



Goodbye  
George

THE CULTURAL ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT LOST one of its most illustrious pioneers this past winter when George Gerbner died at his home on Christmas Eve. His passing was cause for reflection here at *Adbusters*, as we remembered back to a decade and a half ago, when we were a fledgling, little-known magazine trying to make our mark, and Gerbner first contacted us to ask how he could be of service. His eagerness to contribute to *Adbusters* gave us a boost that helped send us on our way, and we – along with so many others working in media literacy and media activism – will miss him.

Gerbner developed an appreciation for the value of cultural expressions at a young age. Growing up in pre-World War II Hungary, he spent his summers living in villages with peasants, learning their culture and language, collecting folk songs and folktales. He was also deeply affected by the rise of fascism in Europe and experienced first hand how the stories told by a government to its people can turn one group against another.

When he immigrated to the US in 1940, Gerbner brought with him his interest in storytelling and decided not just to study mass communications, but also to influence public policy and educate individuals about its effects on society. He entered academia and created the Cultural Indicators project to analyze the effects of television violence on society. This systematic, long-running study documented both the quantity of violence on prime-time television and the way that violence was portrayed. Gerbner's findings led him to coin the term "mean world

syndrome" – the perception based on media violence that the world is a dangerous and unforgiving place. In 1981, he told a Congressional subcommittee on communications, "Fearful people are more dependent, more easily manipulated and controlled, more susceptible to deceptively simple, strong tough measures and hard-line postures. They may accept and even welcome repression if it promises to relieve their insecurities. That is the deeper problem of violence-laden television."

After three decades at the University of Pennsylvania he retired in 1990 to found the Cultural Environment Movement, an advocacy group demanding more media diversity. Gerbner understood better than most that whoever "tells the stories of a culture really governs human behavior. It used to be the parent, the school, the church, the community. Now it's a handful of global conglomerates that have nothing to tell, but a great deal to sell."

As his son John noted at his graveside service, Gerbner likened himself to the environmentalist Rachel Carson – warning the world about the effects of a cultural environment that was controlled by a few commercial, military and global forces. He understood that he was going up against very powerful interests, but he was not easily discouraged, and John summed up his father's life by citing one of George's favorite quotes: "Here's to the success of the impossible."

Staff