



The fight against pressures to 'Dumb-Down'

Why is 'NOW WE THE PEOPLE' only 'SOME OF THE PEOPLE'?

People busy in community movements to better the world and fight injustices can overlook or even deny what prevents the majority of the people joining them. There is greater awareness of oppressions, sexism, racism, ageism, bigotry, militarism and the destruction of the earth. We must ask why most people still seem unconcerned. Keep this question in mind throughout the conference; how can its workshops reach out to the people unless the people can hear? We cannot have a fair-go democracy unless all the people can be active citizens.

Edward Gibbon saw history as the record of the crimes and follies of mankind. The Victorians hoped for human progress to match their technological progress. Prophets like H G Wells, George Orwell and Jacques Ellul have warned that instead, their striving for greater intelligence could roll back, and 'intelligence' even be seen as elitist, rather than the ability to work out what needs to be done. Arthur C. Clarke in *'I remember Babylon'* not only foretold satellites, but how global communication could be used to control and stupefy the masses. Political and commercial interests benefit from mass culture that keeps people ignorant, apathetic, helpless and consuming, and prevents connected thinking, organized knowledge and co-operative action to stop injustices.

'Dumbing down' is 'whatever makes people less able to think, speak and act in their long-term interests.' However they may whinge, they may be unable to consider solutions except more government money.

1. THE EVIDENCE is that people behave more stupidly than their potential when they act against their own interests - vote against their own interests; take up self-destructive habits and behaviour, including gullibility, greed, gambling, debt, and superstitions new and old. See how consumers are manipulated; why 'blowing one's brains' is a term of approval; disordered consciousness deliberately induced; social problems increasing rather than reducing, with costly efforts to remediate, rather than prevent. Dramatic signs of life-style changes include what has happened to women's magazines, the shortened concentration spans in television entertainment, the limited English of many teenagers, and declines in University standards. Political and commercial advertising successfully and now openly aims at emotions not reason. Theodore Dalrymple's *Life at the Bottom* describes real lives, even though he blames intellectuals for the mind-sets that imprison them. Research finds how we are all affected, even if we feel immune. Frogs in fact jump out of water without waiting to be boiled; it is humans who accustom themselves to destructive cultures, as history shows.

Much of our culture is harmless when it is balanced and moderate - but not when it is excessive and prevents independent thinking and active living. The greatest energy crisis today is a crisis of human energy to face and deal with the crises that face us. But mental energy is drained by poor health habits or diverted from what needs to be done - into, for example, cults of superstitions, obsessions for cosmetic beauty, and sporting lives dedicated to moving fast up and down.

2. WHAT CAN BE DONE? A culture cannot be legislated. But cultural changes always begin somewhere and every individual can do something. We can think outside our own boxes. We can connect ideas. Much action that is needed is obvious and can be planned during all the conference workshops.

Everyone can resist dumbing-down attitudes and behavior. Be alert to what is happening and promote alternatives, as individuals and as members of groups, as artists, writers, journalists, teachers, parents, innovators, unionists, business operators, activists, poets, thinkers and doers.

- COUNTER DESTRUCTIVE MYTHS with better concepts, knowledge, ideas, living examples, schools, films, songs, the press, and books on current affairs that everyone can read. People are being encouraged to believe that it is human nature to want the worst, to be motivated mainly by greed or fear, that they cannot control themselves, that they are helpless, it is no use trying to do anything, that people in public life are all venal, that the world can only get worse, that 'the good life' is to consume and relax, that knowledge does not matter because 'you can always look it up'; that the frontiers of artistic daring are sexual rather than more courageously revealing what is not being told about what is going on in the world. Everyone needs to know about history, other cultures and other people, and their own potential for fulfillment as citizens. Alternative experiences can include more non-TV reality to contrast with TV 'reality', school day-exchanges, and more interludes of meaningful and gentle entertainment in current-culture shows and festivals. The myths of 'no happy families' and 'child-rearing is awful' can be countered by real-life sharing and television demonstrations more than by group-talks.

- PRECIOUS BRAINS. Everyone needs to know that their precious brains are their greatest resource, and the most important part of health. They need to know they can make the most of being alive by being fully conscious, rather than seeking escape. We can get our thrills from challenging the frustrations and troubles of everyday life, with 'escapes' as a sauce, rather than letting the culture-pushed goal be to escape by any means, from chemicals to passive entertainment or the obsessions of problem gambling or internet voyeurism. Promote re-creation in its literal meaning. Promote action research on the mass experiments on the mind that are being made globally without our consent and without control groups that can stay immune. The forms of our entertainment can affect our powers of thinking and delight in thinking as seriously as thalidomide and asbestos have affected bodies.

Adolescents especially like intense stimulation, but thinking processes may be affected by repeated insults to the brain through intense distortion and numbing of consciousness, hard-impact physical noise rather than multi-dimensional music; epileptogenic and hallucinatory-style visual experiences; addictions to computer and gambling games that stimulate unreflecting reaction times; and cultural and peer pressure for self-damaging behavior including bingeing. People assume their brains will bounce back from every insult, but impairments can remain. The less you have to start with, the more you can lose. Even moderate cannabis is now found to risk long-term effects on social judgment, motivation and sensitive higher nervous centre functions. Psycho-medical research is needed on the numbing effects on problem-solving and reflective thinking of

repeated exposure to unmodulated electronic drumming. Symptoms of dumbing down include shortening attention spans, preference for sound-bites, uncontrolled acting out, form valued over content, tolerating meaninglessness in entertainment and the arts, gambling beyond resources, identifying with crime, public politics reduced to personal confrontations and trivia. Fight the causal factors that damage public mental health, and that affect us all, as well as the specific factors that are harmful in childrearing and individual experiences.

- FORMS OF PLEASURE are learned. They vary in different cultures and times. We might as well learn pleasures and skills for physical, mental, aesthetic and social enjoyment that do not harm ourselves or others and that do not waste the earth. They will usually not be commercially promoted, because they do not make profits.

- GENDER AND CIVILISATION. Societies have been most civilised when creative masculine and feminine characteristics are combined and valued in both men and women. Societies have been most brutal when they give priority to pathological extremes of 'masculinity' and 'femininity - male aggression and female helplessness. Women can lose even what we have gained unless we stop on the one hand, the pressure from women's magazines to trivialise female minds with absorption in gossip, cosmetic appearances, and being sexual bunnies, and on the other hand, permitting misogynist practices in the name of any religion or culture.

- EDUCATION IS PRIMARILY OUTSIDE SCHOOLS today. The mass media and advertising seek mass markets by targeting the largest and most gullible sector of the population, at the cost of debasing the rest, who could respond to better. Boycott products when advertisements use irrational over rational persuasion, and interrupt programs at closer than 20 minute intervals. Promote meaningful and innovative features, that extend curiosity into neglected areas such as social improvement. Constantly re-state the function of taxpayer-supported national broadcasting, to encourage thinking and knowledge, innovating and setting standards, doing what commercial channels do not do, and not duplicating what they do do. A three percent rating for Radio National thinking and information programs is a comment on the state of national intelligence and curiosity rather than an argument for extinction of this rare source.

RADIO has essential functions. It can provide information that does not require visuals (a reason why TV news has such a narrow range); give access for community voices; its programs can convey thinking through language. Kindergartens of the Air are as valuable for child development and language as TV Playschools, and could replace the ABC's cost-cutting adult story-readings, even if only re-runs were affordable.

THE PRESS defeats its own future by dumbing-down to chase declining readerships. It could develop the attractions and utility of reading, including for the young, even in details such as 'social inventing' on the puzzle pages, and publishing responses to readers' questions for information about current affairs. Even obituaries of goodies can give the young knowledge of better role models in wonderful lives, however flawed, to contrast with the criminals and celebrities on page 1. 'Serious Pursuits' and quizzes can omit ephemeral celebrity trivia.

SCHOOLS can show dumbing-down trends to be wary about, especially when policy documents sound like Don Watson's *Weasel Words*, but miss out on ideas about goodness, beauty, truth or practical life-skills and goals. Money, technology and constant curriculum change are not panaceas. Schools should be where students learn what they cannot learn outside school, to build on what they do know, and not merely reinforce the culture that immerses them. Learners deserve

to taste the range of music, art, story and other worlds in time and space, in environments that are beautiful, with teachers unhassled and undistracted. Curricula should respect children's development and childhood's need to acquire knowledge bases and schemata, practical skills, and ways to find roots that are familial, local, national and global, with heroes more admirable than the media offer. To discover adult goals and what 'adult' should really mean. When bins are filled daily with throwaway 'activities', there are message and effects for children's minds.

LITERACY skills give power to know and to communicate. Reading books can be a major developer of intelligence as well as thirst for knowledge, and thinking as a pleasure. Check out the mental age of children's books - two years old? If children read only a little, what they read should be worth reading and re-reading. Classrooms even in Year 1 need new and old books for browsing, above as well as below the children's mental age, to inspire adult goals and act as advance-organisers, such as Arthur Mee's 'Children's Encyclopedia' (new costly version needed) and Peter Spier's 'People' picture-book (Pan Macmillan, reprinting needed).

I have two dreams to help bring down barriers to literacy. That everyone everywhere has the right to free access to a short internet/DVD/video that gives them a quick overview of the writing system, an advance organizer for beginners and clues for clearing up confusions for failing learners, with graphics made by the very best artistic talent and production. Secondly, cut out the unnecessary difficulties in English spelling, the great barrier to English literacy world-wide. This is feasible today. (A Spelling-without-Traps version of this paper is posted on the OzIdeas website, <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~ozideas/dum.htm>. See also 'classroom barriers to literacy' on <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~ozideas/litbar.html>)

POPULAR READING about social reforms and political policies. Where is it? Make it happen, for teenagers, adult-literacy students, average people, and primary-schoolers. Even written in Spelling 'without Traps'. More readable citizens' books for *everyone*, and how *everyone* could read them is a field for Ph.Ds in English, Politics, Commerce, Communication and Education.

- THESE FOUR PAGES may seem to connect too many ideas - but it is not just a shopping list, and still has not mentioned essentials such as child-care to raise up thinkers and doers. We are being conditioned to cope with only one idea at a time. But if readers take away even one thought, that thought is: There can be no real democracy unless all the people are freed to be active citizens - Down with Dumbing-Down!

REFERENCES: Look around you. Enjoy libraries, and bookshops such as the New International Bookshop.

ORGANISATIONS - Work with all the contacts and the activist issues you have. Use and contribute to websites such as www.melbourne.indymedia.org, www.globalideasbank.org and <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~ozideas>, (no www needed) with links to pages such as /concepts.htm.

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