CULTURE WARS AND THE LIBERATING ALTERNATIVE

by
George Gerbner

The Culture Wars are heating up. Its warriors are exploiting legitimate concerns to justify censorship and repression. The Cultural Environment Movement (CEM) offers the liberating alternative.

CEM is a non-profit coalition of independent organizations in every state of the U.S. and 57 other countries on six continents. It represents a wide range of social and cultural concerns united in working for freedom, fairness, diversity, responsibility and democracy in media. Its formal Founding Convention will assemble March 15-17, 1996, on the campus of Webster University in St. Louis.

This is an account of why CEM was founded and of the challenges it confronts.

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For the first time in human history, most of the stories about people, life and values are told not by parents, schools, churches, or others in the community who have something to tell but by a group of distant conglomerates that have something to sell.

The roles we grow into and the ways others see us are no longer home-made, hand-crafted, community-inspired. They are products of a complex manufacturing and marketing process. Television is the mainstream of that process and it has reshaped the total culture.

This is a radical change in the way we employ creative talent and the way we create the cultural environment. It calls for a radical shift from traditional arenas of the struggle for equity, justice, and the fulfillment of the democratic promise, to the cultural arena.

The analytical basis for that shift is almost 30 years of continuous and cumulative ongoing research called the Cultural Indicators (CI) project. Its focus is the recurrent and inescapable patterns of the cultural environment that shapes public ideas, actions, and policies. The "telling of all the stories," as Scottish patriot Andrew Fletcher once observed, is the key to "the making of all the laws."

The most remarkable finding is the relative stability of the patterns. In some essential characteristics, story-telling, whether fiction or news, deals with the exercise of power: who has it, who uses it, who seeks it, and, most of

all, who threatens it. As long as a structure of power-relations persists, new technologies extend rather than fundamentally alter patterns of communication and culture. A realistic assessment of the forces of resistance is both a basis and a springboard for a movement for change.

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The average viewer of television is exposed to 355 characters playing speaking parts each week in prime-time dramatic programs, 353 in daytime, 138 in Saturday morning (children's) programs, 51 in game shows, and 209 news professionals (including repeat appearances). A lifetime of such exposure shapes images of the self and others, defines majority and minority status, and guides power relations between persons and groups.

Women, a numerical majority, play one in three roles in prime time, one in four in children's programs, and one in five in the news. They age faster than men, and as they age they lose roles (and jobs) and are more likely to be portrayed evil and ill-fated.

Seniors of both genders are greatly underrepresented and seem to be vanishing instead of increasing as in real life. As characters age, they lose importance, value, and effectiveness. *Visibly* old people are almost invisible on television. Mature women seem to be especially hard to cast -- and hard to take. They are disproportionately underrepresented, undervalued, and undersexed.

People of color, the vast majority of humankind, are less than 11 percent of prime-time and 3 percent of children's program casts, and, unlike in life, mostly middle-class. Latino/Hispanic persons, over 9 percent of the U.S. population are about 1 percent of prime time and half of that of children's program casts. The world of daytime serials is even more "white" than prime time.

In the overwhelmingly middle-class consumer world of television, poor people play a marginal but, as we shall see later, troubling role. Although the U.S. census classifies more than 14 percent of the general population, 29 percent of Latino/Hispanics, and 33 percent of African-Americans as "poor," and many more as low-income wage-earners, on television they are virtually invisible: 1.3 percent of characters in prime time, 1.2 percent in daytime, half that (0.6 percent) in children's programs, and 0.2 percent in the news.

As the 43 million disabled American struggle to gain rights of equal access, employment, and dignity, disability is visible in only 1.5 percent of prime-time programs.

Those shown as disabled or mentally ill are most likely to be stigmatized and victimized.

Programs designed specifically for children's favorite viewing time, Saturday morning, present a world that is the harshest and most exploitive of all. The inequities of prime time are magnified Saturday morning.

The Saturday morning viewer sees an elderly major character about once every three weeks, and it is most likely to be a man. Married and parent images are curiously rare and gloomy in children's programs. Midlife and older women in Saturday morning children's programs are among the least visible but most evil and, consequently victimized group; this is where the witches come from. (The source of all evil in the global marketing power-play, aptly titled "Power Rangers," is an evil old woman called Rita Repulsa. Cheaply marketed to greedy broadcasters in 80 countries, it is playing to 300 million children every night.)

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Casting and fate also affect those who deliver the news, who are referred to and cited in the news, and who are news. Women decline in representation as they increase in power: 35 percent as newscasters, 20 percent as authorities cited and 17 percent as newsmakers. Other minorities are also most visible delivering and least visible making news. When they do, they are most likely to appear as equal-opportunity public officials or as criminals. African-Americans make news as criminals at least twice as often as other groups do, despite the fact that 62 percent of criminals are white.

Reporting of violent crime has doubled while homicides declined. Most violence on local television news is not even local. It is imported from wherever it happens, to fill a station's "violence quota," which seems to be about one in every four items, and "if it bleeds it leads." Black aggressors and white victims are the most newsworthy, despite the fact that young black males are the most frequent victims of violence.

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In dramatic programs, violent scenes occur an average of 5 times per prime time and 20-25 times per Saturday morning program hour. They involve nearly half of all characters in prime-time, and more than 8 out of 10 characters in Saturday morning children's programs

Of course, there is blood in fairy tales, gore in mythology, murder in Shakespeare. But the individually crafted, historically-inspired, selectively used (and often

dreadful) violence of art, folklore and journalism, capable of balancing tragic costs against deadly compulsions, has been swamped by "happy violence" produced for global sales on the dramatic assembly-line. Happy violence is swift, cool, painless, effective, and always leads to a happy ending. Marketing mayhem shuns tragedy and pain; it is designed to deliver an audience to the next commercial in an upbeat and receptive mood.

Much of the mayhem, especially in Saturday morning children's programs, is not only painless but also humorous. Humor is the sugar coating that makes the pill of cool, happy violence even more easily absorbed.

The pill is power. It demonstrates who can get away with what against whom. Violence is a demonstration of power, a social relationship of aggressors and victims, a cultivation of one's internal calculus of the risks of life. The risks are not randomly distributed.

A disproportionate number of ill-fated characters comes from the ranks of poor, old and minority casts. At the bottom of fate's "pecking order" are characters portrayed as old women and as mentally ill, perpetuating stigma of the most damaging kinds.

Lethal victimization extends the pattern. For every 10 killers 5 are killed. But for every 10 killers of color, 7 are killed; for Latino/Hispanic characters, 13 are killed; for disabled characters 15 are killed, and for every 10 women also 15 are killed. The most calamitous fatality ratio is reserved for the poor. For every 10 lower class characters who kill, 101 die a violent death, 20 times the general ratio.

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The consequences of exposure to violence-laden television can be summed up as the "mean world syndrome:" insecurity, mistrust, repression, with women and minorities bearing the heaviest burden.

Surveys on the subject show that television violence is disliked by most viewers. Cultural Indicators research has found that its injection into programs actually depresses ratings. Nevertheless, it is pervasive because it "travels well" on the global market, where most of the profits come from. It needs no translation, it is image-driven, it fits any culture, and can be cheaply mass-marketed. What its syndicators lose in the domestic market, they more than make up by selling it cheaply to many countries.

Most television violence, therefore, is not an expression of creative freedom. On the contrary, it is part

of a global marketing formula imposed on creative people and foisted on the children of the world. It is part of a system of cultural production that has drifted out of democratic reach.

Casting and fate allocate resources and values. They are not simple issues of numerical representation but of life chances. Being underrepresented and overvictimized means growing up with fewer visible roles, opportunities, and options, but a higher sense of risk; in other words, growing up damaged.

The relative invisibility of working people and the less affluent, except as a menace, means an inability to narrow the gaps that tear society apart. Images of the "third world" induce pity when far away but panic and revulsion when confronted face-to-face on our own streets, permitting and even supporting repression.

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Media merger mania has made a movement toward a free, diverse, and fair cultural environment an urgent necessity. Channels multiply but communication technologies converge. With every merger, staffs shrink and creative opportunities diminish. Cross-media conglomeration reduces competition and denies entry to newcomers. The coming of cable and VCR's has not led to greater diversity of product or actual viewing.

Fewer creative sources fill more outlets more of the time with ever more standardized fare. Global marketing streamlines production, homogenizes content, sweeps alternative perspectives from the mainstream, and moves cultural policy further beyond democratic, and even national, reach.

There is no historical precedent, constitutional provision, or legislative blueprint to confront the challenge of the consolidated controls over the mainstream of the common cultural environment. Its iniquitous portrayals and power relationships are frozen in a time-warp of obsolete and damaging representations.

The Cultural Environment Movement was launched in response to that challenge. Its Founding Convention March 15-17, 1996, in St. Louis, coming soon after the Democracy in Media Congress in San Francisco, builds a broad citizen movement toward a time when all children will be born into a cultural environment that is reasonably free, fair, diverse, democratic.

The Convention will assemble invited representatives of organizations and leading media activists and scholars. The

working sessions will represent a wide diversity of interests including media education, religion, creative workers in media, independent producers, labor, women's and minority groups, senior citizens, and groups concerned with violence and physical and mental health. The Convention will complete and approve an action program, and set up a Coordinating Council to guide it.

The distinguished group of keynote speakers includes The Rev. Dr. Joan Brown Campbell, General Secretary, National Council of Churches; Dorothy Gilliam, *Washington Post* columnist and Immediate Past President of the National Association of Black Journalists; Robert McChesney, historian and author of *Telecommunications, Mass Media and Democracy*; Sumi Sevilla Haru, Immediate Past President of the Screen Actors Guild; Riane Eisler, cultural historian, author of *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History our Future*; Lynn Curtis, President of the Eisenhower Foundation, Keyan Tomaselli, Director, Centre for Cultural and Media Studies, University of Natal, Durban, South Africa; Nicholas Johnson, former FCC Commissioner (invited); and Teresa Heinz, Chair, Heinz Family Philanthropies (invited).

Invitations to the Convention, a list of Cultural Indicators research publications, and Cultural Environment Movement information are available from CEM, P.O. Box 31847, Philadelphia, PA 19104, or Fax 215 387 1560.

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