International Journal of
Journalism & Mass Communication

Commentary Open Access

Global Empathic Consciousness Development: Mass Communication Hope?

Ronald D. Gordon

Department of Communication, Humanities Division, College of Arts & Sciences, The University of Hawaii - Hilo, U.S.A.

Abstract

Jeremy Rifkin's recent perspective on global empathic consciousness development is summarized, then related to current global media practices. It is argued that media preoccupation with violence, commodification, and "entertainment" as its supra-ideologies does not serve well the further development of empathic regard for the peoples of the Earth and for our biosphere. The central nervous system extensions (a la McLuhan) of the global Western media empire have been drawn excessively from the lower and more primitive brain regions, the "reptilian" brain and the "fight-and-flight" reactivity of the limbic system, and it is time to up-level future extensions out into the world consciousness system. The notion of "mass communication hope" is raised, and eight recommendations to concerned mass communication scholars are made in response to the question "What can we do?": (1) we can promote dialogue on ethical / neuroethical issues; (2) we can further question underlying media assumptions; (3) we can accelerate the call for media reform; (4) we can catalogue, comment upon, and publicize existing prosocial media themes, scenes, and images; (5) we can pursue further prosocial media research; (6) we can link to positive psychology research efforts; (7) we can synthesize diverse strands of prosocial research across disciplinary lines; (8) we can stimulate and facilitate ongoing dialogue on what is needed. The hope and aim is to help meet human and planetary needs for wholeness, empathy, depth of awareness, and harmony of all being.

Publication History:
Received: February 20, 2016
Accepted: June 02, 2016
Published: June 04, 2016

Keywords:

Communication hope, Electronic colonialism, Empathy, Mass communication, Mass media effects, Media violence, Positive psychology, Prosocial research, Marshall McLuhan

Introduction

Simonson [1] included John Dewey among the early 20th century thinkers "who fell prey to a dream that I call communication hope, a dream that continues to resonate today. It is the hope that communication, especially mass communication, might bring about a new and perhaps unprecedented unity among people." Dewey envisioned the "Great Community." Many today share a similar dream, not only for a single country but for the world community. Yet Simonson warns us that "communication hope" is blind to the economic, political, and social realities upon which the commercial mass media are "parasitic," and that one should not have one's hopes naively high. As true as this may be, John Lennon's lyric echoes in the mind: "You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one. I hope someday you'll join us, and the world will live as one."

In this commentary paper we will briefly summarize Rifkin's [2] recent call for a hastening of global empathic consciousness development on the planet Earth, then link this call for empathic consciousness development to current mass media practices and potentials (which Rifkin does not address), and, finally, suggest implications for mass communication scholars, researchers, and practitioners.

Global Empathic Consciousness Development

In a nearly seven hundred page *tour d' force* titled *The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis*, Jeremy Rifkin [2] attempts to re-view human history through the lens of empathic consciousness development, a human journey across 175,000 years toward an increasingly greater ability to feel and imagine our way into the experiences, minds, and feelings of our fellow human beings. He argues that historians have mostly ignored human empathic consciousness development in their own renditions of our human story, and instead have chronicled the exercise and abuses of power, the inevitability and consequences of economic greed, the constantly recurring conflicts and wars, and the hero and villain narratives, all the while granting scant attention to the evolution and extension of human empathic consciousness across time. Rifkin asserts in his opening chapter that "Our collective memory is measured in terms of crises and calamities, harrowing injustices, and terrifying episodes of brutality inflicted on each other and our fellow creatures. But if these were the defining elements of human experience, we would have perished as a species long ago."

Meanwhile and more quietly over the past epochs of history, in Rifkin's depiction, humankind's empathic consciousness has slowly developed. New technological eras and their accompanying communication revolutions in particular have reconfigured not only societies but human consciousness, changing the way that the human brain engages with other human beings. Rifkin's sweeping treatment [2] of the development and recognition of empathic consciousness includes surveying a wide range of topics including biological evolution, the development of language, key historical periods (e.g., the European Romantic period and the Renaissance), the creation of democratic values and structures, religious diversity, the concept of companionate marriage and advances in parenting, evolving schools of philosophical thought, urban living and cosmopolitanism, innovations in media technologies, primate research, recent child development research, the cultural influence humanistic psychology, the ease of geographical travel, and so on. Rifkin observes (Ch. 2) that Charles Darwin, later in his life, came to realize more clearly that

***Corresponding Author:** Dr. Ronald D. Gordon, Department of Communication, The University of Hawaii - Hilo, 200 W. Kawili Street, Hilo, HI 96720, U.S.A., E-mail: rgordon@hawaii.edu

Citation: Gordon RD (2016) Global Empathic Consciousness Development: Mass Communication Hope? Int J Journalism Mass Comm 3: 116. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.15344/2349-2635/2016/116

human survival entails every bit as much cooperation as competition, and that Darwin foresaw a time when humanity will be even further expanded in empathic expression. Rifkin asserts that "it is the extraordinary evolution of empathic consciousness that is the quintessential underlying story of human history, even if it has not been given the serious attention it deserves by our historians."

Rifkin proffers the increasingly scientifically-supported view that the empathic predisposition is biologically built-into we humans, and facilitates our bonding with others, and potentially with our extended human family. He cites (Ch. 4), for instance, research that demonstrates that infants as young as six months of age prefer to see strangers helped rather than hindered in moving toward their chosen goal -- they value seeing someone serve in the Good Samaritan role. And by 18 months of age toddlers acquire the rudiments of perspective-taking and perform altruistic acts themselves, with happiness being a consequence but not a self-interested primary aim of their altruism. Rifkin (Ch. 3) also draws upon the neuroscience research of the past twenty-five years that demonstrates that our brains are designed, predisposed from birth, to experience another's emotions as if they are our own in order to create bonds of sociality and caring. Humans with normal brains come pre-wired for empathy, the research suggests, though the extent to which our mirror neurons activate depends upon nurture and not nature alone. While this empathic capacity is part of our natural endowment, we need to exercise and cultivate this capacity if we are to develop it rather than having it overridden: "We are both a cooperative and competitive animal. But it is the former sensitivity that is wired to our biology and sets the ground rules. We are, first and foremost, a social species. Within that context we sometimes compete to advance our interests. If, however, our self-interest strays too far from the social bond, we risk ostracization" (Rifkin, p. 129).

Especially in the second half of the twentieth century, notes Rifkin (p. 37), "We extended empathy to large numbers of human beings previously considered to be less than human, including women, homosexuals, the disabled, people of color, and ethnic and religious minorities, and encoded our sensitivity in the form of social rights and policies …" Yet Rifkin argues that humankind is currently in need of a more widespread level-jump in empathic expansion, one in which our empathy will be inclusive of the entire biosphere in which we exist: "Climate change is forcing us to recognize our shared humanity and common plight; we are entering a new phase" (p. 615). We need biosphere consciousness, an empathic embrace of the 40-mile band that encircles the planet and keeps us all alive, and an empathic embrace of our fellow human beings within our biosphere, for "To be truly human is to be universally empathic … " (p. 177).

Rifkin argues that the concentration of methane, carbon dioxide, and nitrous oxide in the atmosphere exceeds by far the natural range over the past 650,000 years because of humankind's use of coal, oil, and natural gases, and this has prevented heat from exiting the planet and the trapping of gases within our biosphere. Resulting hurricanes, floods, droughts, wildfires, and rising and falling temperatures are already spawning tension, discord, conflict, displacement, and human need. This environmental destabilization increases the importance of yet greater empathic maturity, a deepening global ethic toward other human beings around the planet and toward our natural environment. We would do well to reverse the narcissistic trends which have distracted our attention during the past half century, and discover transcendent purpose. Rifkin (p. 598) observes that "global communications without any real transcendent purpose result in a narrowing rather than an expanding of human consciousness." He suggests that our future as a species may well rest on whether we can accelerate more widespread movement toward total global empathy.

In Rifkin's portrayal, for the first time in human history we are within potential reach of identifying the human race as our extended family, and the biosphere as our home, yet we are simultaneously on a collision course with entropic forces that we have set in motion. The task is upon us now, as Rifkin sees it and as the clock ticks, is to ever more swiftly and fully rise to our role as "*homo empathicus.*"

Electronic Colonialism: The Non-Empathic Empire?

If global empathic consciousness expansion is indeed a need (and let us assume for now that it may be), then how do the global media fit into this picture, into the meeting of this need for an enlargement of empathic concern to include the planet and our human family? In this section we will briefly attempt to advance the claim that electronic colonialism, in which vast amounts of certain Western media images and messages are disseminated to the world, remains contrarian to the development of global empathic consciousness. We will specifically and briefly focus upon two such media impediments: the pervasiveness of media violence with its antisocial (rather than prosocial) imagery and force, and the media's commodification and entertainmentization of human consciousness.

Electronic colonialism

Elecronic colonialism theory, as discussed by McPhail [3], traces four principal periods of empire building: (1) military colonialism (e.g., the Roman Empire, BC to 1000 A.D.); (2) Christian colonialism (e.g., the Crusades, 1000 to 1600); (3) mercantile colonialism (e.g., the European industrial revolution, 1600 to 1950, affecting Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and the Americas); and, most recently (4) electronic colonialism (1950 to the present). McPhail notes that electronic colonialism theory "deals with what happens to individuals when they are repeatedly exposed to foreign-produced communications. These messages convey foreign personalities, foreign history, foreign norms, foreign values, and foreign tastes. Frequently these values are at variance with indigenous cultures and lifestyles … the goal of global communication corporations is to make electronic colonies of large segments of the population around the world in order to increase market share and maximize profits."

American-owned media corporations are consistently among the world's top global media empires, including Comcast, Disney, Time-Warner, Twenty-First Century Fox, Viacom, Google, Apple, Microsoft, and Facebook. Of the world's top twenty revenue-generating media giants, sixteen are currently American-owned [4]. The U.S.A. is a heavyweight in the global media enterprise.

In the area of film, for example, one Hollywood film typically costs more to produce than the entire annual film budget of most other countries; nine of the top grossing films in the world have been American; 80% of European box office receipts are from American films, and the majority of imported television programs are American; entertainment is America's second-largest export to the world (for five of the past six years, after aerospace and military materials). In short, America is a key player in what is seen on screens of all types and sizes around the world. And what is it that is repeatedly shown on those screens? We will focus here upon one of the global media staples: screen violence.

Citation: Gordon RD (2016) Global Empathic Consciousness Development: Mass Communication Hope? Int J Journalism Mass Comm 3: 116. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.15344/2349-2635/2016/116

Screen violence

Bushman et al. [5] recently examined the thirty top-grossing U.S. films each year from 1985 to 2012. They found that in the past twenty-five years gun violence in American movies in PG-13 films (i.e., films for viewers thirteen years of age and older) has gone up by more than 300%. This is a dramatic rise, especially since violent imagery at the low-end of this distribution was already considered high in its time [6]. In fact, the current PG-13 level of violence is now even above the level of violence shown in current R-rated (adult) films. A full 94% of the top-grossing PG-13 films since 1985 contain gun violence, and PG-13 films accounted for more than half of all film revenue (and among the 420 top-grossing films only 5% were G-rated family films, which means that most children under thirteen watch PG-13 films not expressly designed for young children). These content analysis findings support and exceed previous findings on the prevalence of violence in American film and television [7], and show not only no decrease but a dramatic increase in the presence of violent imagery in film. And since 1994 the majority of revenues for the American film industry have not come from domestic release in America, but from worldwide distribution. Movies with violence, it is commonly believed in the film industry, travel well globally. Since the dialogue in action-oriented films with violence is secondary, little is required or lost in language translation, and these visually-mediated narratives are readily understood around the world.

Effects research. But does violent imagery serve well the development of global empathic consciousness development? There have by now been more than fifteen (N = 15) separate meta-analyses of the scientific research on media violence and its effects, especially on children and adolescents, and there is what most researchers consider "strong evidence" that media violence is a causal risk factor for increasing aggressive cognition, aggressive affect, and aggressive behavior, and there is also recent direct evidence that media violence can significantly decrease empathic and prosocial behaviors [8-12]. This evidence has been obtained using multiple study designs, including gold-standard randomized experiments, cross-sectional correlational studies, and longitudinal studies. Investigations have now been conducted in countries around the world, and the pattern and weight of the evidence is apparent to all but the most diehard skeptics [13,14].

Virtually every U.S. social scientific and health organization has gone on record as warning that screen violence has been convincingly demonstrated, through extensive scientific research, to contribute to aggressive attitudes, values, and behaviors. These organizations of record include the American Psychological Association, the American Psychiatric Association, the National Institutes of Mental Health, the National Academy of Science, the National Science Foundation, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Academy of Family Physicians, and the Society for the Study of Social Issues and Public Policy.

Interpretation of effects

To help in conceptualizing the significance of media violence effects, according to the U.S. Surgeon General's Report on Youth Violence [15] exposure to media violence at ages 6 to 11 is about as equally predictive of later youth violence as low IQ, broken home, neglect, abusive parents, poor relations with parents, poor school performance, antisocial behaviors, psychological condition, weak social ties, or hyperactivity. Media violence is considered a risk factor for serious subsequent aggression, and becomes especially problematic when other risk factors are also present. A 10-year old child, for example, exposed to a half-dozen risk factors is ten times more likely to be seriously aggressive at age 18 as a child exposed to a single risk factor. Risk factors are interactive and multiplicative, and violent media imagery is one risk factor in the mixture. To use Potter's [16] analogy, neither fuel nor heat nor oxygen alone make fire, but the combination of this set of three factors can. Another way to clarify the meaning of a media aggression effect is to note that the statistical effect size for the relationship between media violence and aggression is greater than the effect size of exposure to second-hand smoke inhalation as related to lung cancer, exposure to asbestos as related to cancer, and calcium intake as related to bone mass [6,7]. Yet another angle on the meaning of an aggression effect is offered by Hearold's [17] pioneering meta-analysis of 225 research investigations, and her conclusion that a single brief exposure (fifteen minutes or less) to media violence will increase a young person's aggression ranking by fifteen percentile points in an aggression distribution if the child or adolescent was initially angry prior to the violent imagery being consumed. For a non-angered child viewer, a single brief exposure resulted in a ten percentile point rise on an aggression distribution. This is somewhat dramatic considering the single short-duration exposure. In life outside the laboratory it is the cumulative effect of media violence exposure from a range of mediated sources across time that becomes of even greater concern. And also of importance, beyond imitative aggression effects, are fear effects (including the "mean world" syndrome), desensitization effects, excitation transfer effects, long-term cultivation effects, agenda-setting effects, priming effects, and contagion effects, all of which have been documented [18].

Larger mental health context

Combined with the demonstrated pervasiveness and power of media violence is the borderline mental health condition of much of the world's population. According to the World Health Organization [19], mental disorders affect 25% of the earth's human population, including approximately 20% of children. At any given time on the planet approximately 450 million people suffer from mental health issues, and two-thirds of these persons will never seek or receive mental health intervention. The ubiquitous presence of media violence around the world combined with the prevalence of mental unhealthiness seems a volatile mixture, and counter-conducive to the building of empathic consciousness. Perhaps related to this, based upon a database analysis of over 5,000 terrorist incidents between 1968 and 1986 it was found that within two months after American network television coverage of international terrorist events there will be more than twice as many terrorist events compared to when there is no initial television network coverage, n=26 vs. n=12 [20].

Youth vulnerability

But even for adolescents and young adults not in need of treatment for mental health conditions, the transitional years are challenging developmentally, a time of confusion as to self-identity, uncertainty about the future, hormonal surges, mood changes, heightened sensitivity and stress reactions, personal experimentation, tendencies to want to confront authority and the status quo, drug consumption, and all the rest. When media violence comes into this life-space with its "lessons" about how to handle frustration, how to express anger, how to "get even" with people who get in your way or do bad things

to you, or how to treat strangers of other races and places and ethnicities and religions ("out-group others"), then receptive minds, especially among young males, are primed for modeled "solutions" [22]. This can be an explosive intersection: graphic media portrayals of aggressive acting-out behaviors, and young male receivers in a state of acute vulnerability. The human brain is the longest-maturing among mammals, not fully formed until the mid-to-late twenties, and the adolescent and young adult populations are therefore especially at-risk for susceptibility to compelling and violent media imagery. Of particular import is the most recent line of neuroscience research in media aggression effects examining impacts of violent imagery upon the human brain and finding neural changes akin to "emotional anesthesia" [23].

Issue of scale

Added to this is the "issue of scale" [22]. Let us imagine for the moment that there is no international mental health issue, and that adolescence and young adulthood are not particularly susceptible and vulnerable stages of life. Even so, if a given violent film or other mass medium stimulus had absolutely zero aggression effect on 99.9% of its world audience (unlikely, but for this "issue of scale" example this will be posited), for a total viewing audience of 100,000,000 receivers this would still mean that approximately 100,000 consumers of this violence imagery would still be adversely affected. The population of the planet is now so large, and the media violence so ever-present, that even in a 99.9% "no effect" scenario there nevertheless remains a sizable pool of impacted receivers who can potentially exert adverse impacts on their surrounding environments. This is especially true if we consider not only immediate direct imitative effects, but delayed, cumulative, and indirect effects [24].

Implications

The violent and aggressive imagery that the world, and especially its young, are being led to consume is often at odds with the empathic consciousness development that the world requires. Instead of fostering empathy and compassion, aggressive media imagery increases hostile expectations and fears, increases aggressive emotions and cognitions and actions, and decreases sympathy and real-world helping behaviors [25,26]. The opposite of what Rifkin [2] is hoping for is occurring as large doses of violent and aggressive media fare are exported to the world and devoured by the young upon whom tomorrow most depends.

Yet there is always cause for communication hope, and there always need be. As Guare [27] put it, "It's amazing how a little bit of tomorrow can make up for a whole lot of yesterday." For example, in a recent study of thousands of uploaded You Tube videos collected during a three-month period during 2009 [28], only 13% of the sample contained violence (often captures of video games), compared against a figure of slightly above 60% for television fare, and there was also more of an anti-violence message surrounding these depictions on You Tube than is the case on television. These early findings are encouraging. But ongoing research is needed, especially since each week the equivalent of 180,000 full-length movies (in terms of sheer visual footage) is being uploaded to You Tube [29].

Level of media violence is theoretically the most modifiable of the major contributing aggression factors. Poverty is difficult to eradicate, urban overcrowding is difficult to remedy, and so on, but modifications in the quantity of graphic media violence are more amenable to intervention. The relative modifiability of the gratuitous violence variable cannot help but be apparent to those who envision a less violent world, and a more globally empathic, harmonious, and survivable tomorrow.

Let us briefly consider one additional media-related impediment (among of course others) to the development of global empathic consciousness.

Commodification and entertainmentization of consciousness

Another counterforce to the development of empathic consciousness and biosphere awareness is the commercialization of consciousness. As McPhail [3] has noted, "From the perspective of electronic colonialism, advertising has a greater role and impact in foreigners' lives, values, and ultimately purchasing behaviors than the audio or video programming or print copy these ads surround." A closely related counterforce is the entertainmentization of consciousness. We will briefly allude to both, for these, along with violent and aggressive media content, can take us away from the vision hoped for by Rifkin. Instead, if they remain unchecked, these tendencies will perhaps condemn us to future scenarios we will wish we had earlier tried to affect.

The commercialization of human consciousness [30] is now at an all-time high in America and around the world, and poses numerous threats to well-being at personal, social, cultural, and international levels. Consumers are sold the notion that social, emotional, and psychological needs can be met through the ongoing consumption of material goods. Ads seek symbolic control of their viewers' consciousness, linking products with something beyond the product that is attainable through the purchase of the product. These ads usually do not come in straightforward messages, but are often camouflaged via product placements, sponsorships, cross-promotions, infomercials, logos, visual embeds, place-based ads, pop-ups, etc., constituting a visual and acoustic space heavy with commerce, life organized around material consumption. Highly skilled strategic compliance professionals endlessly seek new formats for triggering automatic emotional responses within us, their target audiences, and image dominates as the media deliver audiences to advertisers.

This has resulted in personal, social, cultural, and environmental repercussions. In India, for example, commercial television exploded in the 1990s when most of the urban centers in the country went from one governmentally-controlled non-commercial channel to dozens of satellite and cable-delivered commercial channels, about sixty in Delhi. Until that happened, Unnikrishnan & Bajpai [31] observed that "children growing up in metropolitan India lived by an entirely different agenda – certainly television formed no part of it." But their later interviews with hundreds of Delhi children told a different story: "Our study revealed consumerism is the new religion of the day, and its most devout followers are children." These Indian researchers were concerned about the vast majority of the child audience who could in no way afford what they saw advertised, and who therefore feel they are living in an "unreal reality." Equally troubling are the children from affluent families who "might feel convinced that only his class of Indians really count … Since the ideology of consumption turns the spotlight on the individual, the individual is, in effect, freed from the burden and responsibility of caring about the rights and development of others in society" (p. 348).

Citation: Gordon RD (2016) Global Empathic Consciousness Development: Mass Communication Hope? Int J Journalism Mass Comm 3: 116. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.15344/2349-2635/2016/116

Ewen & Ewen [30] worried decades ago about the ultimate environmental impacts of unrelenting consumerism: "Within each new choice being offered is the implicit invitation to dispose of yesterday's choices. At the heart of this perpetual cycle is a market economy whose health depends upon the growing infirmity of the planet." An American child, for example, will use about eight times more of the resources of the planet than a child growing up in rural India. Rampant consumerism keeps us perpetually out of touch with the endangered environment that our consumerism creates. Budd et al. [32] warned nearly twenty years ago that "We face an ecological and social crisis of major proportions, a crisis for which individualist market culture has not prepared its inhabitants."

Research suggests that for the past three decades or so narcissism, a preoccupation with self, has gone up significantly in the West, and increasingly around the world [33-35]. This accentuation of the self, concern with the self, adornment of the self, presentation of the self, concern with the pleasure and happiness of the self, concern with the attention that the self is or is not getting, all of this runs counter to the empathic consciousness that our biosphere and its people require. As Hedges [36] writes in his recent volume *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle*, "We have a right, in the cult of the self, to get whatever we desire. We can do anything, even belittle and destroy those around us, including our friends, to make money, to be happy, and to become famous." Focus narrows, and ethics and responsibility to anyone but self becomes elusive.

Related to the commodification of consciousness is the entertainmentization of consciousness. Postman [37] in his classic work *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* was among the first eloquent spokespersons to call our attention to the fact that not only are the mass media entertainment-driven, but as a result, entertainment has become the dominant format for the representation of all experience in society. Entertainment is the supra-ideology by which all institutions are to be judged. As Postman put it, "Our politics, religion, news, athletics, education and commerce have been transformed into congenial adjuncts of show business, largely without protest or even much popular notice. The result is that we are a people on the verge of amusing ourselves to death." Postman, in the tradition of media theorists such as Innis and McLuhan, argued that "the bias of a medium sits heavy, felt but unseen, over a culture." As a result of the entertainmentization of everything, our attention spans shrink even further, our literacy declines, our standards erode, our concern about serious issues dwindles. As Hedges [36] has summarized it, "In an age of images and entertainment, in an age of instant emotional gratification, we neither seek nor want honesty or reality. Reality is complicated. Reality is boring." Hedges offers these figures: more than 40% of college graduates will never read another book in their lives; 80% of families neither read nor bought a single book in 2007; nearly a third of the population is illiterate or barely literate. A world in which commodification and incessant entertainment and spectacle and narcissism prevail in peoples' consciousness renders its inhabitants ill-prepared for surviving the difficult times ahead.

While there are certainly other media-related issues beyond media violence and the commodification and entertainmentization of consciousness that deserve attention as well [38-42]), these are beyond the scope of this commentary.

Mass Communication Hope?

What can communication scholars and researchers do next? Where to make contribution, what is needed? Below eight possibilities are highlighted. As Jarecki [43] expresses it, "America is a work in progress, made better by the tough love of those who care for her." May we view her mass communication products and world exports in a similar vein, as a work in progress and subject to further influence.

So what can we academics do?

We can promote dialogue on ethical / neuroethical issues

A renewed world dialogue on the ethics of violence depiction, and increasingly from a neuroethics standpoint, is needed. Iacoboni [44], a pioneering mirror neuron researcher, has serious concerns about media violence from a neurophysiologic perspective: "Our instinct for empathy is part of the good news stemming from mirror neurons. Imitative violence could well be the bad news …" He writes (Ch. 8) that mirror neurons produce automatic imitations that are non-conscious and that constrain our free-will: "The neural properties of these cells can easily explain the immediate imitation of violent behavior, especially simple acts of violence, just as they can explain, as we have seen, the mirroring of smiling, foot shaking, face rubbing, and so on." He observes that violence viewing stimulates arousal in the organism, and this arousal can reduce the inhibitory activity of super mirror neurons, and there is "uncontrolled biological automaticity that may undermine the classical view of autonomous decision making that is at the basis of free will." This leads to neuroethical issues that, Iacoboni advises, need to be deliberated. Iacoboni (p. 272) concludes his book with a call: "We have evolved to connect deeply with other human beings. Our awareness of this fact can and should bring us even closer to one another."

Is it neuroethical in today's world consciousness system to further saturate that system with mediated images of gratuitous violence? Is this necessary and appropriate? When is violent media imagery a violation and abuse of human consciousness? Do whatever benefits accrue outweigh the costs to humanity? These and other issues are in need of widespread open debate and dialogue, and academics can help to arrange and support world inquiry in this ethical realm.

We can further question underlying media assumptions

The assumptions that "violence sells" and that the media are only responding to audience demand have been questioned in previous media research, and it is not at all clear that violence itself is the crucial variable in increasing audience size [14]. Studies of the key variables in highly consumed media fare are needed. Can audiences be engaged to willingly watch a mediated stimulus that lacks violent imagery as the hook? For example, Blanchard et al. [45] found that people found the Russian roulette scene in The Deer Hunter to be their least enjoyable scene in the film, yet thirty-one real-life Russian roulette incidents across a four-year period were associated with that scene. Would audiences still be drawn to ultra-violent films even if the violent imagery were toned down by 25% to 75%? And what might be compelling enough narratively and visually to gain audience interest and produce profits while featuring prosocial themes and possibly stimulating prosocial outcomes? How can the traditional element of dramatic "conflict" be constructively utilized in the pursuit of prosocial themes and effects? And what other foundational media industry assumptions need to be called into question, debated, and investigated? We academics have something to offer to this line of inquiry, examining foundational media assumptions.

We can accelerate the call for media reform

Concurrent with formal academic investigation, scholarly appeals to the media industries, producers, directors, writers, and actors is also needed, based upon our existing scientific knowledge, highlighting the importance of greater ethical regard and responsibility as we continue into the 21st century. Academic leadership would be helpful to social activism calling for media attention to biospheric concerns and global empathic consciousness development.

How can pressure be strategically and systematically applied to promote media reform? How do citizens of the world who recognize the acuity of planetary conditions and events exert influence on the media to be more of the solution and less of the problem? Media consciousness-raising, advocacy, and leadership efforts by mass communication scholars are needed, aside from the pursuit of yet further research [16]. The world cannot wait until all of the research is in. Much of media effects research has historically been to acquire knowledge and promote career advancement [35], but these priorities can no longer predominate. Considering the state of the world, this is an now rendered an anachronism. Energetic academic advisement, support, and leadership are vital to media literacy and reform efforts.

We can catalogue, comment upon, and publicize prosocial themes, scenes, and images

Peterson & Seligman [46] found that virtues ubiquitous around the world include kindness, gratitude, forgiveness, hope, wisdom, self-restraint, authenticity, persistence, wisdom, open-mindedness, awe, and other valued virtues [46,47]. Content analysis research that catalogues and analyzes continuing media depictions in these and other "higher" areas of human functioning is needed. Knowing where to turn for existing prosocial depictions, themes, and images would be of value to educators, other helping professionals, and prosocial societal change-agents, as would guidance in implementing the use of these media artifacts within educational curricula and media literacy efforts. Often embedded within violent narratives are prosocial elements that can be identified, extracted, commented upon, and made available for wider dissemination. Such materials could be organized, indexed, and publicized to a greater extent than is currently the case, drawing attention to prosocial media content already in existence, and compensating for attention-bias to the violent and aggressive.

We can further pursue prosocial media research

The prosocial side of the media research enterprise has commanded far less research attention than has the media violence side of the equation. The research that does exist tends to document the positive benefits of constructive media portrayals of prosocial behaviors across multiple forms of media, including video games, music, television, radio, and film [13,48-52,]. The modeling of virtuous human actions and the cultivation of perspective-taking and empathy via the media fits within a general learning model that incorporates concepts and principles from social learning theory, script theory, cognitive and neo-association theory, cultivation theory, desensitization theory, and social information processing theory [53].

Prosocial beliefs, attitudes, affects, and behavioral scripts are susceptible to modification by skillfully designed media interventions. Prosocial media depictions of cooperation, generosity, tolerance, compassion, helping, hope, wisdom, forgiveness, etc., can be even more powerful at times than the depiction of antisocial acts, and we have suspected this for a long while [17]. Further documentation of prosocial effects and the specification of the precise mechanisms by which they work is perhaps, at this stage, more important than further media violence research. We have worked extensively to chronicle the darker side of media effects across the decades, and now the time is auspicious for researching the brighter side of human capacity.

For example, in a recent study of prosocial media effects [48], samples of 200 to 500 participants (mean age of 21) were studied in Australia, China, Croatia, Germany, Japan, Romania, and the U.S. The authors report this to be the first study ever to directly examine the relationship between prosocial media use, empathy, and real-world helping behavior across a range of cultures. The main finding, using a multi-group structural equation model, was that the entertainment media studied (television, movies, and video games) can affect empathic concern and perspective-taking, and this mediates self-reported helping behavior over time in the real-world, and with no major gender, age, or even cultural differences: "These findings underscore the fact that media are powerful teachers. Just as exposure to violent media can lead to negative outcomes such as desensitization and increased aggression, use of prosocial media can lead to positive changes such as increased empathy and helping" [48]. Another recent example of prosocial media effects is a radio drama intervention in Burundi, Africa [49]. The researchers found that tolerance, inter-group trust, social distance, in-group superiority, and responsibility attributions were all affected in a constructive direction for receivers of a radio drama across time, compared to non-listeners. They view this finding as consistent with the previous limited research in the area, though most of the previous studies of media impact in prejudice-reduction interventions have used single-exposure media programs.

Ongoing investigations of the effects of portrayals and discourses surrounding prosocial themes are needed, especially within the newest electronic media and their applications, as is advisory assistance in helping these prosocial messages to more regularly go viral.

We can link to positive psychology research efforts

Parallel to the recent interest in pursuing prosocial media effects research, "positive psychology," a term coined by Abraham Maslow [54], has blossomed in the past two decades [55]. Much of the research momentum gained in positive psychology in investigating the "lighter" (rather than the "darker") side of human values and behaviors would seem auspicious for stimulating a surge in innovative prosocial media effects research. Positive psychology topics have included forgiveness, gratitude, awe, joy, happiness, love, humanity, kindness, compassion, harmony, beauty, wisdom, persistence, temperance, fairness, modesty, transcendence, hope, spirituality, and others [56]. Seligman and colleagues summarize the science of positive psychology as the study of positive emotions, virtues, and strengths of character that contribute to human flourishing, as well as the study of positive and enabling institutions [46]. Positive psychology aims to identify the character requirements necessary for a viable and healthy society. Attention to documenting the positive effects of prosocial media themes and content dovetails with this burgeoning applied scientific positive psychology movement. Making the link between prosocial media effects research and positive psychology more explicit could be useful at theoretical and practical levels.

We can synthesize diverse stands of prosocial research across disciplinary lines

What have we learned from previous research in mass communication, social psychology, the neurosciences, personality research, sociology, social epidemiology, and other inquiry from

Citation: Gordon RD (2016) Global Empathic Consciousness Development: Mass Communication Hope? Int J Journalism Mass Comm 3: 116. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.15344/2349-2635/2016/116

disciplines far and wide that will allow us to better predict how to inspire a shared vision of greater worldwide human cooperation and environmental respect? And if the people of the planet are fated to continue consuming large mediated doses of violent and aggressive imagery with themes of attack, defense, and revenge, what can be done after consumption to help mitigate these effects? Synthesizing previous research broadly related to these questions is a worthwhile scholarly pursuit. We often know more than we realize we know, and those who can cull, distill, and integrate far-flung knowledge perform extremely valuable service.

We can stimulate and facilitate ongoing dialogue on what is needed

Of value is continuing active dialogue among mass communication scholars on the question itself, "What is needed?" Especially if we assume that we cannot entirely rely on media producers to decrease the export of violent and aggressive media imagery, at least in the near-term, then what courses of action and research can be pursued that accommodate to this, yet that can assist in buffering impact? To reflect aloud in community, generating widespread and free-flowing dialogue on options of the most creative and innovative sort would be a healthy pursuit: where to go from here? Hearings before Congress, statements from professional associations, endless violence effects research, all of this can appear to be for naught. So what other options are there? What is possible that has not already been done? Where are the leverage points for change? Open and generative exploratory discourses are needed among mass communication scholars and within public arenas.

Conclusion

Our scholarly responsibility to the planet

Ethics in the behavioral sciences have often been discussed in terms of the ethics of the collection and analysis of data and the treatment of research participants. Far less attention, especially within communication studies, has been paid to the ethics of our responsibility to society, how our roles as scholars relate to our larger responsibilities as citizens of our planet Earth [57-59]. Yet as Skolimowski [60] warned long ago, "Knowledge which does not aid the species in the process of overall survival and which does not contribute to the betterment of man (sic) is defective knowledge." And as Houston [61] advised, "It is time to educate ourselves to the web of kinship and fellow-feeling necessary on this endangered planet -- to awaken all those dormant potentials that were not necessary to man in his role as conqueror of nature and other people. We are challenged, as never before, to achieve a new humanity and a new way of nurturing the species in harmony with nature and with each other." And, finally, the words of Stagner [62] from sixty years ago are truer today than ever before: "The physical sciences have now achieved such success that it is now possible for all men (sic) to die together. Relatively little is being done to make it possible for them to live together." The warnings have been with us for a long while.

Gazzaniga [63], in Human: The Science Behind What Makes Us Unique, concludes his volume with the thought that "the ability to wish or imagine that we can be better is notable. No other species aspires to be more than it is. Perhaps we can be." We are also reminded of the words of George Herbert Mead [64]: "Of course, there have been evolutionary changes that took place without individual reaction. But moral changes are those that take place through the action of the individual as such. S/he becomes the instrument, the means, of changing the old into a new order. …by asking what is right, we are in the same situation, and we are helping in this way toward the development of the moral consciousness of the community" (gender inclusive option not in the original).

Of course there will be resistance to prosocial change efforts within the violence entertainment establishment, not only within the industry but among those consumers habituated to, or craving of, violent media imagery (mediated visually and/or aurally). In one recent study for instance [65] those most opposed to nonviolent prosocial interventions were those highest in aggression themselves. A "boomerang effect" is to be expected. But as Japanese communication scholar Satoshi Ishii [66] has urged, "It is now the most crucial and unavoidable responsibility … to establish and further develop harmonious, peaceful and sustainable world order not by means of mass-devastating militaristic or terroristic violence but through intercultural, interethnic, international, interreligious and intercivilizational *communication* so that the 21st century will not be the last century for the whole living world" (italics in original). As Mead understood, since human nature is social, moral ends must also be social.

Shades of Marshall McLuhan

McLuhan [67] presciently and famously observed more than fifty years ago that "Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned." McLuhan wrote that any such extension of our central nervous system into the whole of mankind "affects the whole psychic and social complex." Anyone familiar with the preponderance of violence in media content, and the triune structure of the human brain, cannot help but wonder whether there has not been disproportionate extension of the "reptilian" brain (our instinctual survival mechanisms) and the limbic brain system (including our "fight or flight" reactions) into the world community, rather than an extension of the neo-mammalian brain functions that have evolved most recently. It is this most recent evolutionary development of the neo-mammalian brain that includes the higher-order human brain functions including thinking, reasoning, reflecting, emotional self-management, language, empathy, compassion, and other such neocortical functions. It can be argued that the central nervous systems extensions of the global Western media empire have been drawing excessively from the lower and more primitive brain regions, and that it is time to upgrade our central nervous system extensions into the world consciousness system. Or, to at least counterbalance them with other more constructive extensions and flows from higher regions. "The aspiration of our time for wholeness, empathy and depth of awareness is a natural adjunct of electric technology" wrote McLuhan [64], as is the eagerness for "a faith that concerns the ultimate harmony of all being." McLuhan is even more right now than he was then: electronic interconnectivity, especially in the most recent twenty-year period, has brought to multitudes of young people across our globe this hunger for wholeness, empathy, depth of awareness, and harmony of all being. How to help bring these into greater presence amidst a torrent of images of visual harm and revenge, and how to get past narcissistic self-preoccupation and disengagement, remains the question. As McLuhan knew, there is a predictable "numbness that each extension brings about in the individual and society." And as he also knew, the electronic extensions of humankind need to eventually be brought into "orderly service."

As McChesney [29] has commented, communication technologies with unlimited potential have been usurped by the uses to which they have been put. In America it was the hope of early broadcast enthusiasts in the 1920s and 30s, especially within the academy, that the electronic media would serve the public interest with content from the arts and humanities that would lift the human spirit, and with public affairs programs and "fourth estate" scrutiny of the forces of power in society [38]. As critical media scholars are quick to point out, this noble vision has not come to pass, as economic interests have instead reigned supreme.

Yet hope springs eternal, and hope we must have. It is not that mass communication hope is not worth having, but rather that such hope cannot be left entirely in the hands of the media monoliths. If we are to have mass communication hope, we will want to find our way of contributing to consciousness-raising, to continuing to nudge constructive change forward. May those of us who have dedicated a major part of our lives to the study and practice of mass communication find ways to contribute to a lessening of numbness, and help meet human and planetary needs for wholeness, empathy, depth of awareness, and harmony of all being. Our very survival as a species might depend upon exactly this.

References

1. Simonson D (1996) Dreams of democratic togetherness: Communication hope from Cooley to Katz. Critical Studies in Mass Communication 13: 324-342.
2. Rifkin J (2009) The empathic civilization: The race to global consciousness in a world in crisis. New York: Jeremy Tarcher / Penguin.
3. McPhail TL (2002) Global communication: Theories, stakeholders, and trends. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
4. Le V (2015) The world's largest media companies of 2015.
5. Bushman BJ, Jamieson PE, Weitz I, Romer D (2013) Gun violence trends in movies. Pediatrics 132: 1014-1018.
6. Rosenthal R (1986) Media violence, antisocial behavior, and the social consequence of small effects. Journal of Social Issues 42: 141-154.
7. Comstock G, Scharrer E (2007) Media and the American child. San Diego: Academic Press.
8. Anderson CA, Bushman BJ, Donnerstein E, Warburton W (2015) SPSSI research summary on media violence. Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues 15: 4-19.
9. Media violence commission of the International Society for Research on Aggression: Report (2012) Aggressive Behavior 38: 335-341.
10. Saleem M, Anderson CA, Gentile DA (2012) Effects of prosocial, neutral, and violent video games on children's helpful and hurtful behaviors. Aggr Behav 38: 281-287.
11. Anderson CA, Shibuya A, Ihori N, Swing EL, Bushman BJ, et al. (2010) Violent video game effects on aggression, empathy, and prosocial behavior in Eastern and Western countries: a meta-analytic review. Psychol Bull 136: 151-173.
12. Anderson CA, Dill KE (2000) Video games and aggressive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in the laboratory and in life. J Pers Soc Psychol 78: 772-790.
13. Anderson CA, Gentile DA, Buckley KE (2007) Violent video game effects on children and adolescents: Theory, research, and public policy. Oxford, England: University Press.
14. Potter WJ (2003) The 11 myths of media violence. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
15. United States Surgeon General's Office (2000) Youth violence: A report of the surgeon general. Washington, D.C.: Printing Office of the United States Government.
16. Potter WJ (2016) Media literacy, 8th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
17. Hearold S (1986) A synthesis of 1043 effects of television on social behavior. In G. Comstock (Ed.), Public communication and behavior (v.1, 65-133). New York: Academic Press.
18. Gordon RD (2007a) The Asian communication scholar for the 21st century. China Media Research 3: 50-59.
19. World Health Organization (2001) World health report 2001: Mental illness. Geneva, Switzerland: WHO.
20. Weimann G, Winn C (1994) The theater of terror: Mass media and international terrorism. White Plains, NY: Longmann.
21. Strasburger VC (Ed.) (2012) Children, adolescents and the media. St. Louis, MO: W.B. Saunders.
22. Berkowitz L (2000) Some effects of thoughts on anit- and prosocial influences of media events: A cognitive neoassociation analysis. In S. Prince (Ed.), Screening violence (pp. 205-236). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
23. Stockdale LA, Morrison RG, Kmiecik MJ, Garbarino J, Silton RL (2015) Emotionally anesthetized: media violence induces neural changes during emotional face processing. Soc Cogn Affect Neurosci 10: 1373-1382.
24. Gordon RD (2002) The question of media violence in the USA. Human Communication 5: 331-350.
25. Bushman BJ, Anderson DA (2002) Violent video games and hostile expectations: A test of the general aggression model. Pers Soc Psychol Bull 28: 1679-1686.
26. Prince S (2000) Screening violence. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
27. Guare J (2007) Landscape of the body. New York, NY: Grove Press.
28. Weaver A, Zelenkausekaite AJ, Samson L (2012) The (non) violent world of You Tube: Content analysis in web video. Journal of Communication 62: 1065-1083.
29. McChesney R (2013) Digital discontent: How capitalism is turning the internet against democracy. New York: New Press.
30. Ewen S, Ewen E (1992) Channels of desire: Mass images and the shaping of American consciousness. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
31. Unnikrishnan N, Bajpai S (1998) The impact of television advertising on children. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
32. Budd M, Craig S, Steinman C (1999) Consuming environments: Television and commercial culture. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
33. Twenge JM, Foster JD (2010) Birth cohort increases in narcissistic personality tests among American college students, 1982-2009. Social Psychological and Personality Science 1: 96-106.
34. Twenge JM, Campbell WK (2009) Narcissism epidemic: Living in the age of entitlement. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.
35. Derber C (2000) The pursuit of attention: Power and ego in everyday life. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
36. Hedges C (2009) Empire of illusion: The end of literacy and the triumph of spectacle. New York: Nation Books.
37. Postman N (1985) Amusing ourselves to death: Public discourse in the age of show business. New York: Penguin.
38. McChesney R (1999) Rich media, poor media: Communication politics in dubious times. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
39. McChesney, R (2007) Communication Revolution: Critical junctures and the future of media. New York: New Press.
40. Bugeja M (2005) The interpersonal divide: The search for community in a technological age. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
41. Alger D (1998) Megamedia: How giant corporations dominate mass media, distort competition, and endanger democracy. New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield.
42. Mitroff II, Bennis W (1993) The unreality industry: The deliberate manufacturing of falsehood and what it is doing to our lives. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
43. Jarecki (2008) The American way of war: Guided missiles, misguided men, and a republic in peril. New York: Free Press.
44. Iacoboni M (2008) Mirroring people: The new science of how we connect with others. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.

Citation: Gordon RD (2016) Global Empathic Consciousness Development: Mass Communication Hope? Int J Journalism Mass Comm 3: 116. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.15344/2349-2635/2016/116

45. Blanchard DC, Graczyk B, Blanchard RJ (1986) Differential reactions of men and women to realism, physical damage, and emotionality in violent films. Aggressive Behavior 12: 45-55.
46. Peterson C, Seligman MEP (2004) Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.
47. Park N, Peterson C, Seligman MEP (2005) Character strengths in forty nations and fifty states. Unpublished manuscript, University of Rhode Island.
48. Prot S, Gentile DA, Anderson CA, Suzuki K, Swing E, et al. (2014) Long-term relations among prosocial-media use, empathy, and prosocial behavior. Psychol Sci 25: 358-368.
49. Bilali R, Vollhardt JR, Rarick JRD (2015) Assessing the impact of a media-based intervention to prevent intergroup violence and promote positive intergroup relations in Burundi. Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology 26: 221–235.
50. Greitemeyer T (2011) Effects of media on social behavior: When and why does media exposure affect helping and aggression? Current Directions in Psychological Science 20: 251-255.
51. Greitemeyer T, Osswald S (2010) Prosocial video games reduce aggressive cognitions. Journal of Experimental and Social Psychology 45: 896-900.
52. Greitemeyer T (2009) Effects of songs with prosocial lyrics on prosocial behavior. Pers Soc Psychol Bull 35: 1500-1511.
53. Maier JA, Gentile DA (2012) Learning aggression through the media: comparing psychological and communication approaches. In I. J. Schrum (Ed.), The psychology of entertainment media: Blurring the lines between entertainment and persuasion, 2nd ed. (267-299). New York: Taylor & Francis.
54. Maslow AH (1954) Motivation and personality. New York, NY: Harper.
55. Seligman MEP, Steen TA, Park N, Peterson C (2005) Positive psychology progress: Empirical validation of interventions. American Psychologist 60: 410-421.
56. Lopez SJ, Pedrotti JT, Snyder CR (2015) Positive psychology: The scientific and practical explorations of human strengths, 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
57. Gordon RD (2007b). Beyond the failures of Western communication theory. Journal of Multicultural Discourses 2: 89-107.
58. Gordon RD (1988) Communication research and social responsibility. Speech Communication Annual 2: 93-102.
59. Gordon RD (1982) Research editorial: Practical theory. Spectra 18: 1-2.
60. Skolimowski H (1973) The twilight of physical descriptions. In I. Laszlo (Ed.), The world system: Models, norms, variations. New York, NY: George Braziller.
61. Houston JM (1977) The mind of Margaret Mead. Quest 77: 22-25.
62. Stagner R (1956) The psychology of industrial conflict. New York, NY: Wiley and Sons.
63. Gazzaniga MS (2008) Human: The science behind what makes us unique. New York: HarperCollins.
64. Mead GH (1934) Mind, self, and society (Ed., C. Morris). Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press.
65. Cardaba MAM, Brinol P, Brandle G, Ruiz SR (2016) The moderating role of aggressiveness in response to campaigns and interventions promoting anti-violence attitudes. Aggr Behav.
66. Ishii S (2007) A Western contention for Asia-centered communication scholarship paradigms: A commentary on Gordon's paper. Journal of Multicultural Discourses 2: 108-114.
67. McLuhan M (1964) Understanding media: The extensions of man. New York: McGraw-Hill/Signet.

Int J Journalism Mass Comm
ISSN: 2349-2635

IJJMC, an open access journal
Volume 3. 2016. 116