Liberal Education in the Information Age

George Gerbner

The challenge of an information society in the telecommunications age is not only a challenge to education but also to the very process of humanization, the process that makes human beings out of Homo sapiens. In order to address that challenge, we need to take four steps:

- The first is to reflect on the unique and distinctive aspects of the humanization process.
- The second is to sketch how these aspects have shaped us and brought us to where we are.
- The third, is to identify the mission of a liberal education in that process.
- And the fourth is to try to develop a strategic conception of what we are up against in pursuing that mission.

Homo Sapiens: The Storytellers

Scottish patriot Andrew Fletcher once said that if he were permitted to write all the ballads, he need not care who makes the laws of a nation. Ballads, songs, tales, gestures, and images make up the unique design of the human environment. All animals react to things but humans act in a world of towering symbolic constructions that we call culture and includes art, science, law, religion, statecraft, and all other story-telling. Culture is that system of messages and images which regulates social relations; introduces us into roles of gender, age, class, vocation; gives us models of conformity and targets for rebellion; provides the range of personalities, temperaments, and mentalities said to be our "characteristics;" helps us rise to selfless acts of courage and sacrifice; and makes us accept (or even perpetrate) repression and slaughter of countless unknown people assigned to the appropriate categories of barbarians and other enemies. In other words, culture is that symbolic organization which socializes us and cultivates our fantasies about a world we do not experience directly. It is a system of stories and other artifacts, increasingly mass-produced, that mediates between existence and our consciousness of existence, and thereby helps shape both. As we encounter something new we hold it up to that fantasy. If it fits we call it real. Of course, that does not *make* it real; it only makes us behave as if it were. Therefore, it is all the more important to obtain accurate knowledge, to make warranted assertions, to develop ways of making statements that are relevant, valid, and true, to know what stories are and do, and most of all, to study how and on whose behalf we tell the stories that reflect, express, and shape our reality.

There are basically three kinds of stories. The first are stories about how things *work*. They illuminate our all-important but invisible network of relationships. They depict facts and people and set them in action so that the hidden dynamics of their interplay can be seen and explored. We call this type of story fiction, drama, poetry, etc. Only artful creations can incorporate a full and compelling human vision of how things really work.

The second are stories about what things *are*. They provide some verisimilitude to the larger mythology of how things work. They fill in that synthetic framework with selected facts—news, anecdotes, descriptions, explanations—to provide confirmation of a society's fantasy of its reality. Sometimes they undertake the difficult and risky task of challenging the mythology.

The third are stories of *value* and *choice*. They are as if to say: if this is how things work and what things are, then what should we do about them? What are our choices and what set of priorities

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should we follow? These are the exhortations, sermons, and instructions of all times. Today, most of them are called commercials. They present the styles of life to be desired and the choices to be made to attain them.

Three Cultural Epochs

These three kinds of stories have been woven together in different ways in different cultural epochs.

First, of course, is the preindustrial way of providing explanations of how things work, what things are, and what to do about them. The preindustrial way is face-to-face. It depends on memory and on ritual. It requires a great deal of repetition and the accumulation of a limited set of stories about the origin of the Universe, about the meaning of life, and the ways of proper conduct. The leaders of the tribe can reach and tell or interpret the stories for each small and stable total community.

Then comes the industrial transformation. The first machine is the printing press. The first industrial product stamping out standardized commodities is the book. That paves the way for the transformations to come. It breaks up the ritual and the face-to-face community. Printed stories are movable packages of consciousness that can be taken across hitherto impenetrable or closely guarded boundaries of time, space, language, religion, status. The book lifts people from their traditional moorings as the industrial revolution uproots them from their communities and cultures; it frees them from historic dependence on the ministrations and interpretations of their local chiefs and priests. The book can now be given to all who can read (a new class) to interpret as they wish.

Meanwhile people engage in long and costly struggles to tell stories and thus shape reality from their own points of view. The struggle is necessary for the formation of new identities and interests as the industrial age breaks the community into different and conflicting classes, mixes together religious and ethnic groups, and restructures the process of humanization heretofore confined by geography and relative stability. The way to achieve some control over the newly differentiating consciousness in a situation of unprecedented mobility and flux is to gain the right to select and write and publish stories (and thus create publics) stemming from radically different conceptions of reality existing in the same society. Notions of individuality and class consciousness are rooted in this era. The publication of different types of stories creates and cultivates mass publics—those loose aggregates of people who share some consciousness without ever meeting face-to-face. Mass publics are necessary for self-government and much of economic, educational, religious, and cultural life in the print-industrial epoch. Ever since the industrialization of story-telling, human consciousness is increasingly the product of a system of symbol mass-production.

Next comes the second industrial transformation. We enter the telecommunications era. Its mainstream is television, superimposed upon and reorganizing print-based culture. Television has its own characteristics. It is a centralized ritual, distant and pervasive and yet seemingly personal and face-to-face. It turns out and disseminates a limited number of stories about how things work, what they are, and what to do about them, along with the stars, scenes, social types, and other myths that make an otherwise diverse audience into a new kind of community: the modern mass public. In terms of its essential socializing functions, television is more like tribal religion than like any other selectively used medium preceeding it.

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In the average American home, the television set is on 6 hours and 48 minutes a day. Most people do not watch television by the program but by the clock. The majority do not even decide what to watch until they turn on the set. The view-

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ing pattern follows the style of life of the family. If that is rich and diverse, television has a lesser role in it. Otherwise, television practically monopolizes cultural participation and dominates the cultivation of common consciousness as local parochial culture did before the print era.

Liberating Education

Now to liberal education. I prefer to define it as "liberating education." I believe that its traditional role is to liberate the individual from an unwitting and unquestioning dependence on the traditional local and parochial cultural environment.

Liberation begins with putting the individual in touch with the great art, science, and philosophy of humankind. But if liberal education is liberation from dependence on an impoverished local and parochial cultural environment, then what role does it have today? Our cultural environment is anything but impoverished.

Television alone has abolished the old provincialism and parochialism. No one is out in the sticks anymore, culturally speaking. One can be very young or very old, far from the center of things, lying in a hospital or locked in a prison, and still live in the same cultural mainstream of the world of television as do most others more able, mobile, or fortunate.

For the first time in human history, the resident of the penthouse shares a great deal of the common culture with the inhabitant of the ghetto. The famous and the infamous, the celebrities and the criminals, the politicians, the spies, and the cops, and the parade of other culture heros and villains that makes up the common mythology are now in the home and available to everyone. Television is the cement of cohesion in an otherwise diverse and divergent society. The world it presents even encompasses more of the great art and science and philosophy than a whole nation has ever shared before. So what are we to be liberated from?

To answer that question, we have to review some evidence. It bears upon the reversal of the trend toward differentiation of consciousness according to individual and group interest, and the rise of a common environment of stories, ritualistically used, presenting a world according to television.

The World of Television

We have moved away from the historic experience of humankind. Children used to grow up in a home where parents told most of the stories. Today, television tells most of the stories to most of the people most of the time. This electronic pulpit and faithful messenger would be the envy of every Emperor and Pope who ever lived. Children do not have five or six years of relatively protected development within the family and the neighborhood before emerging into the outside culture of school and reading. By the time they can speak, let alone read, they have absorbed hundreds of thousands of stories—programs, news, commercials—produced on the television assembly-line to the specifications of adult tastes and industrial needs. The pervasive mass ritual blurs, when it does not short-circuit, social distinctions rooted in subcultural and class membership, blends community consciousness into its mainstream, and bends that in the direction of its own institutional interests.

How does that work? What is the world according to television like? To discover its main features and functions, we have to look at familiar structures in an unfamiliar light. Rituals rationalize and serve a social order. They make the necessary and inevitable appear natural and right. In conventional entertainment stories, plots perform that rationalizing function. They provide novelty, diversion, and distraction from the constant reiteration of the functions performed by casting, power, and fate. The main points to observe, therefore, are who is who (number and characterization of different social types in the cast); who risks and gets what (power to allocate resources including personal integrity, freedom of action, and safety); and who comes to what end (fate, or outcomes inherent in the structure that relates social types to a calculus of power, risks and relative success or failure).

When observed in that way, as the Annenberg School of Communications has been doing for over 15 years on an annual sample basis, the world of television drama is found to be one in which men outnumber women at least three to one; young people comprise one-third and older people one-fifth of their true proportion of the population, and all other minorities have less than their share of the action but more than their share

of the risks. The lessons learned from that, as we have found by surveying light and heavy viewers in otherwise similar groups, are those that tend to cultivate and confirm rather than challenge or change some of our stereotypic inequities and prejudices.

We have found that the heavier viewers (matched with light viewers by income, education, sex, age, and so on) are less likely to believe that women are as capable as men for responsible positions, more likely to be opposed to open housing, more likely to view older citizens as a vanishing breed, and are generally more likely to respond to our surveys in a way we would call sexist, racist and ageist.

The world according to television also is one in which violence occurs at the rate of 6 acts per hour in prime time and 25 per hour in children's weekend daytime programming.

Violence is essentially a demonstration of power. It shows who can get away with what against whom. Exposure to violence cultivates a sense of relative powers, of one's risks and place in the social hierarchy, and a sense of heightened anxiety and insecurity about a world that is shown to be much meaner and more dangerous than anyone has directly experienced. Insecurity leads to demands for protection, dependence on authority, and acceptance of repression if it comes in the name of security.

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In the world of television, most people are professionals. Service and blue collar workers who occupy about 60 percent of our population occupy only 10 percent of the television population. The average viewer of prime time television sees a stable cast of about 300 characters a week. Of those, about 44 are engaged in law enforcement and about 21 are criminals. The restoration of law and order is a chief feature of the ritual. And the most general characteristic of heavy viewers compared to similar groups of light viewers is a certain rigidity and resistance to change.

Despite the overwhelming presence of professionals on TV, the process of educating plays a small and ambivalent role. Surveys show that the more children and adolescents watch television, the lower their school and IQ test scores and educational aspirations seem to be.

The Tasks of Liberation

These are a few of the many features and functions of the television mythology that have been studied. But just as important as the individual findings are the results that show television reducing or eliminating differences in people's consciousness of the world around them, and absorbing them into its synthetic and homogenized mainstream. The vast majority of stories that make up the world according to television are made to uniform specifications of institutional service and sales. Relatively rich and attractive though it may be, the world of television acts to screen us from, rather than to mediate, the rapidly changing requirements of equity, justice, and survival.

Liberation cannot be accomplished by turning it off. Television is for most people the most attractive thing going any time of the day or night. We live in a world in which the vast majority will not turn it off. If we don't get the message from the tube, we get it through other people.

The strategic conception calls for action on three fronts: as educators, as parents, and as citizens. We can use the skills and insights employed in teaching the humanities and social sciences and apply them to the everyday cultural environment from which all our students learn. Media studies and critical viewing curricula which develop an analytical and critical stance toward mass-produced culture and its television mainstream should be at the center of liberal education.

Teaching students how to be parents in a television culture is also a part of liberation. Participation and discussion rather than proscription or prescription is the best way to put the person, and not the set, in control of the message.

Teaching citizenship in the television age involves the struggle for public access to and real participation in the institutional decision-making process affecting the humanization of our species. This includes a broader resource base enabling the medium to address a greater variety of interests and needs than the middle-majority consumer market. Only then will television be able to create a world of stories fit for all groups in our diverse society.

As teachers, parents, and citizens we can work for a fresh approach to liberal education aimed at liberation from the mass-produced dreams that hurt.

These, at least, are the dreams that heal!