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TV violence gets left-right punch

George Gerbner, the former dean of Penn's Annenberg School for Communication, spoke on a recent evening to the Peace Committee at the Arch Street Friends Meeting House about how TV violence was demoralizing America.

As it happened, on that same day in Washington the same topic had been discussed at a program put together by a seemingly unlikely set of partners: the Democratic Leadership Council (which President Clinton once headed), and Empower America, the political action vehicle of Republican philosopher-ki-bitzer Bill Bennett.

The Washington conference was more impressive in many ways. Besides Bennett, you had two U.S. senators — DLC chairman Joe Lieberman of Connecticut and former DLC head Sam Nunn of Georgia — along with an array of widely known journalists and academics.

Jane Brown, a professor of journalism at the University of North Carolina, presented the new National Television Violence Study, which analyzed 2,500 hours of programming over two years, on network and cable channels; it found that television teaches aggressive behaviors, desensitizes viewers, and makes people fearful. (Gerbner has been saying as much for 20 years.)

But while there was some hopeful talk in Washington about V-chips and teaching children "media literacy," there was befuddlement as to what exactly people should do next.

On the political left bank

Gerbner, by contrast, has at least the beginning of a plan for changing the communications world. He asked his listeners to join an organization he founded and chairs, and which, virtually unnoticed, held its first convention at a Holiday Inn in St. Louis in March. He calls it the Cultural Environment Movement.

It would be nice to think the centrist coalition in Washington might link up with Gerbner's movement and really make something happen. Nice, but not likely soon. As too often seems to happen, we have people with a common goal kept apart by historic political differences. Call it the balkanization of America.

The founding convention of the Cultural Environment Movement assembled an array of groups from the flickering left edge of the political spectrum that reads almost like a parody: the National Stigma Clearinghouse, Old Lesbians Organizing for Change, the Foundation for Deep Ecology, the Center for the Study of Commercialism. It was an event where you wish you'd had the yogurt and granola concession.

Gerbner is quietly horrified at the suggestion he might make common cause with Bill Bennett. Those who have taken up the anti-violence cause in recent years, he says, have a repressive tendency he abhors. (Bennett, for the record, disowns any interest in censorship.)

The big picture

The motto of Gerbner's movement is "the Liberating Alternative." He is convinced formulaic violence did not become the central dynamic of American television because Americans want it — the top-rated shows are rarely the most violent. Rather, it is because violence is easily translated for the global market, where the entertainment oligopoly makes its real money.

Whether or not one buys his economic analysis, he is onto something with his idea that, rather than rely on the government, citizens have to join together and demand "a place at the table" when decisions are being made about the cultural environment our children grow up in.

There's a moving eloquence to Gerbner's understated delivery when he talks about how, when civilization is finally achieved (and he thinks we're not there yet), "we will be appalled at what we permitted and what we rewarded."

At the Friends Meeting House, Gerbner had people ready to act. And who knows? Maybe there's a potential here that will transcend differences.

Gerbner says we must learn the truth of the Scottish philosopher's dictum that if one can control a nation's songs and stories, it doesn't matter who writes the laws. Somehow, I think Bill Bennett could relate to that.

In any event, for information on the Cultural Environment Movement, call 215-387-5303.