Exploring the design of conscious media

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Our existing model of media, based upon a consumptive-materialist–atomistic orientation, falls short in seeking to promote mainstream awareness of systemic and integral thinking in society-at-large. This paper presents evolutionary guidance media, a new model for media arising from evolutionary perspectives including systems science, humanistic, transpersonal and integral studies designed to promote planetary consciousness and give rise to an ecological–spiritual–integral mindset. Two key elements of evolutionary guidance media are discussed: a databank containing purposeful data from nine or more dimensions of human activity, and transception, the infusion of cyberception with qualities arising from mutual causality. Specific types of transception are introduced including Gaiaception, Agoraception, and Dharmaception. Organizations and companies already in the process of creating green media, socially responsible media, and spiritual, or transformational media are vanguards of the development of conscious media.

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1. Background & rationale

In many disciplines, researchers have birthed viable compassion-infused alternatives to those they inherited, e.g., humanistic, transpersonal, and integral psychologies; holistic, complementary, and alternative medicines; ecological, socially responsible, and caring economics. The new insights have already begun to revolutionize the world, revealing ways and means through which we might hope to accomplish our universal dream: peaceful planetary co-existence. However, for many of us, the institutional, cultural, moral, and other social, and environmental changes are not making headway rapidly enough. In the United States, for example, most psychological disorders are still treated with psychotropic drugs; insurance providers still refuse coverage to all but the most mainstream of medical providers, and the economic value of the natural world is still a subject of debate, rather than an established capital. Thus, while we have placed compassionate, holistic, integral ideals on the horizon, and are in the process of crawling towards them, many of us would welcome a faster mode of transportation.

Although *media* has played an essential role in disseminating information arising from the consciousness movements, since the digital revolution it has morphed into *new media*, gaining additional means by which to broadcast, propagate, and influence. Indeed researchers, as if summoned by McLuhan and Fiore [1], have set about examining the Internet's effects on many aspects of our lives, from social interactions and identity [2,3] to the effects of violent and nonviolent video game play [4,5]; from the persuasive nature of interactive technology [6] to the advent of a new form of rhetoric, *procedural rhetoric*, "the practice of persuading through processes in general and computational processes in particular" [7]. Recognizing the powerful role of such media to shape society and accelerate change, additional scholars, as well as members of the entertainment industry, and non-governmental organizations, have called for the integration of consciousness-raising content and transformational narratives in media, as well as equity in media accessibility and production [8–14].

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As a graduate student, I began exploring "conscious media" and/or "transpersonal media" and found little in the academic databases. Indeed, it was due to the enthusiasm of my dissertation committee[1] for the topic, that I continued on, taking the road less traveled. With the call for a new societal mythos ringing in my ears [15,16] and convinced of the ability of media to be a powerful force for positive change in the world, my explorations ultimately led to the preliminary sketching out of a new discipline, articulated and described as *evolutionary guidance media* [*EGM*] [17].

Evolutionary guidance media (EGM) is a theoretical framework designed to create a discipline in which the academic investigation of conscious media, socially responsible media, green media, spiritual, and/or transformative media can flourish. It arises from evolutionary perspectives including systems science, humanistic, transpersonal and integral studies, based on and derived from many voices calling for transformative change and stewardship of media. These include, but not limited to Elgin [8,9], Hubbard [10], Laszlo [11], Holland [12], Simon [13] and the National Organization for Women [14]. Such media is a hybrid, its creation requires the inclusion of data arising from both ends of the research spectrum. It is the love child of science and spirit—of *techne* and *dharma*—an infinite digital peace sign with special effect capabilities rivaling those of LSD. EGM is potentially consciousness expanding, and yet requires further research. A psycho-social stimulant, EGM is designed to facilitate the investigation and creation of media designed both in content and context specifically for the purpose of guiding and/or facilitating the societal emergence of transpersonal consciousness—specifically, planetary consciousness [17].

The latter term, planetary consciousness, as defined by the systems philosopher, Ervin Laszlo, refers to "the knowing as well as the feeling of the vital interdependence and essential oneness of humankind, and the conscious adoption of the ethics and the ethos that this entails" [11] (p. 143). Planetary consciousness arises from the principle of co-dependent origination or mutual causality common to both General Systems Theory and Buddhism, purporting the co-arising and interdependence of all phenomena and suggesting that "certain moral values are woven into the fabric of life, intrinsic to its harmony and continuity" (Macy, p. 193) [18].

2. Designing evolutionary guidance media

The methodology utilized to design a preliminary iteration of the EGM framework was B.H. Banathy's evolutionary guidance system (EGS) design methodology [19,20]. Although a thorough explanation of the methodology is beyond the scope of this paper, fives spaces of design architecture are involved: Exploration/Image Creation Space, Design Solution Space, Organized Knowledge Space, Evaluation/Experimentation Space, and the Space of the Future System [19]. While each Space is set aside for a specific activity (e.g., creative visioning, data acquisition, and so forth) the Spaces are organized as recursive spirals, designed to facilitate feedback and feed forward. The recursive nature of the Spaces can be demonstrated by examining the way in which the core values of EGM were generated. Although the Space set aside for delineating core values is the Design Solution Space, those values arose from work done, back and forth, within and between, the Exploration/Image Creation Space and the Organized Knowledge Space.

In the Exploration and Image Creation Space, for example, I began exploring the design of EGM by bundling my own ideals with the ideals of those previously mentioned individuals and organizations. Certain values were implied at the outset, with the vision itself—for it would be impossible to conceive of media designed to promote planetary consciousness without esteeming those values/qualities which promote harmony and unity, for example, peace and conflict resolution skills. Additional values were specified by stakeholders' of the system (e.g., gender and racial diversity via the National Organization of Women). Still others were delineated after research was conducted in the Organized Knowledge Space. The latter is a space set aside for the collection, organization, and synthesis of information and knowledge pertinent to nine or more dimensions of human activity considered crucial to evolutionary development, including: social action, economic, moral, wellness, design or learning and human development, scientific, aesthetic, technological, and political [19]. A summary of the dimensions is provided in Table 1.

A careful reading of these dimensions reveals a commitment to values that go far beyond those currently supported by the status quo, i.e., wellness is not the absence of illness, but the nurturing of holistic well being for individuals and society; technological advancement alone is not considered progress, but rather technology is placed under the guidance of sociocultural intelligence, and designed to serve and improve the quality of life for all beings. Through seeking data capable of promoting such goals, additional values were recognized as essential to the overall design of EGM.

Thus, working within and between the Exploration/Image Creation Space and the Space of Organized Knowledge, the core values of EGM were delineated as those that support planetary consciousness, transpersonal experiences, and superconscious learning[2], some of which include compassion, love, being values[3], personal and social responsibility,

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[1] My dissertation research was conducted at Saybrook Graduate School and Research Center under the guidance of Bela H. Banathy (1919–2003), Stanley Krippner, and Bela A. Banathy.

[2] *Superconscious learning* is learning which "provides a sense of direction for cultural and mankind processes by 'illuminating' the process from the far end in terms of guiding images" (Jantsch & Waddington, 1976, p. 42). [71].

[3] Maslow coined the term *Being-values* to refer to the following values: truth, goodness, beauty, wholeness, aliveness, uniqueness, perfection, completion, justice, order, simplicity, richness, effortlessness, playfulness, self-sufficiency (Maslow, 1971, pp. 133–135). [57].

Table 1
Dimensions of an Evolutionary Guidance System [19] (Banathy, pp. 324–325).

Dimension	Description
Social action	Ensuring social justice and an increase in cooperation, leading to the integration of our societal systems
Economic	Focusing on economic justice and integrated and indigenous development
Moral	Strengthening self-realization and social and ecological ethics
Wellness	Nurturing the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health and well being of the individual and society
Design	Nurturing the full development of individuals and social groups and enabling them to develop a design culture and attain evolutionary competence
Scientific	Manifesting ethical science that serves human and social betterment.
Technological	Placing technology under the guidance of sociocultural intelligence and in the service of the nonviolent resolution of conflicts, and the improvement of the quality of life for all
Aesthetic	Pursuing beauty, cultural and spiritual values, the various forms of art, the treasures of humanities, and the enrichment of our inner quality of life
Political	Promoting self-determination, genuine participation in self-government, continuous action for peace development, global cooperation and integration, and governance for the improvement of human conditions

creative altruism[4], peace and conflict resolution skills, and gender and racial diversity [17]. Although some researchers might balk at the strident integration of moral and ethical values, if we admit that media are indeed extensions of our senses, i.e., of our body–mind into the social world, as suggested by McLuhan and Fiore [1], it seems imperative at this juncture that we make a concerted effort to view our most revered qualities and traits, e.g., compassion, love, forgiveness, creativity, as *senses* in their own right, and promote their extension.

By explicating the manner in which the core values of EGM arose, I hope to demonstrate the recursive nature of EGS design architecture. Using it to design EGM, the resulting system is itself, endlessly capable of enfolding new visions, ideas, and data. That said, the design's ability to guide the creation of human systems towards those values capable of advancing human evolution lies in the teleological nature of the dimensions defined in Table 1. Ultimately, it was through following their lead, that a foundation emerged upon which research in conscious media, socially responsible media, green media, and spiritual, or transformative media, can advance. For, as purposeful data is collected, the dimensions become a resource, a creative repository, useful to those persons interested in promoting the advancement of planetary consciousness in society-at-large through media.[5] One way to envision this databank is as containing many thousands of mosaic-like data-pieces, each piece unique, purposefully gathered, and sorted. A handful of examples include: Bandura's research in social cognitive theory and self-efficacy [21,22]; Cialdini's research in social norms [23]; Peterson and Seligman's research in character strengths and virtues [24]; Eisler's work in caring economics [25]; Murphy's work in integral wellness [26,27]; Gidley's research in futures education [28]; Krippner's research in altered states [29], Csikszentmihalyi's research in creativity [30]; Grey's thoughts on visionary art [31]; Laszlo [32] and Sheldrake's [33] investigations of Akashic fields and morphic fields, respectively; Metzner's metaphors of self-transformation [34]; Wilber's investigations of integral psychology [35]. The databank will enfold data from many divergent disciplines, paying particular attention to the fields of media psychology and communications studies.

2.1. To what end?

Sesame Street [36] and *Blue's Clues* [37] provide excellent examples of television programs in which media creators utilized concepts from child development to hone their communication skills in an effort to appeal to a particular audience; television producer Miguel Sabido, provides a compelling example of the application of data from psychology to the design of media for adults. By applying the theories of Bandura and Jung to media, he has successfully created programming that has changed specific social behaviors in target audiences around the world [38].

The seeds for such a database have been planted through the establishment of an EGM research group [39]. Wilber's [40] Integral All-Levels, All-Quadrants (AQAL) framework is being considered as an organizing structure, or "object-container" for sorting purposes. This database is envisioned as kaleidoscopic in nature—such a vision encourages recognition of the fractal nature of the data, i.e., its potential applicability across multiple spectrums. The process encourages recognition of the data-pieces themselves as raw material—material to be given color, shape, and form, by artists, writers, musicians, software developers, and other media creators—speaking to interdependence, enfolding and/or transcending and including, while revealing a diversity of pattern. It is hoped that such a kaleidoscopic database will be used by media creators to reflect *back to ourselves* our best potential, communicating our interdependence in a multiplicity of guises, with the ultimate goal of expediting the transition to an ecological, spiritual, integral mindset.

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[4] *Creative altruism* as discussed by Gruber [72] differs from everyday altruism in that it depends upon the expansion of the sense of the self toward world-consciousness and is generally dependent upon collaboration.

[5] The EGM framework is not concerned with the censorship of media, but rather is a framework within which media designed to promote planetary consciousness can be investigated and the resulting data pooled for use by media creators.

3. Noticing evolutionary memes: transception, Gaiaception, and more

Evolutionary guidance media offers an avenue through which we can investigate, notice, create, and promote planetary consciousness in society, and in doing so, recognize, name, describe, and define some of the powerful evolutionary memes[6] that are emerging of their own accord. One such exemplar is that of *transception*, a neologism I coined to refer to cyberception infused or transfused with the moral values arising from mutual causality, including but not limited to: loving-kindness, compassion, self-restraint, social responsibility, and generosity [41,42]. As cyberception is to new media, transception is to evolutionary guidance media, i.e., the life-blood of the system. Examples of transception can be found on the Internet: e.g., by clicking a link at the *The Rainforest Site* [43] one can save 11.4 square feet of rainforest without spending a penny; by choosing to plant a "digital flower" through the (Lil) Green Patch application, *Facebook* users have been saving additional rainforest acreage—20,547,567 square feet to date [44]. By visiting *Care2.org* with one click a visitor can take action to help seals, primates, or children to name just a few [45]. Or, through choosing to use *Microsoft's Instant Messaging* service, a user can donate to the *Red Cross*, *UNICEF*, the *National Aids Fund*, and/or other charities while sending a message—again without ever spending a penny of his or her own money [46]. These examples exemplify the hardwiring of transception, i.e., simply by *acting* in cyberspace *generosity* results. While it would be naïve to suspect that in each and every case the motives of these companies and corporations are purely altruistic, still, in their race to gain market share by seeking recognition for their socially responsible activism, they may end up launching a good deed war amongst themselves. While some may make false claims (e.g., Energy companies have been accused of claiming to be far "greener" than they are; non-profits have been accused of squandering donated funds, and so forth), in the end, consumer advocates, and conscientious donors are capable of exposing such fraudulent behavior and making informed choices. Meanwhile, those corporations, companies, and non-profits with sincere intentions will have painted a streak of compassion within our competitive market place.

Indeed, activists of all stripes—scientists, musicians, artists, filmmakers, business leaders, and others, have launched outstanding initiatives demonstrating variations of transception in action. Some notable examples include: The *Natural Resources Defense Council's* digital citizen's petitions aimed at encouraging lawmakers to pass legislation designed to curb emissions [47]; *Freepress.net* a non-profit organization facilitating digital citizen action to secure independent media ownership, strong public media, and universal access to communication [48]; the new, 3.2 million member strong, *Avaaz.org*, a global web movement with a mission to ensure that the views of people around the world inform decision making [49]; the powerful viral video campaigns created by *Greenpeace* aimed at raising awareness about a number of ecological and social issues [50]; *Product Red*, an initiative to raise awareness and money for The Global Fund by teaming up with iconic brands to produce (Product) Red branded products for the purpose of helping those affected by HIV/AIDS in Africa [51]; *Amnesty International's* "Instant Karma," campaign to save Darfur, blends the power of John Lennon's music, as recorded by popular musicians, with technology and human rights activism [52]; *Witness* organization's new beta Hub, provides a global platform for uploading, viewing, and discussing Human Rights media [53]; *Participate.Net* innovative linking of filmmaking, the internet, and social action campaigns [54]; *Live 8*, a global concert viewed by an estimated 3 billion people generating 30 million signatures presented to the leaders of the G8 summit—with the goal of canceling third world debt and making poverty history [55]; following Live 8's lead was *Live Earth*, a global concern with the goal of raising awareness about climate change, said to have set a record for on-line entertainment with over 15 million video streams during the live concert [56].

All of the foregoing initiatives exemplify transception in a general way. Upon closer examination they can be identified as evolutionary memes in their own right. I coined the following terms, Gaiaception, Agoraception, Dharmaception to refer to specific types of transception: Gaiaception is earth-centered transception, Agoraception is socially responsible marketplace transception; and Dharmaception is social justice-oriented transception [74]. Earth activism and transception, as exemplified by the Natural Resources Defense Council, Greenpeace, and Live Earth, may be thought of as "Gaiaception"; while mergers of socially responsible market activism and cyberception, such as those exemplified by (Product) Red and the Instant Karma campaign might be thought of as "Agoraception"; and cyber action designed to promote social justice, as exemplified by Freepress.net and Avaaz.org, may one day be referred to as "Dharmaception." Whatever we choose to call them, these evolutionary memes are speeding along, tugging our evolving consciousness forward; providing those persons with computer access a chance to make a difference in the world.

While some might argue that such initiatives are "preaching to the choir" rather than raising consciousness per se, literature in both humanistic and transpersonal psychology offers equally persuasive arguments to the contrary. Consider, for example, in the humanistic tradition, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs pyramid which suggests the following: a voluntary redistribution of wealth (i.e., philanthropy) encourages conditions through which persons struggling for basic needs may have those needs met—fulfilling conditions considered necessary for further psychological growth and development (i.e., a person receiving a contribution may be able to fulfill basic needs such as those for food and shelter and thus be able to focus on educational needs) [57]. Furthermore, persons donating to such organizations are accessing avenues through which they can express their humanity (e.g., through means of peaceful social action, caring, generosity, and so forth), thus such initiatives provide growth opportunities for people at other levels within the development pyramid: i.e., Maslow considered engaging with being values as essential to crossing from self-esteem needs into self-actualization [57]. Meanwhile, in the

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[6] Here I am referring to memes in the most basic sense, units of cultural information, as described by Dawkins [73].

transpersonal literature, spiritual traditions, East and West, are replete with philosophical teachings encouraging good deeds and/or acts of merit (*paramitas*) as essential to spiritual development.

Gladwell defined "the tipping point" as "the moment of critical mass, the threshold, the boiling point" and explained that "the world of the Tipping Point is a place where the unexpected becomes expected, where radical change is more than possibility. It is—contrary to all our expectations—a certainty" [58] (pp. 12–13).

The significance and relevance of EGM, keeping in mind the numerous examples of transception previously presented, is also exemplified in many other ways. *Games for Change*, a non-profit organization, was established in 2004 to support the development of digital games for social change through a membership that represents hundreds of organizations and includes partners in the gaming industry, academia, non-profits, local and state governments, foundations, the UN, and artists [59], having evolved from The Serious Games Initiative founded at the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, in 2002 [60]. Silbiger has laid the foundation for the design of Integrally informed video games [61] and Gackenbach's on-going research indicates that video game play may be changing consciousness in a positive manner [62]. In 2007, *UCLA Extension* and *Fielding Graduate University* launched a master's degree in media psychology and social change [63]. In 2008, *Naropa University* in conjunction with *The Spiritual Cinema Circle* and *Gaiam Corporation* initiated plans for a "Conscious Media Institute" [64]. *Discovery Communications*, "a non-fiction media company reaching more than 1.5 billon people in over 170 countries," launched *Discovery PlanetGreen*, the "first-ever 24-h television network dedicated solely to green lifestyle programming" [65] and acquired *treehugger.com*, an ecologically oriented website promoting planetary sustainability in the mainstream [66]. *Cinema Libre Studio* launched *EarthNow* a new label for films that explore how humans co-exist with the planet, as well as the environment, health, ecology, and sustainability [67]. *Pala Flicks* was established to produce socially conscious content for television, films, Web and interactive media [68] and the pioneering *Environmental Media Association* celebrated its eighteenth year mobilizing the entertainment industry to educate the public about environmental concerns and to inspire action [69]. *The Spiritual Cinema Circle* founded in 2004 by Stephen Simon and Kathlyn and Gay Hendricks continued promoting spiritual and transformative media [70]. Finally, *Participant Media*, having released films such as *Good Night, and Good Luck* in 2005, and *An Inconvenient Truth* in 2006, continued its production of socially responsible films linked with social action campaigns in 2007 and 2008 with *Darfur Now*, *Charlie Wilson's War*, *Chicago*, and *Standard Operating Procedure*, among others [54].

These are only a small sampling of the many initiatives taking place in the United States and around the world by organizations, members of industry, and independent media creators. By calling attention to these individuals, organizations, corporations, and/or their products, my intention is to point out new developments that unite activism and the Internet. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss either the negative social impact of communications technologies [75], or the pro-social impact. However, in reference to the latter, I would like to note that thoughtful individuals, organizations, and companies have used such technologies to create socially responsible programming, since their inception. A few examples include: public service advertising campaigns created by the *Ad Council* [76]; pioneering television mini-series such as *Roots*; films such as *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, *The Killing Fields*, *Schindler's List*; organizations such as *Sundance Institute* that have fostered diversity in media through supporting creators of independent films [77]; and documentary film makers around the world who have brought powerful, informative, educational, and inspiring stories to a larger audience, often despite enormous odds. Taken together, they represent an unprecedented effort to utilize new media to raise planetary consciousness. A tipping point, perhaps?

4. Conclusion: towards conscious media

New media has the potential to reach across national boundaries and political differences more quickly than any tool or weapon in existence today—a collective creative effort to create it consciously, with defined objectives, is one of the most adequate means we have to address the problems facing the world today. As our youth come of age with powerful new forms of rhetoric, it is imperative that we not only create informative and empowering narratives, but that we design within those mediums, ways and means through which they might consciously co-create a sustainable future. By co-creating a discipline capable of investigating the further creation of conscious media, green media, socially responsible media, spiritual & transformative media, we may find that just as media creators succeeded in teaching generations of children their ABC's and 123's, so can we promote the values, qualities, and traits necessary to promote planetary consciousness. To that end, evolutionary guidance media has been presented as an emergent discipline through which such media may be thought about, investigated, and created. It was designed utilizing perspectives arising from the evolution of consciousness discourse that has revolutionized many disciplines. A key design element of evolutionary guidance media is a repository containing purposeful data from nine or more dimensions of human activity. The AQAL model has been suggested as one possible organizing structure for sorting such data, and the databank itself has been likened to a kaleidoscope capable of being used by creators to reflect *back to ourselves* our best potential, communicating our interdependence in a multiplicity of guises, through a multiplicity of media.

Cyberception infused with qualities arising from mutual causality such as loving-kindness, compassion, self-restraint, social responsibility, and generosity has been referred to as transception. Fortunately, such qualities are being woven into the fabric of our media technology at an astounding pace. The double helix of transception can be found winding its way through numerous initiatives, including those concerned with the Earth, the market place, and social justice. For the purpose of bringing awareness to these evolutionary memes and to further their integration within media, they have been identified

as Gaiaception, Agoraception, and Dharmaception. By spotlighting the on-going efforts of individuals, organizations, companies, and corporations that are creating conscious media, green media, socially responsible media, and spiritual, or transformational media, I have sought to identify them as vanguards of media's integral evolution.

Furthermore, through establishing an EGM research group, it is my intention to create a forum for synergistic interaction with the people and organizations mentioned herein, and all others interested in assisting in the exploration and facilitation of this field. The pace at which activists, entertainers, and more recently, academics are investigating this area suggests that we are approaching a tipping point. EGM is a model capable of stimulating, containing, and promoting a great fusion of extant and evolving knowledge in multiple dimensions of human inquiry that has emerged at a seemingly auspicious time. However, it is only through a concerted effort by a family of transdisciplinary scholars, that the child of *techne* and *dharma* can and will grow from a child of great promise into an adult medium capable of guiding and expanding our *senses* of compassion, right action, and skillful means into our greater body–mind—the world-at-large.

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