

2009-10 Topics

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Sensory Overload

Musak, iPods, cell phones, visual imagery, TV, advertising, the Internet, fusion food, exotic restaurants, sports entertainment, animated billboards, and flashing signs are just a few examples of the kinds of sensory input humans receive on a daily basis. The average supermarket has over 30,000 products and scientists have discovered that this overwhelming assault on our senses impacts our brain waves. Our senses are continually inundated in ways that would not have been thought possible in our grandparents' and great grandparents' era. We embrace multitasking in all areas of our lives even as investigators raise questions about its effectiveness and advisability. What is the possible future impact of this sensory overload and how will we accommodate our need to process increasing amounts of information?

Invasive Species

We find Asian long horned beetles in New York, Australian wattles found in Africa, and Canadian geese in Europe. Globalization has led to increased human travel and trade, and as people move around more, they bring with them species of plants, animals, and diseases from their home regions, introducing these invasive species into non-native habitats. Such movement of species can harm ecosystems, economies, and human health. Can such harm be effectively mitigated through eradication and quarantine efforts, including mechanical, chemical, and biological controls? How much of a role should governments play in these efforts, or should efforts be left to private businesses and organizations? What role will increased globalization and global climate change play in addressing these concerns or in making matters worse?

Orphaned Children

Throughout the world, places exist where acts of man and acts of nature have conspired to create well over 100 million orphans who struggle to survive every day. Poverty and suffering are caused by famine, disease, poor economic conditions, social decay, lack of social infrastructure, and natural disasters. Whatever the reason, the results are the same as that of innocent children with no parents, no home, and diminished chances of survival. These children often live in doorways and makeshift tents, begging, stealing, or scrounging to find what little food they can. Alone and scared, some orphans live on the streets while others live in underground sewers for protection from the elements. Many live in crumbling orphanages where the children's food, medicine, and clothing reflect governments' meager contribution of sometimes just a penny per day per child. What can be done to change the conditions for these children? What will their future be? How do these situations affect the world as a whole? If we truly believe that children are our future, what can be done to generate sustainable opportunities for these children? Who should take the lead in creating these opportunities – nonprofits, governments, or businesses?

Food Distribution

A global information and early warning system on food and agriculture was set up some years ago, but the two main elements of the system of food security, namely food reserves and a better deal for developing countries in agricultural trade, have made very little progress. Unlike developing countries, the world's richer states have controlled the bulk of surplus grains and could afford to pay for and manage a system of food security. They did not need the surplus for themselves, but now surpluses are shrinking as more grains are used for bio-fuels. Is it fair for the 'haves' to pay for the 'have-nots'? How can we fairly and effectively make sure the world's poorer inhabitants are fed? What kind of threats, such as terrorism, transportation disruptions, or technological failures, may the world's food supply be subject to in the future, and how should these threats be dealt with?

Green Living

If the global environment is to be saved for future generations, many experts warn that more of the world's citizens need to participate in "green living." This means using materials that reduce pollution of all types in various aspects of daily life, thereby reducing consumption of fossil fuels, and producing less waste. Homes, clothing, and other everyday items can be made of recycled materials. Alternative energy sources such as solar and wind power can be used in the home or office. But how necessary are these changes in the way people live? Do the benefits of change justify the economic costs and personal inconveniences of green living? What other consequences of change are likely to occur, and can these consequences be

mitigated? If necessary, how can people be persuaded to change the way they live for the sake of the planet's future health and well-being?