



“Nonnutritive sweeteners may make you hungrier and want to eat more.”

Sylvia R. Karasu, M.D.

## Greening the Media

How media technology contributes to the global ecological crisis.

by Richard Maxwell, Ph.D. and Toby Miller, Ph.D.

### Electronics Industry Discovers New Species of Media Consumer

Why the industry always gets us wrong in their fantasy of abundance and growth.

Published on January 29, 2013 by Richard Maxwell, Ph.D. and Toby Miller, Ph.D. in Greening the Media

Have a little pity on the high-tech retailer who must once again fulfill the fantasies of consumers via the spectacle of the Consumer Electronics Association's annual trade show in Las Vegas, a January highlight on the high-tech calendar.

On the surface, this year's CEA convention was a live preview of 2013's models of consumer electronics and a celebration of invention and skill and the fact consumers spent \$204 billion on digital technology in 2012, and forecast expenditure of \$213 million for 2013.<sup>1</sup>

As in past years, it was also a meeting of industry oracles returned as from a vision quest to expound on the marketing potential of high-voltage entertainments. Lingered ghosts of conventions past—goodbye 3-D television, killed for now by the stupid glasses—mingled with the familiar forms—fifty kinds of ultra high-definition TV, with up to hundred-inch screens offering four times the resolution at 25 times the cost of present sets.<sup>2</sup>

Inevitably, the ritual magic of this breathtaking hype is accompanied by a bestiary of new consumer types, the latest one a doozy: with 54.8 million US residents playing with tablet computers in 114.5 million television homes, the voltage mavens proclaimed to have discovered that “humans are now multiple-input creatures” forming a “Great Circle of modern consumerism.”<sup>3</sup> And the mavens are serious in this grand claim of quasi-evolutionary change: they don't just mean we like pear with Camembert, or tea with toast.

Consider last December's “TV of Tomorrow” conference where confident media executives offered these Olympian pronouncements about the past, present, and future to attendees paying \$1,075 for the privilege:<sup>4</sup>

- TV viewers are no longer “passive observers” (were they ever?)
- “consumers can find whatever they want to watch” (we really can't, even if we knew what we were looking for)
- the future involves “a more on-demand experience” (could an Orwell or DeLillo please deliver alternative wording?); and
- a “killer app” will appear “where the masses congregate” (where? Facebook or Twitter?—this is supposed to be imaginative?)

Businesses justify what they do in terms of meeting existing needs that consumers have—responding to demand by coming up with supply. We want bigger TVs, higher resolution, more portability, greater computing power in less space. They react by coming up with the goods.

In some cases that may be so. But when we look at the Consumer Electronics convention, it's clear that the idea is, at least in part, to generate consumer desires rather than simply satisfy them.

Before the electronic versions, the only tablets we cried out for were

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administered by doctors for earaches, stress, and fever. Today, what happens is far from a house call: Apple picked up on Amazon's portable e-reader and endowed it with higher graphic and communication capabilities, then marketed it as effectively as a pill, today's virtual soothing visit.

And while many people around the world are consumers, hundreds of millions operate outside the capitalist economy. And those of us who are consumers are often also workers. In fact, we generally spend more time working than buying. That's why we feel like square pegs to the industry's rounded version of a media consumer.

"What do you do?" We generally don't answer with "I'm a television audience" or "I'm a mallrat" or "I'm a 3-D loving, tablet owning multiple-input creature," unless we're joking.

We reply "I'm looking after the children," "I'm a chemist," "a student," "I drive subway trains," or "I'm between jobs."

When we think about work, we factor in the time and cost of travel, the opportunity lost from doing other things, the impact on our loved ones, the experience of obeying our supervisor, the wistfulness of down time, the hurriedness of lunch, the ambivalence of overtime, the absence of free speech—and the other sides to our jobs, when they work out and we feel satisfied in the office, factory, farm, or studio.

So our message is a simple one. Humane and sustainable ways of living connects what we do to the things we also consume. When we strive to buy the consumer gadgets promised by corporations and thereby increase domestic peace or pleasure, we need to be skeptical and think beyond what we are told are "our" needs. A consumerist perspective—"I want more and I want it now"—misses out on the needs and realities of much of the population, much of the time. Yet it may have an impact on them environmentally and occupationally. The public interest demands, if you like, greater innovation, and less merchandise.

1. [http://www.ce.org/News/News-Releases/Press-Releases/2013-Press-Releases/CE-Industry-Revenues-to-Reach-Record-High-\\$209-Bil.aspx](http://www.ce.org/News/News-Releases/Press-Releases/2013-Press-Releases/CE-Industry-Revenues-to-Reach-Record-High-$209-Bil.aspx)

2. <http://www.tvnewscheck.com/article/64591/4k-second-screens-center-stage-at-ces>

3. [http://www.tvb.org/4685/about\\_tvb/commentary/commentary\\_article/1339](http://www.tvb.org/4685/about_tvb/commentary/commentary_article/1339)

4. <http://www.thetvoftomorrowshow.com/>;  
<http://www.mediapost.com/publications/article/190486/experts-mull-the-tv-of-tomorrow.html#axzz2HKtOwsGf>



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