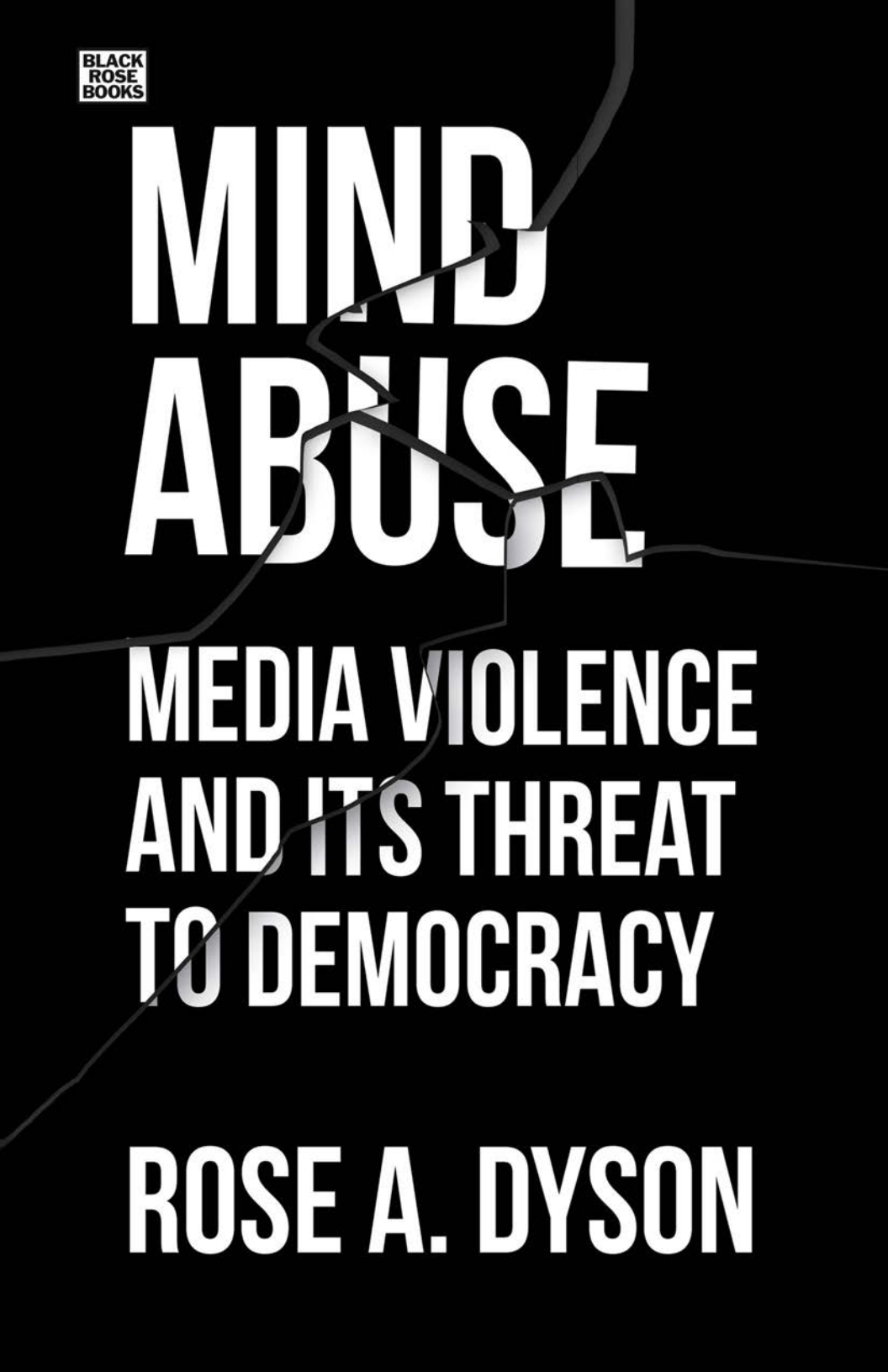
BLACK ROSE BOOKS
MIND ABUSE
MEDIA VIOLENCE AND ITS THREAT TO DEMOCRACY
ROSE A. DYSON

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ROSE A. DYSON

BLACK ROSE BOOKS

Montréal • Chicago • London

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To my grandson Harrison

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Foreword

With this book, Dr. Rose Dyson has provided us with a brilliant, uniquely original, and essential resource, exposing and examining aspects of media violence as veritable *Mind Abuse*.

Whatever your beliefs or politics, this is one topic where we should all find common ground. In writing the book, *Assassination Generation: Video Games, Aggression and the Psychology of Killing,* my two co-authors and I agreed to set aside our divergent views on other topics, and focus on this one area where we hold a common passion. Rose aptly refers to this common ground as a "collective vision for civilized society."

The more we understand that media violence inflicted on children truly is "mind abuse," that it is abusive behavior and an abuse of authority that really does threaten the very foundations of democracy, the better we will recognize how tragically it erodes so many aspects of rational thought, civil behavior, and the competent governing of our nations. The more we understand how pervasive this harm is—to our children, to our daily lives as citizens—how virtually omnipresent a toxin it is in every aspect of life; the more we comprehend this, then the better equipped we are to realize that, whatever one's concern or passion—be it climate change, or rational national policies, or administrative processes that are free of corruption, or any one of a host of other challenges we face—none of these things can be rationally addressed, until we understand and address the widespread, virulent aspects of this debilitating "mind abuse." Here is a realm where we can all find true solidarity and common cause.

"Respect for human dignity, diversity, compassion and peaceful co-existence." These are the principles that Rose holds up as the core values of our civilization, and these are the very factors under attack. When we talk about such matters, on any side of our deeply divided political spectrum, everyone can point to examples on the "other side." What we don't understand is that there is a common component eroding this foundation of our civilization, causing the breakdown of these "time honored values" and our collective vision for a civil society.

Rose rightly and effectively identifies the "information, misinformation and disinformation" that work together to form an "interwoven pattern" of

violence that is destroying everything that we hold dear. Like fish who swim in the sea, oblivious to the water around them, this "mind abuse" pollutes the ubiquitous cultural "water" in which we all exist.

She spares no one in her examination of this challenge: corporations, the field of education, the mainstream media, advertisers, and, yes, politicians across the political spectrum. She makes it clear that, "Media violence adds to, complicates, and obscures the serious problems involving basic survival that so urgently need to be addressed... distorting value systems that are incompatible with human sustainability."

American novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald said that, "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function." Let us engage as "first-rate" intellects and listen to what my good friend of many decades, Rose Dyson, Ed. D. has to tell us.

I do not agree with all aspects of the author's politics, but I deeply respect her perspective, her right to speak on such matters, and—ultimately, most importantly—her conclusions and her clear, clarion call for action, in a realm where we can all work together. Take joy in the fact that, we can find common ground in this area of our abusive media, and this should give us hope for the future.

As we love our children, our families, and our nations, as we desperately strive to sustain a society based on rational thought, as we struggle to ensure the continued existence of our civilization: please, let us set aside our differences and agree to take action on this toxic, corrosive, destructive aspect of our basic social contract, so aptly termed, *Mind Abuse*. I implore you, gentle readers all, not just to read, but to study and apply the lessons in this book, to move our world to a better place.

Dave Grossman
Lt. Col. US Army (ret.)
Author of *On Killing, On Combat,* and *Assassination Generation*

Introduction

My attention to media violence and how the subject has been addressed over the years is predominantly an outgrowth of parenthood, a background in psychiatric nursing, a bachelor of arts degree, and graduate studies at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. The latter began with a Masters in Education in applied psychology and counselling and concluded with a doctorate in adult education in 1995.

This has all led to certain key assumptions. First, formal education beginning in early childhood is a necessary component in human development. But in recent years, some of the most powerful educational forces in society are being exerted through mass media. Cultural commodities in the current digital economy are rife with "action-filled" (a euphemism for violence-filled) forms of entertainment. Decades of research indicate that this helps to foster and reinforce a broadly based culture of violence. Second, it is neither desirable nor possible to eradicate all violence from society; but rising levels, as well as the fear of violence—real or imagined—call for mitigation. Media violence may be only one of many contributing factors but it is one that we can, if we choose to, ameliorate. Third, aggression starts in infancy as a force that enables the child to grow and develop. Without it children could not cope with their environment. Parenting and childhood education operate to mould and shape this force into a form compatible with the norms of a given culture that, in most democratic societies, include respect for human dignity, diversity, compassion, and peaceful co-existence. The extent to which these time-honoured values have been adequately developed, or ever could be in a way that conforms with the expectations of all engaged citizens, is a moot point. However, as a collective vision for civilized society, these values are becoming more and more obscured in an increasingly centralized, globalized, and mass-marketed media environment with ever more realistic and varied depictions of violence and destruction.

Chapter I

Teachers Today—Who Are They?

The most powerful educating forces in society today are no longer the adults in the classroom, home, or places of worship. These influences have been eroded and replaced by various manifestations of consumer culture. Social media have reinforced other forms of mass media and overtaken the traditional role of moulding and teaching the young. Since the arrival of television, video, and other digital devices, teachers have increasingly tended to adopt the role of classroom facilitators, arbitrating between what is deemed necessary for student learning and socialization and what the seductive forces of new technologies offer. These are eagerly embraced and promoted in the marketplace as new, innovative, and, increasingly, essential tools of learning.

Moreover, the influence of new technology tools on social and cultural learning has stretched far beyond the classroom and into the broader cultural environment. In the process, the unimpeded proliferation of information, misinformation, and disinformation has resulted in mainstream media themselves becoming imperilled. Not only are readers and viewers (along with advertising dollars, traditionally their main sources of revenue) migrating to the internet, but truth itself has become irrelevant. We are now living in the age of the alternative fact. So how did this happen and what do we do about it?

For too long the power of language and how it impacts on broader decision making have not been sufficiently acknowledged in cultural policy. During the 2016 presidential campaign in the United States, the vitriol and divisiveness in which the idiom of threat and vengeance ignited a popular thirst for the female Democratic candidate to be jailed, or even killed, shocked the world.

Old social and political norms became unglued in the most powerful advanced democracy on the globe. But these inclinations had been gathering force on the airwaves and in cyberspace for some time. It was normalized with the rise of shock jock radio talk show hosts such as Howard Stern and Rush Limbaugh, then transferred to television and reinforced with violence creep in entertainment and social media. Fox News television host Bill O'Reilly,

although fired for female sexual harassment, was nevertheless widely credited with helping to elect Donald Trump, one of his staunch admirers, to the presidency. As a cheap industrial ingredient that sells well in a global economy and translates easily into any language, violence has become a staple in special effects-driven entertainment for young people in particular. Interactive first-person shooter video games, successfully marketed worldwide to young and old alike, teach players that killing is fun. Social media fuel incivility by ensuring widespread dissemination of every tweet and falsehood, frequently resulting in cyberbullying and character assassination. Basic courtesies have become irrelevant.

This is the price we pay for letting ourselves be hoodwinked into thinking that allowing, under the guise of "freedom of expression," free access to every new digital toy, regardless of content, is a cornerstone of our democratic institutions and a hallmark of our civil liberties. Somehow we have been led to believe that corporate freedom of enterprise in the media and digital industries is synonymous with individual freedom of expression. We need to re-examine these outdated assumptions.

Digital technologies underscore the extent to which we live in a global village. The need for good global governance increases as issues pervade national boundaries. Public health concerns merge with those in education, the environment, energy, culture, gender, security, and the economy. New media offer enormous potential in mobilizing for political action, limiting climate change, maintaining the biosphere, and securing energy needs. But they can also be mobilized for harmful, destructive purposes.

The growing challenges we face require a re-examination of trends in all aspects of mass media. Collectively, we need to rethink the profit-driven ways in which our proliferating digital technologies mitigate potential steps toward a sustainable, peaceful future. A more integrative approach to all policy making is necessary to reduce tensions arising from the social instability that rapid change is precipitating. This includes acknowledging and addressing growing health and public safety problems due to the harmful effects of media that encourage the use of violence as a conflict-resolution strategy and that fuel hatred, racism, misogyny, and fear. Moreover, in myriad forms that go well beyond the seductive and addicting trends of endless hours spent online, new and proliferating digital toys are neither carbon neutral nor, as some proponents would have us believe, do they hold the sole promise of much-needed innovation and job creation.

New Technologies Are Never Neutral

Frequently the argument arises that all technology—communications related and otherwise— is neutral; in other words, values-free. But that perspective in itself confirms a formidable pro-technology mindset. Marshall McLuhan, whose work is widely regarded as a cornerstone in the study of media theory, urged us to think of all technology in environmental terms because of the way in which it envelops us as we live out our lives in reconstructed, human-created environments, literally *inside* manufactured goods.[1] In his discussion of the value-laden nature of all technologies, Jerry Mander, who argued against the reformability of television, referred to evolution as having once been an interactive process between human beings and a natural, unmediated world.[2] Now it is largely an interaction between human beings and our own artifacts. Experimental physicist Ursula Franklin defined technology as the grounded practice in which human beings have always worked and lived together.[3] What is new is the scale of its intervention in everyday life. As a consequence, all technology has large-scale effects on culture itself.

Digital technologies have created cultural conditions that are unique in the history of humankind as we now coexist, predominantly, inside constructed environments that are the product of human decisions. People now spend anywhere from three to seven hours a day tethered to their smartphones. All this connectedness is giving rise to a host of unfortunate side effects, ranging from poor sleep habits to loneliness and technological addictions. Despite these developments, notions regarding neutrality, with full and equal access to the internet for everyone regardless of the nature of the content, persist. More recently, however, in the aftermath of widespread evidence of social media tampering in elections around the world, calls for the former have become somewhat obscured as the need for regulation becomes more evident.

McLuhan and before him Canadian political scientist Harold Innis[4] pointed out decades ago that we had not yet grasped the fact that many technologies determine their own use, their own effects, and even the kind of people who control them. We still haven't. They urged us to think of technology as having ideology built into its very form. In the early 1950s television was introduced to shift a wartime economy to one based on consumerism. At the heart of it was, and still is, the advertising industry. Advertisements are specifically designed to influence our thoughts, feelings, and lifestyles. They advance and perpetuate ideas and values that are indispensable to "developed" economies. Their purpose is to persuade us to buy things, use them, throw them away, and buy replacements in a cycle of continuous conspicuous consumption.

Clearly, such underpinnings are at odds with a sustainable future. As Vance Packard pointed out over 50 years ago in his provocative best sellers on the American philosophy and practices of deliberate waste under the pretence of making America great again, such economic strategies drain our finances, undermine our children, and threaten their future.[5] It is difficult to overstate the extent to which these media trends amount to institutionalized violence.

Public concern over the relationship between the portrayal of violence and its practice has waxed and waned over the years. In recent decades it has been dwarfed by market-driven priorities that tend to trivialize the notion of harmful effects despite the evidence of thousands of studies undertaken in numerous countries around the world. The debate needs to return to an examination of what the relationship between these two phenomena should be on the basis of the broader public interest. Scientific findings must take precedence over public opinion and preferences dominated by profit motives. To ignore the urgent need for social, economic, and cultural reform is to stand by and allow the silent crumbling of our basic democratic institutions.

Popular Culture: What Is It?

A key component in our socialization, popular culture is shaped and dominated by mass media in the form of information, entertainment, and public education. On the whole, the "synergism" that takes place in the production of popular culture renders meaningless any isolated studies on the impact of certain aspects of the media to the exclusion of others. There is an interconnectedness to the entire field. The various forms are linked and they reinforce each other. It is possible to extrapolate from the research on one medium to the effects or impact from another. These conclusions were reached decades ago by numerous giants in the field of media scholarship and empirical studies, among them George Gerbner, Herbert Schiller, Brandon Centerwall, George Comstock, and the American Psychological Association.[6]

Trump as the New Postmodernist

Back in the 1980s, postmodernists such as Stephen Crook, Jan Pakulski, Malcolm Waters, and Robert Fiske postulated that the boundaries between *culture* and *society* were collapsing as we moved away from cultural modernity.[7] This was generally regarded as the condition of rapid change from modernity to an era of postindustrialism as large-scale enterprises, ushered in during the Industrial

Revolution, were displaced in an increasingly globalized economy. In the process, the commodification of communications technology, information, and services has made them useful products for trade in the profit-driven marketplace. The cultural arena is now the source of new and powerful economic forces. It is not so much that Donald Trump co-opted critical tools from this school of philosophical thought in the 2016 presidential election as that he is a product of it. His belief in alternative facts resonates with the fundamental underpinnings of postmodernism, in which facts are socially constructed by the wordsmiths of the world. The irony, of course, is that these ideas evolved from the left as widely held critiques of capitalist and patriarchal society. The fact that they have been seized upon by the right points to the need for the pendulum to swing back to such universal truths as scientific and legal facts.

Although postmodernists have offered a useful analytical perspective for unsettling the dominant discourses of the status quo, there has been a tendency to undermine any aspirations for deriving rational grounds on which to reconstruct educational theory and practice. Because of a reluctance to draw conclusions for the purposes of policy development, postmodernist discourse has been viewed by some with skepticism. Over the years many feminist scholars have called for an integration of postmodernist critique with the ethical claims of feminist critique, which have continued to rely on traditional categories of truth, values, and ethics.

Media Violence: A Tenacious Virus

In most studies on the subject, definitions of media violence are based on the kinds of media content that researchers in child and adult development have hypothesized to have harmful or negative effects. These include graphic horror, violence, the exploitation of sex, and the combination of sex and violence as they surface in television programming, film, rock music, videos, sports, advertising, pornography, toys, video games, comic books, print, social media, and the internet. In addition, particularly as digital technologies and various forms of content converge, harmful influences involved in the celebration of drug and alcohol abuse, suicide, satanism and cult worship, racism, sexism, bigotry, hate, and terrorism are included along with commodities such as war toys, characteristically described in promotional material as "action-filled" in order to avoid being labelled as violence-filled.

Interpretations of media violence based on media produced specifically for entertainment purposes frequently include an overlap with information

and news media. This has given rise to catch phrases such as "edutainment" and "infotainment." The fading boundaries between these different forms are an inevitable characteristic of the existing cultural climate. Consequently, institutionalized violence through dominant social, economic, and political forces reinforces a culture of violence in the broadest sense.

Another component in the shifting cultural climate has been the eroding emphasis on morals and values education, which in the 1960s became an international movement that redefined teaching methods. The central tenets in this movement—values clarification and Kohlberg's moral reasoning approach—led us into the battle over control of popular culture that we now face decades later. Clive Beck, Kathleen Gow, and William Kilpatrick, among others, argued that this unfolding dilemma was influenced by the pendulum swing away from teaching based on conventional foundations for standards and ethics toward moral relativism and emphasis on individual rights.[8]

In the early 1990s, Kilpatrick argued that tolerance and open-mindedness had overtaken fundamental principles on what is right and what is wrong, on good example and character formation, and themselves became the chief virtues in school curricula.[9] Values gradually became synonymous with feelings. The classroom teacher's role has gradually shifted to one of facilitator. School instruction is often on a par with screen time where the emphasis is on popular appeal. We have gone too far in emphasizing individual rights and the idea that all values are relative. Public schools need to do more to help students see that traditional morality does represent the well-being of all people in society. But the debate on morals and values education has been overshadowed by the emphasis on diversity of tastes and tolerance.

That is, until more recently. Now we see evidence of racism, exclusion, and homophobia, undergirded by fear, insecurity, and disorientation. Some of these trends are fuelled by rapid change in an age increasingly dominated by acceleration and automation. As a result, in schools throughout North America teachers and administrators have had to develop and implement values-based policies on what is right and what is wrong simply in order to avert chaos. Dave Grossman, in his latest book *Assassination Generation* (2016), gives us a chilling account of how violent video games have precipitated a rising number of school massacres, beginning with one in Paducah, Kentucky in 1975.[10] The Parkland, Florida high school shooting, which took the lives of 17 people on February 14, 2018, galvanized surviving students themselves to demand change. In an unprecedented display of leadership, they organized mass protests demanding better gun laws and managed to sustain these protests for well