

THE LIBERATING ALTERNATIVE

A Proposal to the Ford Foundation by George Gerbner

The "culture wars" are heating up. Dan Quayle, Pat Buchanan, Bob Dole, William Bennet, Pat Robertson, Ralph Reed and others of the "Christian Coalition" are leading the charge. Exploiting the anger and frustration of millions of parents, professionals, community leaders and citizens about the state of the media-dominated cultural environment, they are preempting the field and moving in a repressive direction.

The Cultural Environment Movement (CEM) offers the liberating alternative. CEM is emerging as a 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 and democracy in media.

A grant is requested to help in the creation of CEM as an enduring, active organization confronting the structure rather than only the symptoms of an increasingly market-driven, monopolized, conglomeratized, globalized and homogenized cultural environment.

Why CEM?

Through almost thirty years of research we had observed the drift of the cultural environment out of democratic reach. Channels multiply but communication technologies converge and media merge. With every merger, staffs shrink and creative opportunities diminish. Cross-media conglomeration reduces competition and denies entry to newcomers. Fewer sources fill more outlets more of the time with ever more standardized fare. Alternative perspectives vanish from the mainstream.

Other distortions of the democratic process include the promotion of practices that pollute, drug, hurt, poison, and kill thousands every day; portrayals that dehumanize and stigmatize; cults of media violence that desensitize, terrorize, and brutalize; stories that polarize and spur the growing siege mentality of our cities but ignore the drift toward ecological suicide, the silent crumbling of our infrastructure and the widening gaps in the richest country that already has the most glaring inequalities in the industrial world.

Our research has demonstrated that these manifestations are not expressions of freedom but, on the contrary, the

symptoms of a cultural system dominated by shrinking group of conglomerates that have nothing to tell but a lot to sell. They are symptoms of marketing formulas that themselves constitute *de facto* censorship. We have concluded, therefore, that systemic reform is needed; that not more censorship but, on the contrary, liberation of creative people and journalists from the imposition of narrow and prejudicial marketing formulas is the way toward fairness, diversity, equality, and democracy in cultural policy.

ADBUSTERS magazine published the CEM prospectus under the title "The Second American Revolution." *Psychology Today* published a summary under the heading, "Take Back the Culture." Regional meetings, broadcast interviews, newspaper stories, and lecture tours across the U.S., in Latin America, and overseas keep generating enthusiastic response. Some 3,000 persons responded by joining, requesting information, and offering to help build the movement. Over 100 organizations in all regions of the U.S., Canada, and several other countries wrote to express interest in affiliation.

The Founding Convention

On March 15-17, 1996, the Cultural Environment Movement will hold its Founding Convention in St. Louis. The Convention is hosted by Webster University and co-sponsored by Webster and over 35 other organizations including the Children's Division of the American Humane Association, the Minority Media and Telecommunication Council, the Center for Media Education, the Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility, the Center for the Study of Commercialism, the Screen Actors Guild, the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, and the Physicians for Social Responsibility.

While supporting and cooperating with other organizations and conferences with similar aims, CEM plays a unique and distinctive role. The Founding Convention is an invitational working meeting of affiliated organizations, co-sponsors and other supporters prepared to collaborate on the national and international levels in addressing the problem of an increasingly monopolized and globalized media system. The tasks of the Convention are to ratify a "People's Communication Charter", draft a "Viewer's Declaration of Independence," recommend an action program of reform, and set up a Coordinating Council of affiliated organizations to guide the program.

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, and Keyan Tomaselli, Director, Centre for Cultural and Media Studies, University of Natal, Durban, South Africa.

Most of the work of the Convention will be done in 14 Working Groups representing a wide diversity of interests including media education, religion, creative workers in media, independent producers, labor, women's and minority groups, youth and senior citizens, and groups concerned with children, violence, and physical and mental health (see Attachment 1).

CEM has received no major funding. Preparation for the Convention has been financed from small donations and contributions in response to a direct mail appeal to those who had expressed interest. The basic cost of the Convention is financed by a registration fee.

A grant of is requested to help launch CEM as the liberating alternative to the repressive movements in the field. It will be used for (1) keynote speakers and scholarships for organizational delegates and members abroad who could otherwise not attend the Convention (\$40,000); (2) full-page ads in major national papers announcing the program (\$100,000); (3) setting up an office with a small staff including a development function (\$130,000); and (4) supporting the work of the Coordinating Council for one year (\$15,000). A detailed budget will be submitted upon request.