensive usage of violence[4] and the objectification of women[5]. Gerrig[6] proposes that there is in fact no clean delineation in a person's mind between the real and the artificial, with social reality being a combined construct of real world and media experiences.

Thus, media output acts in the same way as the images created by the mind of a hallucinating individual. Not being able to distinguish between the real and the imagined, the individual integrates the two into his conception of reality. The advent of computer games, with the individual transformed into an active participant within the game, only intensifies the challenges to the brain's ability to assess what is truly real and what is only an artificial illusion. In many cases gamers even prefer their artificial existence to their real one. The same has been noted of participants in the Second Life artificial world.

As societies have grown in size and complexity, and the "local" has become highly integrated with other geographical areas, the individual has become more and more reliant upon the media to provide the information and conceptual structures with which to make sense of the larger world. This reality was captured vividly by Walter Lippman, "Inevitably our opinions cover a bigger space, a longer reach of time, a greater number of things, than we can directly observe. They have, therefore, to be pieced together out of what others have reported and what we can imagine."[7] Thus individuals rely upon the predominant media sources, such as television and film, to both inform them of events and general cultural trends, and help them construct the conceptual frameworks required to understand their meaning and importance. As Lippman noted, "The only feeling that anyone can have about an event he does not experience is the feeling aroused by his mental image of that event"[7], and that mental image is heavily dependent upon the medias depiction of it.

With the power to directly affect the social reality through which individuals make sense of the world, and to decide what events and issues individuals should be made aware of, the media is a central force in the creation of the ruling societal discourse. In a fully working democracy one would expect extensive regulations and oversight to make sure that a great diversity of groups have fair access to media outlets and that such outlets represent a diversity of opinions. Unfortunately, this is not the case as the media industry has become dominated by large private corporations funded by advertising revenue, together with government-funded organizations. Thus, unlike an individual's hallucinations, the media-created

hallucinations are consciously produced predominantly for material gain, or under political constraints.

As Herman and Chomsky have pointed out[8], with the advertising revenue model media groups become vehicles to sell things to consumers, rather than the independent purveyors of information about the wider world. Anything that gets in the way of ongoing consumption, and thus the success of advertisements focused on increasing that consumption, will reduce the attractiveness of individual media organizations to the corporations paying for the advertisements. The issues of Climate Change, Peak Resources, and Ecological Degradation are certainly not ones that serve to increase an individual's consumption habits. In addition, a greater awareness and understanding of such things could lead to political action to force changes directly upon corporations. If media organizations started to focus heavily on such matters they would be "biting the hand that feeds them", and thus a high degree of self-censorship would be expected. In many cases advertisers are also directly involved in the process of selecting and developing programs (hence the term "soap operas" which were at first funded by soap companies), allowing them to filter out any "problematic" subjects and themes.

Private media organizations may also be constrained by the need to maintain government licenses, and access for their staff to government officials. In addition, such groups may also want to keep good relationships with the government as they work to reduce regulatory restrictions and grow through mergers and acquisitions that require government approval. Government departments may also offer beneficial support through access to knowledgeable staff and expensive resources for media productions that further their aims. For example, the military have given significant support to television program, film, and even computer game productions that show them in a positive light[9,10,11]. They can also severely constrain what they see as "bad" reporting, as shown by the embedded journalist program during the Iraqi war, which was designed to eradicate the extensive negative journalism (from the U.S. government's point of view) seen during the Vietnam war.

With the purchase of media organizations by non-media companies, such as General Electric, and Sony, there is also the increasing problem of not wanting to negatively effect other parts of the conglomerate. In the case of G.E., that may include staying away from contentious stories on nuclear power, the efficacy of mammogram machines, military spending, and foreign arms sales. As media organizations have been allowed to consolidate into massive global corporations focused on growing revenue and profits they also become part of the wealthy and powerful elites. Too much focus on the shortcomings of the economic and social system within which they have flourished, and too heavy a positive coverage of alternatives, would be threatening to their own future prospects.

Overall, the media groups that create our shared hallucinations will tend to be very conservative, protecting the economic and social environment within which they have thrived. This will be reinforced by both the corporations who pay for advertising space and governmental organizations. As humanity's destruction of the environment continues apace, and becomes more and more visible, these media groups could be expected to work harder to protect the status quo and ignore or downplay inconvenient facts and occurrences. In this light, reductions in staffing and coverage of climate change by media organizations, while the impacts and science become more irrefutable, could be seen as quite logical actions.

In 2013 the TV evening news broadcasts of ABC, CBS, and NBC in the United States covered climate change for a joint one hour and forty two minutes, an improvement over 2012 but still below the 2009 level[12]. Media groups have also tended to report on weather events as stand-alone occurrences without mentioning climate change[13,14]. A number of media groups have also significantly reduced the number of journalists covering environmental issues in recent years[15,16,17]. In addition, a false sense of balance has been used to give climate deniers much more airtime than their representation with the scientific community, less than 5%, would warrant[18,19,20], and one news agency has even appointed a "climate skeptic" as its managing editor[21]. Coverage of climate issues has also predominantly relied upon the use of politicians and social scientists, rather than providing an avenue for scientists to communicate their concerns and findings directly to the public.

The fundamental problem with issues such as Climate Change and Ecological Degradation is that they stem from a core problem, the exponential growth of human demands upon the earth, and thus the only solution is an end to that growth. With the industrialized human societies having spent the past two

centuries developing a tight fit to the exponential growth facilitated by fossil fuels, an end to that growth will require wrenching changes to how those societies are structured and operate. Such changes, while producing great concern to the general populace, will be extremely threatening to those that have succeeded under the current societal arrangements. These are the rich and powerful that have most control over media organizations, as well as other determinants of social reality such as the school system and the workplace. To help affect the creation of social reality in their favor, they have created many so-called "independent" think-tanks, and hired public relations groups, to help create a perception of uncertainty on subjects such as climate change and to gain more access for skeptics to the media[22,23].

Just as it may have made sense for the Mayan elites to call for more sacrifices to forestall their societies downfall, rather than accept the reality in front of them, it may make sense for the current elites to call for the magic of the "invisible hand" of economics and the wonders of human technology, rather than accept the current reality that so threatens their own wealth and privileges. The longer they practice such conscious ignorance, the more they stand to be accused and attacked, the more such ignorance will be seen as beneficial. Once the media spell is broken, and the duplicity of the elites understood, the wrath of the general populace may be truly horrific. The search for others to "pin the blame on", and ongoing extensions to the means to monitor and control society, are completely rational actions in this context. If even the members of the police and armed forces come to blame the elites for not taking the actions required to stave off calamity though, nothing may save the rich and powerful from a brutal denouement.

Hence the desperate need to keep control of the construction of social reality, and have the general population live in a mental world made up more of misleading hallucinations than actual reality. Such a state can be maintained for lengthy periods of time, as has been the case with the North Korean population who have for decades existed in a social reality more made up of fantasy than reality. Many commentators also give significant weighting to the inability of the East German authorities to block the television signals from the much more prosperous West Germany in undermining the basis of the communist state. Those that consider the internet to be a democratizing antidote to media concentration and control both misunderstand the ongoing concentration within media [24,25,26] on the internet, and the ability of authorities to block sources they find threatening. Also, as has been shown by the details provided by such whistle-blowers as Snowdon[27], our new connected age may make the tracking of dissident opinion-formers much easier for the authorities.

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