

Communication

Gerbner Advances Ideas on Media Violence

In September, the Communication Commission released a substantive report urging strong measures to reduce the amount of violent and sexually violent material in film, television, cable and home video, while reaffirming its opposition to censorship. NCCC Governing Board members, at their meeting in November, heard praise for the report from Dr. George Gerbner, dean of the Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania, and a leading media researcher. Calling the report "an historic opportunity," Gerbner offered the following perspective on why violence in the media has been an "intractable" problem. His remarks have been condensed for *Chronicles*.

I would like to begin with some fundamental considerations about the nature of human life. Human beings do not experience reality directly. Our reality is based on stories we tell about the world, the origin of life, modes of right conduct. These stories that we create, record and tell weave a seamless web we call culture. And for the longest time they were told in the form of mythologies, religions, rituals on a highly centralized face-to-face basis.

With print came the breaking up of the ritual. With print came the ability to disseminate the great stories of humankind beyond the boundaries of face-to-face communication. This meant a breaking up of the power of the rulers and chiefs whose oral interpretation monopolized story telling. It made possible the building of publics that are large aggregates of people who have a great deal in common but who never meet face to face. Most of our ideas about governance, religion and education depend on a print-based system of pluralistic society in which different ideas can be shared, even if they are competing or conflicting, and can exist more or less peacefully side by side.

Then came the telecommunications revolution with television its main stream, which has not supplanted but has reorganized all of the rest of the culture.

Television is essentially a ritual. Most



Representatives of NCCC Communication Commission chat with noted media researcher Dr. George Gerbner (at right). From left, is Dr. James Wall, chair of the commission's committee on media and violence, Dr. William F. Fore, NCCC assistant general secretary for communication, and committee member Dr. Beverly J. Chain.

viewers watch by the clock, not by the program. It fits into a style of life. It is a tightly composed new mythology whose true predecessor is tribal religion. It is a repetitive, ritualistic presentation to all of our children, to all of our parents, to all of our grandparents, for an average of seven hours a day. It is a world into which a child is inserted at birth, and where he or she absorbs the patterns of that world as the patterns of the wallpaper in the room—without knowing. And yet the patterns will always be familiar, and he or she will always be receptive to them.

But these patterns are no longer controlled by the parents, and no longer come from the school or the church, but from a small group of distant corporations. This presents an entirely new historical perspective on our age, in which our institutions have to find new roads. We have been studying this world and its lessons on a continuous basis for 18 years and have an enormous amount of data, which amounts to the following:

In the world of television, women are outnumbered by men three to one. Young people comprise about one-third of their true proportion, people 65 and above about one-fifth. Minorities have less than

their share of representation, but more than their share of victimization. This is a world in which representation is not only a question of numbers, but reflects an inequality of opportunity in life with which our children have grown up from the very outset.

And what maintains the credibility and the force of this world and this still largely iniquitous, unjust distribution of power and social order? It is, to a large extent, violence and sexual violence on television. It is a matter of demonstrating, as you have seen in vivid, gruesome and disgusting forms, where power lies. The lessons we have gotten, survey after survey, are that those who are more heavily exposed to these images than comparable groups of so-called light viewers are a bit more insecure, a bit more dependent on authority, a bit more receptive to intolerant, strong, simplistic solutions to complex problems, and even to repression if it comes in the name of enhancing their security.

In this world of television, violence occurs at the average rate of six times per hour in prime time, much of it directed against women. You can tune in any hour of the night and I guarantee that if you

watch for an hour you will see two murders, of which one tends to be the murder of a woman presented in entertaining forms, in forms where the narrative justifies the outcome.

We have found that the lessons that are derived from exposure to this material are not only lessons of imitation. Depending on who they are—women, young people, old people, minorities—and the lower they go on the social power scale, the more viewers learn to see themselves as vulnerable and more dependent and, therefore, as more controllable.

As you address the question of media violence and sexual violence, you are addressing a deeper tension in our society of which this is a manifestation. You are seeing a demonstration of a structure of power which enforces some of the worst features of our society. You are addressing an exercise that makes people more resistant to accepting the changes which have been going on in our society with women, young and old people, and minorities.

Addressing violence and sexual violence will be an historic step that our organizations of parents, teachers and citizens are going to watch. It is going to be the beginning of a new environmental movement whose target is no longer only the physical environment, but the cultural, the spiritual environment, the environment that is equally mass produced as other forms of pollution in our society. And it is the first time that a highly representative national organization attends to it and makes some recommendations, and I can assure you those recommendations cannot be ignored.

The NCCC "Report on Violence and Sexual Violence in Film, Television, Cable and Home Video" is available from the Communication Commission, Rm. 856, 475 Riverside Dr., N.Y., NY 10115, for \$4 per single copy, \$3 each for 2-4 copies, \$2 each for 5-20 copies; \$1 each for over 20 copies.