

VIEWERS' DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

This Declaration originated at the Founding Convention of the Cultural Environment Movement (CEM) in St. Louis, Missouri, U.S.A., on March 17, 1996. It was revised following suggestions by a committee elected at the Convention.

We hold these truths to be self-evident:

That all persons are endowed with the right to live in a cultural environment that is respectful of their humanity and supportive of their potential.

That all children are endowed with the right to grow up in a cultural environment that fosters responsibility, trust, and community rather than force, fear, and violence.

That when the cultural environment becomes destructive of these ends, it is necessary to alter it.

Such is the necessity that confronts us. Let the world hear the reasons that compel us to assert our rights and to take an active role in the shaping of our common cultural environment.

1. Humans live and learn by stories. Today they are no longer hand-crafted, home-made, community-inspired. They are no longer told by families, schools, or churches but are the products of a complex mass-production and marketing process. Scottish patriot Andrew Fletcher once said: "If one were permitted to make all the ballads, one need not care who should make the laws of a nation." Today most of our "ballads" -- the myths and stories of our culture -- are made by a small group of global conglomerates that have something to sell.

2. This radical transformation of our cultural environment has changed the roles we grow into, the way we employ creative talent, the way we raise our children, and the way we manage our affairs. Communication channels proliferate but technologies converge and media merge. Consolidation of ownership denies entry to newcomers, drives independents out of the mainstream, and reduces diversity of content. Media blend into a seamless homogenized cultural environment that constrains life's choices as much as the degradation of the physical environment limits life's chances.

3. This change did not come about spontaneously or after thoughtful deliberation. It was imposed on an uninformed public and is enshrined in legislation rushed through Congress without any opportunity for public scrutiny or debate about its consequences and world-wide fallout. The airways, a global commons, have been given away to media empires responsible to no one but their stockholders.

4. In exchange for that give-away, we are told, we get "free" entertainment and news. But in truth, we pay dearly, both as consumers and as citizens. The price of soap we buy includes a surcharge for the commercials that bring us the "soap opera." We pay when we wash, not when we watch. And we pay even if we do not watch or do not like the way of life it promotes. This is taxation without representation. Furthermore, the advertising expenditures that buy our media are a tax-deductible business expense. Money diverted from the public treasury pays for an invisible, unelected, unaccountable, private Ministry of Culture making, behind closed doors, decisions that shape public policy.

5. The human consequences are also far-reaching. They include cults of media violence that desensitize, terrorize, brutalize and paralyze; the promotion of unhealthy practices that pollute, drug, hurt, poison, and kill thousands every day; portrayals that dehumanize, stereotype, marginalize and stigmatize women, racial and ethnic groups, gays and lesbians, aging or disabled or physically or mentally ill persons, and others outside the cultural mainstream.

6. These distortions of the democratic process divert attention from the basic needs, problems and aspirations of people. They conceal the drift toward ecological suicide; the silent crumbling of our vital infrastructure; the cruel neglect of children, poor people, and other vulnerable populations; the invasions of privacy at home and in the workplace; the growing inequalities of wealth and opportunity; the profits made from throwing millions of people on the scrapheap of the unemployed; the commercialization of the classroom; and the downgrading of education and the arts.

7. Global marketing formulas, imposed on media workers and foisted on the children of the world, colonize, monopolize and homogenize cultures everywhere. Technocratic fantasies mask social realities that further widen the gaps between the information rich and the information poor.

8. Repeated protests and petitions have been ignored or dismissed as attempts at "censorship" by the media magnates who alone have the power to suppress and to censor. No constitutional protection or legislative prospect will help us to loosen the noose of market censorship or to counter the repressive direction the "culture wars" are taking us. We need a liberating alternative.

We, therefore, declare our independence from a system that has drifted out of democratic reach. Our CEM offers the liberating alternative: an independent citizen voice in cultural policy-making, working for the creation of a free, fair, diverse, and responsible cultural environment for us and our children.