Education For The Television Age

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Milton E. Ploghoft
James A. Anderson
Conference Directors and Editors

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Education For The Age of Television

George Gerbner

INTRODUCTION

I'd like to share with you my sense of the historic nature of this occasion. I think you are in the vanguard of the age in which we live, which, for purposes of our discussion, I shall call the age of television.

I begin with a kind of communication historical framework that is based on the assumption that people don't experience reality directly. We experience reality in a symbolic context that gives meaning to whatever we encounter. That symbolic context is sometimes called education, sometimes information, sometimes entertainment; I would like to call it storytelling.

We spend much of our lives learning stories, telling stories and communing through stories. Stories are told in many codes and in many modes. Sometimes they're called fairy tales, sometimes they're called science, sometimes they're called history.

We are born into an environment of stories. Much of our education consists of being told and learning how to tell stories. It is to the image of these stories that we construct a great fantasy—which is the fantasy of what the world is like, what we are like, who we are, and what is the past and perhaps the future. By fantasy, I don't mean that it's false but that it's purposive and synthetic.

George Gerbner is Professor and Dean, The Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania.

THE STORIES OF LIVING

There are basically three kinds of stories.

First are the stories that show *how things work.* These are perhaps the most important. These are the stories that make visible the most important, therefore, invisible connections in life. By embodying them in people acting in situations coming to grips with certain difficulties and problems and either succeeding or failing, they make visible those invisible connections—the dynamics, the inner dynamics we must understand to have some notion of how things work. These stories are called drama and fiction and myth. Only they can invent the facts so as to lend themselves to the development of an insight into how things really work.

The second kind of story, is a story of *what things are.* These are stories that are high on what we might call facticity—the bits that correspond to some independently observable event we call a fact. They carry little information except when they are placed in a framework created by the first kind of storytelling of how things work. Then, they fill out this framework and give it a sense of verisimilitude and give it a sense of applicability. They show not only how things work but what these things are, and they give specific examples of the rules and the exceptions to the rules. These are stories called legend, today's news, that perform, very selectively, the function of telling us what things *are.*

The third kind of story is one of *value and of choice.* As if to say: if this is how things work, and if this is what things are, well then, what are we going to do about it? What are the choices and the values assigned to these choices? How are they weighed—on some scale of desirability, attractiveness, power? What are the styles of life that provide these choices, and what are the things that belong to these styles of life? At what price? These are stories that today we call mostly advertisements or commercials. Each one embodies a style of life into which certain things we call products, services, ideas, sometimes candidates, fit.

CULTURES AND STORIES

Now, all cultures have always told all three kinds of stories. You can't have a viable society and a fully acculturated and socialized human being without having lived with a set of these stories for many years and without having them integrated into a fantasy—much of it true, much of it inventive, all of it functional. That creates our notions of how things work, what things are, and what are the choices that we confront.

Pre-Industrial Cultural Stories

Each culture has woven together these stories in somewhat different ways. In pre-industrial, pre-print society, the stories were woven together in certain specific ways that we can call *ritualistic* because we couldn't say, "I don't have to know it, I don't have to remember it, I can look it up." There was no place to look it up. You did have to know it, you did have to remember, all

that you really needed. And a pre-literate society therefore demands more of a human being in terms of capacity of stories and of inner resources than a modern society. Pre-literate people all over the world are tremendously resourceful because they must carry within themselves all of the stories and the application of these stories that they really need. And the way to do that is to learn them ritualistically.

These stories are also highly *institutionalized* in a pre-industrial, pre-print era. They are not invented by individuals who are specialists who write stories—they are part of the tradition into which children are born and in which they grow up to be accomplished storytellers, usually through the teachings of the parents and the family and the chiefs, the heads of the tribe or the community.

So, these stories are *total* in two ways. They belong to a total, organically composed repertory of stories, and secondly, they involve the total community. There are no great differences of style, taste, age, sex. Everyone gets introduced into the world of stories appropriate to a particular group at about the same time.

Next, they are all what we today would call *entertaining* which means they are compelling, they are inherently rewarding for their own sake. They cultivate a sense of rightness, a sense of place, a sense of belonging, a sense of selfhood which is what entertainment basically does. And because most of them are not specialized, they don't say, "You're not a mathematician so you don't like this kind of story we call math;" "you're not a scientist and you don't want the kind of story we call science," or "you're not a lawyer, therefore you don't need the kind of story we call law." The stories of a pre-print society are non-specialized stories; they are the mythology of the total community, which provide a sense of coherence and a belonging and which entertain the basic tenets, the basic values and the basic directions and meanings of the culture.

And finally, they are what today we will call the *socializing* process of the tribe or the community. It is these stories through which a new member becomes a member of the community in the full sense—takes on a role, takes on an understanding of place and development.

Industrial Cultures and Stories

We have an abrupt shift of scene with the industrial revolution. The first industrial machine is the printing press. The first industrial product is the book. The book is not only the first product, but a pre-requisite for all that is to follow including the breaking up of the ritual, of the organic collectiveness of the tribe and the community; the packaging of knowledge into capsules that can be sent, often smuggled over previously impenetrable boundaries; the breaking up of the unity of the community and its sense of belonging and meaning into different classes, different specialized crafts, over large regions and regional groups; the creation of what we now call different religious, and, of course, of public education and a literate print-based elite.

With the coming of industrialization, there are conflicting and competing classes, there are conflicting and competing specialized interests. Each of these competing interest groups and classes fights for the right to produce stories from its own points of view and to cultivate its own sense of belonging and of interest within the same larger community. These rights are guaranteed in the First Amendment.

The ritual is gone, the institutionalization of storytelling disappears with the abolition of licensing printers. The totality disappears because now instead of total organically-connected storytelling, we have various groups producing stories—all kinds of stories and all three types of stories pretty much from their own points of view.

The entirely compelling and entertaining function of all stories also disappears because specialization comes in. Each of the vocations, arts, crafts, sciences, statecraft and so on requires specialized storytelling, so it's no longer for everyone.

And what is for everyone and what is compelling to everyone is relegated to that section that we call entertainment—which is still the most important because it provides the common basis, the common myths by which we live.

And, finally, the socialization process—also breaks into many components. The family has its own role, the church has its own role, the school has its own role, the peer groups have their own role, the library, the government, the various media of communication all have a part in the total process of socialization. There is no longer a kind of unified process and control as existed for many, many thousands of years.

TELEVISION: THE NEW OLD CULTURE

We are describing the last two or three hundred years coming not to an end, but to another major transformation about thirty or forty years ago. The coming of television represents not an abrupt break but a transformation in the cultural situation in which we live and in which we tell all the stories. It does not supplant, but it is superimposed on the print culture with all its plurality and relative diversity, and it has certain rather specific, interesting, and, to us now, somewhat familiar characteristics.

First of all, television is a *ritual.* It is not like books or even like films. It is not selective—most people do not pick and choose by the program but by the clock, by the time of day, by the day of the week, by the week of the month, and the season of the year. It is a daily, weekly, and seasonal rhythm in which, by and large, the vast majority of the viewing public is non-selectively and ritualistically engaged.

Secondly, it is highly *institutionalized.* Unlike print, you have to get a license to get on the air. There are only a limited number of licenses available. So it has become an institutionalized and essentially centralized authoritatively granted privilege.

Next, it is again *total.* There is one basic formula to which the vast

majority of programs, regardless of what you call them, have to adjust. The formula is called Cost-Per-Thousand. That means that the rating of a program divided by the cost of the program gives you the formula of what goes and what doesn't go. In other words, the cheapest, least objectionable programming. It has been found that viewers are really ritualized into the television habit; reducing the cost, putting the ritual on the assembly line is a natural tendency in the industry.

So you have again a total, organically composed programming concept for the total community. Parochialism, provincialism do not exist anymore. For all practical purposes, the persons living in the penthouse and in the ghetto watch much of the same cultural fare. One of the great attractions of television, especially for poor people, is that they can have a bond which they never had before—a very intimate bond with the rich and the famous and the powerful and all the celebrities and the power figures of their society.

Because of these compelling reasons, television is also all *entertainment*. It is all based on an entertainment formula in the sense that it is compelling, that it is for all, that it is not highly specialized, and that it entertains the basic beliefs of a society of which it is the chief cultural arm.

And finally, therefore, it is the central, by no means only, but the central most pervasive, most universal and only common *socializing* process of our community. It has taken the major part of, and therefore must have a major responsibility for, the acculturation of our children, the bringing of them into that mainstream of the common culture in which they develop much of their sense of what the standards are by which to judge oneself, one's parents, one's leaders, one's society and one's world.

In that sense, the age of television has no historic predecessor. The other media are used very differently and selectively. They require literacy, going out, and paying a certain amount of money per film, per book, or per magazine. If television has a historic predecessor at all, it is pre-industrial tribal religion. Only that had these features and characteristics.

And this brings us to the critical task of education in the age of television. I think that task is to build a fresh approach to the liberal arts.

I define the liberal arts as those skills and concepts that liberate the individual from an unquestioning dependence on the local and immediate culture environment. Until now it was done by making the individual literate, and bringing the individual in touch with the great literature and art and science of the age. Of course, this was possible (and necessary) only for the literate elite and those who could afford it and who could derive from it some sense of self-direction that opened up concrete alternatives.

Today, the situation is very different. Not only the literate elite but every individual lives in a rich cultural environment. The mass media and particularly television expose all individuals to every part of culture, the best as well as the worst, even if very different proportions. Liberation from unwitting dependence on *that* cultural environment requires that the

analytical and critical skills derived from the study of the classics as well as from the lessons of social science be put to use in the everyday cultural environment. The development of those analytical critical skills and their application to television is the fresh approach to the liberal arts and a principal task of education today. Liberal education today is the liberation of the individual from the necessity of drifting with the swift cultural tides of our time and the preparation for such self-direction as may be necessary and possible. That is why I want to congratulate you for being in the vanguard of that great education movement and wish you luck.