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THE MAN WHO COUNTS THE KILLINGS

George Gerbner, who thirty years ago founded the Cultural Indicators project, which is best known for its estimate that the average American child will have watched 8,000 murders on television by the age of twelve, is so alarmed about the baneful effects of TV that he describes them in terms of "fascism"

by Scott Stossel

IN the unlikely event that a major Hollywood studio were to make a movie based on the life of George Gerbner, it might go something like this:

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A passionate young Hungarian poet, dismayed by the rise of fascism in his country in the late 1930s, emigrates to America.

Cut to 1942. The ex-poet, motivated by his hatred of fascism, enlists in the U.S. Army. He volunteers for the Office of Strategic Services and ends up in a group of fifteen men trained, like William Holden and his comrades in *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, in the techniques of blowing up bridges and roads.

Cut to January 15, 1945 -- a sabotage mission gone awry. The young man and his OSS comrades, under heavy fire over Slovenia, parachute into enemy territory. They climb into the mountains and hide in farmhouses, subsisting on emergency rations until they encounter the partisan brigades, with whom they spend the remainder of the war fighting Germans who are in retreat from Greece.

The war takes a bloody toll on the young man's brigade; by V-E Day it has been reduced from 400 men to seventy. But the Allies prevail. And the ex-poet, now a war hero, falls in love. Roll credits: the camera freezes on George and Ilona Gerbner embracing on the deck of their New York-bound ship.

Discuss this article In the more imaginable yet still unlikely event that an

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independent production company were to make a film based on the life of George Gerbner, it might go something like this:

After the Second World War, in the course of which he has seen enough violence, suffering, and pain to harden even the softest sensibility, and during which he has personally identified and arrested the fascist Hungarian Prime Minister, who is subsequently executed, a brooding Hungarian poet travels with his wife to America. He earns a Ph.D. from the University of Southern California, in the process writing the first-ever master's thesis on the subject of education and television, and begins a long career in academia studying the effects of television on its viewers. In 1964 he becomes the dean of the newly founded Annenberg School of Communication, at the University of Pennsylvania, where he builds a curriculum and a faculty from scratch. In 1989, after twenty-five years as dean, George Gerbner retires.



This second film might concentrate on Gerbner's recent activities. Now seventy-seven years old, he is free to pursue more or less full-time what has been a longtime project of his: trying to awaken television viewers from their stupefaction. Television, Gerbner believes, is modern-day religion. It presents a coherent vision of the world. And this vision of the world, he says, is violent, mean, repressive, dangerous -- and inaccurate. Television programming is the toxic by-product of market forces run

amok. Television has the capacity to be a culturally enriching force, but, Gerbner warns, today it breeds what fear and resentment mixed with economic frustration can lead to -- the undermining of democracy.

Though in general respected within his field, Gerbner is misunderstood, misrepresented, and even mocked outside it. Network executives make what sound like commonsense dismissals of his Cassandra-esque claims. The central question of this film might be, What are we to make of this complex man and his provocative message?

Is Gerbner tilting at windmills? Is he just a mediaphobe with a quixotic message? Or is he a lonely voice of insight, telling us things that are hard to comprehend but that we need to hear if we are to remain free from repression? Right or wrong, is his crusade at bottom a futile one? Do we need to change television programming, and if so, how can we do it? After all, network executives say, viewers are simply getting what they want. The film might end with a shot of a gaunt George Gerbner quoting, as he often does, the toast of Russian dissidents under Soviet rule: "Now let us drink to the success of our hopeless endeavor."

Violence and Television: A History

IN 1977 Ronny Zamora, a fifteen-year-old, shot and killed the eighty-two-year-old woman who lived next door to him in Florida. Not guilty, pleaded his lawyer, Ellis Rubin, by reason of the boy's having watched too much television. From watching television Ronny had become dangerously inured to violence. Suffering from what Rubin called "television intoxication," he could no longer tell right from wrong. "If you judge Ronny Zamora guilty," Rubin argued, "television will be an accessory." The jury demurred: Ronny was convicted of first-degree murder.

Although few anti-television activists would agree that excessive television viewing can exculpate a murderer, a huge body of evidence -- including 3,000 studies before 1971 alone -- suggests a strong connection between television watching and aggression. "There is no longer any serious debate about whether violence in the media is a legitimate problem," Reed Hundt, the chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, said in a speech last year. "Science and commonsense judgments of parents agree. As stated in a year-long effort, funded by the cable-

TV industry . . . "there are substantial risks of harmful effects from viewing violence throughout the television environment."

The study cited by Hundt reveals nothing new. Researchers have been churning out studies indicating links between television violence and real-life violence for as long as television has been a prominent feature of American culture. Just a few examples demonstrate the range of the investigations.

- A 1956 study compared the behavior of twelve four-year-olds who watched a Woody Woodpecker cartoon containing many violent episodes with that of twelve other four-year-olds who watched "The Little Red Hen," a nonviolent cartoon. The Woody watchers were much more likely than the Hen watchers to hit other children, break toys, and be generally destructive during playtime.
- In 1981 Brandon Centerwall, a professor of epidemiology at the University of Washington, hypothesized that the sharp increase in the murder rate in North America beginning in 1955 was the product of television viewing. Television sets had been common household appliances for about eight years by that point -- enough time, he theorized, to have inculcated violent tendencies in a generation of viewers. He tested his hypothesis by studying the effects of television in South Africa, where the Afrikaaner-dominated regime had banned it until 1975. He found that twelve years after television was introduced there, murder rates skyrocketed.
- In 1960 Leonard Eron, a professor of psychology at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research, studied third-graders in Columbia County in semi-rural New York. He observed that the more violent television these eight-year-olds watched at home, the more aggressive they were in school. Eron returned to Columbia County in 1971, when the children from his sample were nineteen. He found that the boys who had watched a lot of violent television when they were eight were more likely to get in trouble with the law when older. Eron returned to Columbia County a third time in 1982, when his subjects were thirty. He discovered that those who had watched the most television violence at age eight inflicted more violent punishments on their children, were convicted of more serious crimes, and were reported more aggressive by their spouses than those who had watched less violent television. In 1993, at a conference of the National Council

for Families & Television, Eron estimated that 10 percent of the violence in the United States can be attributed to television.

Although Eron's study did not make a special effort to control for other potentially violence-inducing variables, other longitudinal studies have done so. For example, in 1971 Monroe Lefkowitz published "Television Violence and Child Aggression: A Follow-up Study," which confirmed that the more violence an eight-year-old boy watched, the more aggressive his behavior would be at age eighteen. Lefkowitz controlled for other possible variables, directly implicating media violence as an instigator of violent behavior.

Shouldn't the weight of thousands of such studies be sufficient to persuade broadcasters, required by law since the 1930s to serve the public interest, to change the content of television programming? Especially when polls -- such as one conducted by *U.S. News & World Report* last year -- indicate that 90 percent of Americans think that violent television shows hurt the country? We don't want to become a nation of Ronny Zamoras, do we?

Periods of increasing popular agitation about the effects of television on children (usually inspired by a rising crime rate or by a sensational story like Ronny Zamora's) lead to spasms of political posturing. Studies are commissioned. Imminent legislative or regulatory action is threatened. The broadcast industry filibusters. Within a few months the politicians turn their attention to something new, and the broadcasting industry slips quietly away, barely chastened.

Since 1968, when President Lyndon Johnson convened the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, commissions, hearings, and a Surgeon General's report have all found that television is a "major contributory factor" in violent behavior in society.

"A Telegenic Little Gizmo"

THE latest burst of activity around the issue of television violence, culminating in the legislating of the V-chip, can be traced to a night in the mid-1980s when a weary Senator Paul Simon, of Illinois, lying in his motel bed, flipped on the television and saw, in graphic detail, a man being sliced in half with a chain saw -- a victim, Simon's staff later surmised, of Colombian

drug dealers in *Scarface*. Appalled that there was nothing to prevent a child from witnessing such grisliness, Simon urged the passage of a law reducing gore on television.

What matters is not so much the raw fact that a violent act is committed on television but who does what to whom.

The result, the 1990 Television Violence Act, was a compromise between the broadcasting industry and those who, like Simon, wanted somehow to reduce the violence on shows that children might be watching.

Ordinarily, antitrust laws prohibit broadcast networks from collaborating, but Simon's proposal gave the networks a three-year exemption from the laws so that they could jointly work out a policy to curb violence. Though Simon hailed the announcement of the networks (except Fox), in December of 1992, of a set of guidelines governing television violence, this basically toothless bit of legislation had little effect until it was about to expire, at which point network executives promised that they would place parental advisories at the beginning of violent programs ("Due to violent content, parental discretion is advised"). When the act expired, in December of 1993, television was as violent as ever.

Meanwhile, in Canada, the invention of a Vancouver engineer had come to the attention of Keith Spicer, then the chairman of the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (Canada's FCC equivalent). This invention -- in Spicer's words, a "sexy, telegenic little gizmo that fulfills the fantasy of a magic wand" and could solve the problem of television violence without censorship -- was the V-chip, the basic rationale for which is by now generally known. Using the chip, which receives encoded information about each show as part of the broadcast transmission, parents can program their television to block out shows that have been coded as violent or sexually explicit. Spicer championed the V-chip and ultimately got a law passed mandating its use in all new television sets sold in Canada.

After the Television Violence Act expired, Representative Edward J. Markey, of Massachusetts, introduced legislation requiring manufacturers to install the V-chip in all U.S. television sets. President Bill Clinton extolled the V-chip in his State of the Union Address last year, and then signed its use into law as part of the mammoth 1996 Telecommunications Act. As of February of next year all

new television sets (Americans buy 24 million of them a year) must have the chip. Meanwhile, the broadcasting industry has established a rating system to be employed in conjunction with the chip, age-based like the system used by the Motion Picture Association of America.

Is the V-chip, after all these years, the solution we've been looking for? The "gizmo" that will protect our children from damaging cultural content? Clearly, not everyone thinks so. British opponents of the chip dismissed it early last year, saying it was a "knee-jerk solution" that would impede solving real problems. And criminologists in the United States say that children will circumvent the V-chip -- after all, kids are better at programming VCRs than their parents are.

But the real problem, according to George Gerbner, is that all this hullabaloo over the V-chip, and over television violence in general, misses the point. The chip, though it's the result of good intentions, can do nothing to alleviate television's most complex and insidious effects.

2,605 Violent Acts a Day

IN 1968 President Johnson's National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence appointed Gerbner, who had already been studying violence in the media at the Annenberg School, to analyze the content of television shows. Thus began the Cultural Indicators project, the longest-running continuous media-research undertaking in the world. Gerbner and his team presented findings about both the quantity of violence on prime-time television -- that is, how many violent acts are committed each night -- and the quality. In analyzing these acts Gerbner's team asked questions like Was it serious or funny? Was it the only method of conflict resolution offered? Were realistic repercussions of violence shown? Who committed most of it? Who suffered the most because of it? The quantity of violence on television was stunning; no less significant to Gerbner, though, were the ways in which this violence was portrayed. But in the first instance of what has since become a frustrating pattern for him, the mainstream media seized on the quantity and ignored his findings about the quality of television violence.

The media continue to be fixated on the amount of violence the Cultural

Gerbner has coined a term that describes most

Indicators project finds, because the numbers are staggering. Today someone settling down to watch television is likely to witness a veritable carnival of violent behavior. On average there are more than five violent scenes in an hour of prime time, and five murders a night. There are twenty-five violent acts an hour in Saturday-morning cartoons -- the programs most watched by children, usually without any supervision. And that's only network television. A survey by the Center for Media and Public Affairs that looked at all programming -- including cable -- in Washington, D.C., on April 7, 1994, tallied 2,605 acts of violence that day, the majority occurring in the early morning, when kids were most likely to be watching. By the reckoning of the Cultural Indicators project, the average American child will have witnessed more than 8,000 murders and 100,000 other violent acts on television by the time he or she leaves elementary school. Another study, published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in 1992, found that the typical American child spends twenty-seven hours a week watching television and will witness 40,000 murders and 200,000 other violent acts by the age of eighteen. Ellis Rubin's defense of Ronny Zamora begins to sound plausible.

of the screen violence we see. He calls it "happy violence."

"Never was a culture so filled with full-color images of violence as ours is now," Gerbner wrote recently. This is an assertion he makes often, in his writings and speeches and interviews.

Of course, there is blood in fairy tales, gore in mythology, murder in Shakespeare, lurid crimes in tabloids, and battles and wars in textbooks. Such representations of violence are legitimate cultural expressions, even necessary to balance tragic consequences against deadly compulsions. But the historically defined, individually crafted, and selectively used symbolic violence of heroism, cruelty, or authentic tragedy has been replaced by the violence with happy endings produced on the dramatic assembly line.

The Cultural Indicators project has since 1968 amassed a database of reports on the recurring features of television programming. Today its archive contains observations on more than 3,000 programs and 35,000 characters. In

looking at characters, coders record, among other characteristics, sex, race, height, level of aggressiveness, and drug, alcohol, or tobacco use. For every conflict the coder records how the character acts: Did he get angry? How did he resolve the conflict? If a character is part of a violent act, the coder records whether he suffered or committed it, and whether it was committed in self-defense. The results are then analyzed statistically to try to account for differences in the behavioral trends of the characters. Are there statistically significant differences in the percentage of, say, victimhood or alcohol abuse by sex? By level of education? By race? By social status?

In addition to this "message system analysis," Gerbner's researchers do "cultivation analysis," which tries to measure how much television contributes to viewers' conceptions of reality. Cultivation analysis asks, in other words, to what extent television "cultivates" our understanding of the world. Gerbner believes this to be the most important aspect of his research. It is also the part routinely ignored by the mainstream press and attacked by the broadcasting industry.

One of the basic premises of Gerbner's cultivation analysis is that television violence is not simple acts but rather "a complex social scenario of power and victimization." What matters is not so much the raw fact that a violent act is committed but who does what to whom. Gerbner is as insistent about this as he is about anything, repeating it in all his writings and speeches. "What is the message of violence?" he asks me rhetorically over tea in his office at the University of Pennsylvania, a cozy, windowless rectangle filled with books, pictures, and objets d'art. "Who can get away with what against whom?" He leans forward intently, as though confiding something, although he has already said this to me several other times, during several other conversations. His eagerness to make me understand is palpable. "The media keep focusing on the amount of violence. But concentrating on that reinforces the message of violence. It concentrates on the law-and-order aspect of violence. Harping on this all the time makes people more fearful -- which is the purpose of violence to begin with."

"The Mean World Syndrome"

SO what, exactly, has nearly thirty years of cultivation analysis shown? Among other things, the following:

- Americans spend fully a third of their free time with television. This is more than the next ten highest-ranked leisure-time activities put together.
- Women make up a third or less of the characters in all samples except daytime serials.
- The "lower classes" are almost invisible on television. According to the U.S. Census, at least 13 percent of the population is "poor," with a significant additional percentage being classified as "low-income wage-earners." Yet the lower classes make up only 1.3 percent of prime-time characters.
- For every white male victim of violence there are seventeen white female victims.
- For every white male victim there are twenty-two minority female victims.
- For every ten female aggressors there are sixteen female victims.
- Minority women are twice as likely to be victims as they are to be aggressors.
- Villains are disproportionately male, lower-class, young, and Latino or foreign.

What is the significance of all this? First, the sheer quantity of violence on television encourages the idea that aggressive behavior is normal. Viewers become desensitized. The mind, as Gerbner puts it, becomes "militarized." This leads to what Gerbner calls "the Mean World Syndrome." Because television depicts the world as worse than it is (at least for white suburbanites), we become fearful and anxious -- and more willing to depend on authorities, strong measures, gated communities, and other proto-police-state accouterments. Discounting the dramatic increase in violent crime in the real world, Gerbner believes, for example, that the Mean World Syndrome is an important reason that the majority of Americans now support capital punishment, whereas they did not thirty years ago. "Growing up in a violence-laden culture breeds aggressiveness in some and desensitization, insecurity, mistrust, and anger in most," he writes. "Punitive and vindictive action against dark forces in a mean world is made to look appealing, especially when

presented as quick, decisive, and enhancing our sense of control and security."

The more violence one sees on television, the more one feels threatened by violence. Studies have shown direct correlations between the quantity of television watched and general fearfulness about the world: heavy viewers believe the world to be much more dangerous than do light viewers. Thus heavy viewers tend to favor more law-and-order measures: capital punishment, three-strikes prison sentencing, the building of new prisons, and so forth. And the fact that most of the heavy viewers are in low-income, low-education families means that the most disenfranchised in our society -- and, it should be said, the people most exposed to real violence -- are making themselves even more so by placing their fate in the hands of an increasingly martial state. Politicians exploit this violence-cultivated sensibility by couching their favored policies in militaristic terms: the War on Crime, for example, or the War on Drugs. "We are headed in the direction of an upsurge in neofascism in a very entertaining and very amusing disguise," Gerbner told a lecture audience in Toronto two years ago.

The first time I talked to Gerbner after reading his writings, I asked him if this wasn't all a bit Big Brotherish. "TV images are complex," he told me. "The disempowering effects of television lead to neofascism. That kind of thing is waiting in the wings. Nazi Germany came on the heels of a basic sense of insecurity and powerlessness like we have here now. I don't want to oversimplify, but that is the direction we might be heading."

Portentous talk like Gerbner's about TV gets the network executives rolling their eyes. Isn't this all a bit dire?

Violence, Gerbner says, is all about power. The violence on television serves as a lesson of power that puts people in their place. Members of minority groups grow up feeling that they're more vulnerable than others. Television cultivates

this view. But, I counter, minorities *are* more vulnerable. They are victims more often than middle-class white Americans are. Improving the depiction of minorities on television will not change this social fact. Gerbner strives to clarify: "Television doesn't 'cause' anything. We're wary of saying television 'causes' this or that. Instead we say television 'contributes' to this or that. The extent of

contribution varies. But it's there."

Elsewhere Gerbner is less circumspect. "The violence we see on the screen and read about in our press bears little relationship either in volume or in type, especially in its consequences, to violence in real life," he has written. "This sleight of hand robs us of the tragic sense of life necessary for compassion." No doubt a victim of the Mean World Syndrome myself, I was surprised to learn that Gerbner is absolutely right, at least about the volume of violence. Scary and crime-ridden though the world is these days (violent crime has more than doubled over the past thirty years; an American is six times as likely to be the victim of assault with a weapon as he or she would have been in 1960), prime-time television presents a world in which crime rates are a hundred times worse.

Why Sex Doesn't Interest Gerbner

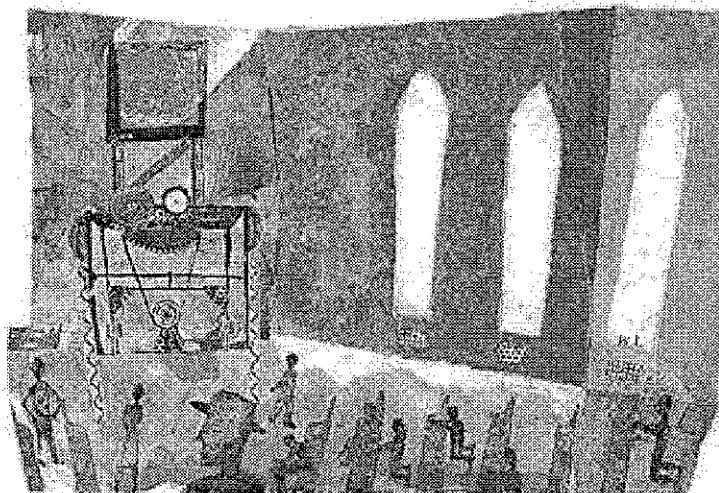
THE Cultural Indicators project does not generally publish statistics about sexual encounters on television. But the aggregate number of sexual references or images on television rivals the number of violent acts. The Center for Population Options, for example, determined that the typical teenager sees nearly 14,000 sexual encounters on television *every* year. And few of these encounters can be said to promote traditional family values. A study by the conservative Media Research Center found that portrayals of premarital sex outnumber portrayals of sex within marriage by eight to one. Why isn't this sort of thing of greater interest to Gerbner?

Given that Gerbner's background is European (in particular the Frankfurt School tradition, which taught the dangers of the control of the masses by ideological cultural content), and given that his outlook is in many ways political, it is unsurprising that sex is not his overriding concern. While deploring the mechanical, passionless athletic contortions that pass for sex in Hollywood movies these days, Gerbner believes that the politics of sex in culture (except when force or violence is also involved) are less sinister than the politics of violence. "Most countries have codes about violence, not about sex," he says. "For us it is the other way around. We have a rather prudish and misguided sense of ratings."

Though other countries share our concerns about violence in culture (France, for example, strictly regulates shows

that combine violent and erotic content and might be psychologically disturbing to children), Europeans generally have more-liberal attitudes toward sex than Americans. Cultural theorists and policymakers from Europe and Canada see it as an irony -- and, given what they consider America's proclivity for gunboat diplomacy, as appropriate -- that the United States is relatively easygoing about violence while being fairly uptight about sex. Consider *NYPD Blue*, the critically acclaimed show that has distressed citizens and legislators in both Canada and the United States -- but for different reasons. Ronald I. Cohen, the national chair of the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council, explains, "In the United States the problem is over sexual content. In Canada the only issue was with violence, not with the number of bare posteriors." In fact, one of the challenges facing those standardizing V-chip ratings is this discrepancy between the cultural concerns of the two countries, across whose borders broadcast transmissions freely move.

What seems to concern most Americans about sex on television (and sex in the culture at large) is that it makes it impossible for parents to control what the self-proclaimed Luddite Neil Postman, the author of *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (1992), has called "the content and taboos of adult life." Parents, in other words, no longer have the opportunity to teach their children about the birds and the bees gradually, in a manner they consider appropriate; everything is exposed -- so to speak -- to kids all at once. The old system of moral socialization breaks down.



The New Religion

WHOEVER tells most of the stories to most of the people most of the time has effectively assumed the cultural role of parent and school," Gerbner says, ". . . teaching us most of what we know in common about life and society." In fact, by the time children reach school age, they will have spent more hours in front of the television than they will ever spend in college classrooms. Television, in short, has become a cultural force equaled in history only by organized religion. Only religion has had this power to transmit the same messages about reality to every social group, creating a common culture. Most people do not have to wait for, plan for, go out to, or seek out television, for the TV is on more than seven hours a day in the average American home. It comes to you directly. It has become a member of the family, telling its stories patiently, compellingly, untiringly. We *choose* to read *The New York Times*, or Dickens, or an entomology text. We *choose* to listen to Bach or Bartók, or at least to a classical station or a rock station or a jazz station. But we just watch TV -- turn it on, see what's on. And in Gerbner's view it is an upper-middle-class conceit to say "Just turn off the television" -- in most homes there is nothing as compelling as television at any time of the day or night.

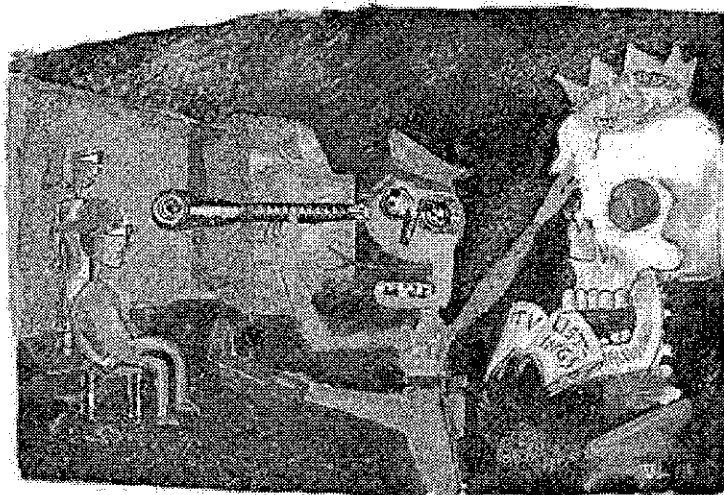
It is significant that this viewing is nonselective. It's why Gerbner believes that the Cultural Indicators project methodology -- looking at television's overall patterns rather than at the effects of specific shows -- is the best approach. It is long-range exposure to television, rather than a specific violent act on a specific episode of a specific show, that cultivates fixed conceptions about life in viewers.

Nor is the so-called hard news, even when held distinct from infotainment shows like *Hard Copy* and *A Current Affair*, exempt from the disproportionate violence and misrepresentations on television in general. The old news saw "If it bleeds, it leads" usually prevails. Watch your local newscast tonight: it is not unlikely that the majority of news stories will be about crime or disaster -- and it may well be that all six stories will be from outside your state, especially if you live far from any major metropolis. Fires and shootings are much cheaper and easier to cover than politics or community events. Violent news also generates higher ratings, and since the standards for television news are set by market researchers, what we get is lots of conformity, lots of violence. As the actor and director Edward James Olmos has pointedly observed, "For every half hour of TV news, you have twenty-three

minutes of programming and seven minutes of commercials. And in that twenty-three minutes, if it weren't for the weather and the sports, you would not have any positive news. As for putting in even six minutes of hope, of pride, of dignity -- it doesn't sell." The author and radio personality Garrison Keillor puts it even more pointedly: "It's as bloody as Shakespeare but without the intelligence and the poetry. If you watch television news you know less about the world than if you drank gin out of a bottle."

The strength of television's influence on our understanding of the world should not be underestimated. "Television's Impact on Ethnic and Racial Images," a study sponsored by the American Jewish Committee's Institute for American Pluralism and other groups, found that ethnic and racial images on television powerfully shape the way adolescents perceive ethnicity and race in the real world. "In dealing with socially relevant topics like racial and ethnic relations," the study said, "TV not only entertains, it conveys values and messages that people may absorb unwittingly -- particularly young people." Among viewers watching more than four hours each day, 25 percent said that television showed "what life is really like" and 40 percent said they learned a lot from television. African-Americans especially, the study showed, rely on television to learn about the world.

Television, in short, tells all the stories. Gerbner is fond of quoting the Scottish patriot Andrew Fletcher, who wrote to the Marquise of Montrose in 1704, "If I were permitted to write all the ballads I need not care who makes the laws of the nation." Fletcher identified the governing power of, in Gerbner's words, a "centralized system of ballads -- the songs, legends, and stories that convey both information and what we call entertainment." Television has become this centralized system; it is the cultural arm of the state that established religion once was. "Television satisfies many previously felt religious needs for participating in a common ritual and for sharing beliefs about the meaning of life and the modes of right conduct," Gerbner has written. "It is, therefore, not an exaggeration to suggest that the licensing of television represents the modern functional equivalent of government establishment of religion." A scary collapsing, in other words, of church into state.



Is I Dream of Jeannie Violent?

PORTENTOUS talk like this gets the network executives rolling their eyes. Isn't this all a bit dire? Many in the broadcasting industry find Gerbner's work incomprehensible or ridiculous. His research has come in for scathing criticism over the years. Though usually soft-spoken and reasonable, Gerbner can be unyielding and strident; he is known, even among his closest disciples, for sometimes believing that people who disagree with him are motivated by personal animosity or vested interest. A letter from two screenwriters to *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, the alumni magazine of the University of Pennsylvania, in March of 1982 read, "We and many of our colleagues find ourselves wishing, perhaps in vain, that Gerbner will eventually recognize that many people of good will may disagree with him, not because they're misinformed but because they simply think he's wrong."

Gerbner's methodology draws fire mostly for its supposed insufficient emphasis on context. For years he has been ridiculed for a single example he cited as part of a routine Cultural Indicators project profile: network executives have never ceased to bring up the *I Dream of Jeannie* episode from 1968 that Gerbner deemed excessively violent. ("It had a really violent dream sequence," Gerbner says.) Frustrated by incidents like this one (more recently the project classified the *Laugh-In* twenty-fifth-anniversary special as very violent owing to pratfalls and slapstick), Gerbner will no longer willingly discuss the content of individual shows, insisting that it is the overall pattern that matters most.

In 1983 ABC published a critique, "A Research Perspective on Television and Violence," that took particular issue with Gerbner's findings. Gerbner's inclusion of accidents, slapstick comedy, acts of nature, and cartoons within his definition of violence, the study said, "results in tallies that distort the amount of realistic violence." Though ABC's critique was dismissed by academic researchers as self-serving, an ABC vice-president, Christine Hikawa, reflected the sentiment prevailing among broadcasters at the National Council for Families & Television Conference in 1993 when she said, "When researchers equate *Tom and Jerry* with *I Spit on Your Grave*, their credibility goes right out the window."

Most people, I think, would agree with Hikawa. A cartoon is surely more appropriate for and less damaging to young viewers than a verisimilitudinous movie like *Silence of the Lambs*. Road Runner's depredations against Wile E. Coyote lack the visceral effect of the gorier violence committed by, say, the serial killer in the 1995 movie *Seven*, in which the rabidity is clearly meant to be disturbing.

But a cartoon's lack of brute visceral impact, Gerbner says, is precisely what makes it so insidious. "Violence in our studies is overt, physical demonstration of power that hurts or kills. Whether it is done in a so-called serious way or a so-called humorous way has no functional significance." He continues, "Humor is a sugar coating that makes the pill of violence go down much more easily -- so it gets integrated into one's framework of knowledge." "Pratfalls are dangerous," Gerbner told me when I asked how his studies could implicate my beloved Three Stooges. "To make pain seem painless is sugarcoating power, sugarcoating the message of power. People don't understand that humor can be very violent and very cruel."

"Swift, Painless, Effective"

WHEN George Plimpton recently asked why, if television violence causes violence in the streets, television comedy doesn't cause comedy in the streets, he was with trademark wit making a commonsense observation: we don't directly replicate in our lives most of what we see on TV. But Gerbner doesn't say that we do. The reason that even apparently innocuous comedy can be so dangerous, he says, is that it reinforces viewers' perceptions of how the world works. No, comedy doesn't cause comedy in the streets. But TV violence indirectly

contributes to our understanding that there is violence in the streets, typically wrought by a stronger entity against a weaker one. "Humorous stories are easier to digest," Gerbner says, "easier to absorb. But basically they are all messages of power. Messages of who can get away with what against whom."

Gerbner has coined a term that describes most of the screen violence we see. "We are dealing with the formula-driven mass production of violence for entertainment -- what I call 'happy violence.' It is swift, painless, effective . . . and always leads to a happy ending." Happy violence appears both in cartoons and in action movies like *True Lies* and *Die Hard*, wherein all problems can be solved by violence and violence has no serious consequences. Movies, it should be noted, are an important part of the constant violent fare on television and in the culture in general. They must become more and more graphic if they are to penetrate our violence-hardened sensibilities. Gerbner points out that body counts always rise in action sequels: the first *Die Hard* movie had eighteen deaths, and the second had 264; the first *Robocop* movie had thirty-two deaths, and the second had eighty-one; and the three *Godfather* movies piled up twelve, eighteen, and fifty-three corpses respectively. "Escalating the body count," he has written, "seems to be one way to get attention from a public punch-drunk on global mayhem." What, Gerbner asks, does this cultivate in our kids, in society? "We live in a world that is erected by the stories we tell . . . and most of the stories are from television. These stories say this is how life works. These are the people who win; these are the people who lose; these are the kinds of people who are villains. It's a highly stereotypic world day after day. It doesn't matter whether it's serious or humorous. The main difference is that cartoons can go further. There is no more serious business for a culture or a society than the stories you tell your children."

Of course, stories have always been used to teach and control. The use of violent stories as moral tales is older than Hansel and Gretel. What is new is that the stories are standardized and commercialized. "For the first time in human history," Gerbner says, "the stories are told not by parents, not by the school, not by the church, not by the community or tribe and in some cases not even by the native country but by a relatively small and shrinking group of global conglomerates with something to sell. This changes in a very fundamental way the cultural environment into which our children are born, grow up, and become socialized." It used to be that scary stories

were told to children face-to-face, so they could be modulated, softened, individually tailored by the parents or the community depending on the situation and the desired lesson. Children today, in contrast, grow up in a cultural environment that is designed to the specifications of a marketing strategy.

Media Monopolies and Censorship

TELEVISION violence, Gerbner has written, "is but the tip of the iceberg of a massive distortion in the way in which we make cultural policy in this country. [Cultural decision-making] is drifting dangerously out of democratic reach." In his view, television violence is just one symptom of a serious underlying problem that threatens to stifle democracy: the very structure of the culture industry.

Most of the debate about acceptable television programming is cast, especially by those in the industry, in terms of censorship versus free speech. But Gerbner says this is misleading: although censorship is unquestionably a problem (there's altogether too much of it), it is not the usual culprit, government, that is doing the censoring. It is private corporations. Gerbner writes,

The Founding Fathers did not foresee the rise of large conglomerates acting as private governments. Nor did they envision their cultural arms, the mass media . . . forming a virtual private Ministry of Culture and Established Church rolled into one, influencing the socialization of all Americans. In licensing broadcasters and then letting the marketplace take its course, Congress has made law respecting the establishment of the modern equivalent of religion and has given a few giant conglomerates the right to abridge freedom of speech.

The market, Gerbner says, is a plutocracy, not a democracy. And the largest market interests use the First Amendment as a shield while denying it to the disenfranchised. Censorship! Censorship! broadcasters cry when anyone suggests that their programming has deleterious social effects, that they might try distributing something different. Yet these interests exercise de facto censorship themselves: in co-opting all programming (as recently as 1986 ABC, CBS, and NBC controlled 70

percent of the television market) a media monopoly has consolidated the diversity of human experience into a few basic formulas. A concentrated marketplace puts distinct limits on the range of views represented. The people have no say in what gets broadcast. This, in Gerbner's view, is plainly undemocratic. But we have become so accustomed to the dominance of a market-driven, advertiser-sponsored media system that we don't realize it doesn't have to be this way.

Alternatives to the American system of broadcasting do exist. Britain, for example, requires all television owners to pay a yearly license fee, which goes into a fund to subsidize independent productions on the BBC. In France proceeds from a tax on entertainment fund private and public producers, ensuring that a range of perspectives gets represented. Whereas in the United States the federal commitment to public broadcasting is less than \$1.50 per capita, other countries typically pay about \$25 to \$30 per capita. Aside from the establishment of the currently besieged Corporation for Public Broadcasting (which runs PBS), in the 1960s, the only serious attempts to legislate federal protection of the public interest in broadcasting were made in the 1930s. Herbert Hoover, who presided over the original Communications Act, for example, called for a two percent tax on radio-set sales to "pay for daily programs of the best skill and talent."

In most truly democratic countries television is subject to the electorate; the public interest is upheld. In the United States, however, the few laws requiring broadcasters to serve the public interest have never been enforced. This is in large part because federal policy for U.S. broadcasting, set in the 1930s, heavily stacked the deck in favor of a market-driven system. During the Depression policymakers hoped that a commercial broadcasting model would ensure sufficient programming diversity. But when the commercial model was codified in the Communications Act of 1934, its only -- albeit important -- concession to a broader civic responsibility was the stipulation that holders of broadcast licenses agree to serve the "public interest, convenience, and necessity."

The vaunted 1996 Telecommunications Act is the first significant update of the 1934 Communications Act. It has many elements, but one of its basic goals is to restore "competition" in the broadcasting market through further deregulation. Robert W. McChesney, a professor at the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the

University of Wisconsin at Madison, spoke in blunt Gerbnerian terms at the founding convention of Gerbner's Cultural Environment Movement, held in March of last year in St. Louis. "The 1996 Telecom Bill is truly one of the most corrupt pieces of legislation in American history," he said. "It has basically covertly handed over all communications to a few conglomerates. And it's all based on a big lie that Goebbels would have been impressed by: that the bill is meant to focus competition." By deregulating the industry, the Telecommunications Act has ensured that it will be consolidated still further. A rash of mergers has already taken place.

McChesney and Gerbner believe that it is structurally impossible for advertising-based television programming to represent the range and diversity of positions in our society. The problems, McChesney wrote in *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy: The Battle for the Control of U.S. Broadcasting, 1928-1935* (1993), are that "US political culture does not permit any discussion of the fundamental weaknesses in capitalism" and "corporate media have encouraged the belief that even the consideration of alternatives was tantamount to a call for totalitarianism."

According to Gerbner, a 1974 House committee report on television, suppressed by the broadcasting lobby before it could reach the House floor, suggested that the very organization of the network industry led to violent programming. Gerbner has long believed this to be true. Look at lists of the ten top-rated shows each year, he urges. Most of them are not violent; they're more likely to be comedies or nonviolent dramas. Yet producers still make scores of bloody shows. If network executives are merely obeying free-market forces, how can it be that they're making lots of shows that aren't in the highest demand?

Because, Gerbner told me, "there is no free market in television." It is well known in the industry that few television programs will break even in the domestic market. According to Todd Gitlin's book *Inside Prime Time* (1983), it costs more to produce one minute of your own programming than to buy an hour's worth from the world market. A programmer in Copenhagen, for example, can lease an old episode of *Dallas* for under \$5,000, less than the cost of producing one minute of original Danish drama. The high cost of production means that producers must sell their shows into syndication or abroad -- from which more than half the receipts come -- if they wish to

make a profit. Selling shows abroad requires a proven story formula that, in distributor lingo, "travels well." The most common formulas are obvious: sex and violence.

The Simple, the Naked, and the Bloody

SEX travels well. A Parisian or a Warsawian can delectate in Pamela Anderson in her bikini on *Baywatch* as well as a New Yorker can -- hence *Baywatch* is the most-watched show in the world. Violence travels well. When Sylvester Stallone rains bullets on the bad guys, who duck or spew blood, a viewer in Beijing can understand what is going on as well as a viewer in Peoria. Grunting is easy to translate. That's why *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* is watched by 300 million children in eighty countries. Violence and sex are naturally televisual genres: they're image-driven. Humor, subtlety, complex dialogue, and culture-specific idiosyncrasies don't translate so well. Thus there's an overwhelming global marketing imperative in favor of the simple, the naked, and the bloody. Cheap to produce, easy to distribute -- violence is the surest road to profit. It becomes part of a global formula that is, in Gerbner's words, "imposed on creative people and foisted on the children of the world."

Polls show that the creative people in Hollywood don't like this. Formulas constrain them. Television-station managers don't like it either: 74 percent say they do not like the violent shows they program. But bound by the bottom line, the cost per thousand viewers (CPM), they are obliged to buy them. Advertisers have no vested interest in pitching goods during violent shows; in fact, they worry about tainting their products with unsavory associations. But advertisers, too, bow before the almighty CPM. Market forces (high demand) make top-rated shows too expensive for many advertisers. According to Gerbner, some of the highest-rated programs have gone out of existence because they became too costly for advertisers. Finally, viewers -- what they say in polls notwithstanding -- do watch violent shows. Yes, there are so many of these shows that it's hard to avoid them. And yes, viewers have been conditioned to accept the corporate violence doled out to them. Still, viewers, too, are implicated in the culture and media structure, along with executives, producers, station managers, writers, and advertisers. If television violence is a problem, and most agree that it is, then it is a systemic problem.

What needs to be addressed, then, is the whole structure.

Each of its constituencies, Gerbner believes, if given a chance to escape the repressive market-dictated strictures that bind it, would do so. What is needed is an alternative model. But in a political environment where, as the journalism professor Robert McChesney points out, alternatives to a market system cannot be entertained without ridicule, this is a challenging need to meet. How do we escape from the trap? That is largely what the Cultural Environment Movement was conceived to do.

The Cultural-Protection Movement

AFTER he retired from the deanship at Annenberg, George Gerbner became, as he puts it, "a part-time researcher, full-time agitator" and continued to lecture all over the world on television violence. At the end of his speeches people would ask, What can we do? He would answer, Write your politician or broadcaster. Teach your children about television formulas. But this, Gerbner came to realize, was "feeble and humiliating -- why should we have to ask for something that ought to be a right?" In other countries people had a right and a voice equal to those of conglomerates and broadcasters. Why couldn't people in the United States? So in late December of 1990 Gerbner and some like-minded friends got together in a borrowed conference room in Washington, D.C., to launch the Cultural Environment Movement (CEM). A quarter century earlier Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* awakened readers to the perils of pollution and stimulated a generation of environmentalists to action. Gerbner's Cultural Environment Movement would do the same for media culture.

The movement yielded its first significant fruit a year ago, when it held its founding convention. Hundreds of delegates (left-leaning academics, progressive activists, former TV-industry people, and cultural policymakers from all over the world) assembled in a Holiday Inn on a bland commercial strip along Highway 366 in St. Louis. Their mission, as articulated in a draft of CEM's Viewer's Declaration of Independence, was to "dissolve the cultural bands which have tied human development to marketing strategies, and to assume an active role in making policy decisions about the cultural environment into which . . . children are born." A serious mandate, and an ambitious one.

Too ambitious? The convention, a three-day affair jam-packed with working groups, cultural events, and plenary

sessions, throbbed with activity and optimism. It had much of the tone of a civil-rights rally, swollen with the revolutionary fervor and progressive rhetoric of the sixties. Sumi Sevilla Haru, a four-foot-ten-inch, ninety-pound Filipino labor leader full of compressed energy, spoke in the language of the labor union when she told the convention, "We have to do something about the media massacre. We don't want to agonize -- we need to *organize*." When *The Washington Post* columnist Dorothy Gilliam entreated delegates in an after-dinner speech to "think of your work as civil-rights work -- CEM can be part of the civil-rights movement" (for which she got a standing ovation), she was making explicit the broader mission by which most of the delegates defined themselves. The general effect of the idealistic enthusiasm was inspiring. But there was in all this an element of Pollyannaism, of preaching to the converted. No one was there to disagree. As one sober-minded delegate, a former television writer and producer and now a retired professor of media studies, confided to me, "These people are zealots. They're naive. Notice that there are no network people here. Things would be different if there were."

The last night of the convention I asked Gerbner how he thought this sometimes radical progressivism would play in the mainstream cultural arena, which is in general fairly moderate, even conservative. He replied that CEM should perhaps be seen not as radical or leftist, or even as liberal, but as "liberating." Americans have been responding to the rhetoric of family-values conservatives who, Gerbner says, really are on to something. The specific example Dan Quayle chose to use -- Murphy Brown's getting pregnant out of wedlock -- may have been unfortunate, but in Gerbner's opinion he made a good general point. "Fundamentalists have pre-empted the cultural issue," Gerbner says. "They're appealing to legitimate concerns of American families and organizations who resent dependence on media." This is precisely why CEM is so important: "The culture wars are heating up, and we need a liberating alternative to stop fundamentalists from expropriating the issue and taking it in a repressive direction."

CEM intends to fight for alternatives both to censorship and to the old-fashioned pieties of the cultural conservatives. But, I asked Gerbner, aren't we just talking about competing visions of cultural reality, of morality -- one on the left, one on the right? Each side wants to impose its vision on the country, and therefore naturally favors whatever cultural products advance it. Gerbner

replied, "We are not just providing a single alternative cosmology to, say, the religious right. We're advocating diversity." But "diversity" is weak tea, protest some of those who deplore today's violent television. Censorship is dangerous, Gerbner would be likely to reply. Conditioned by his dislike of fascism to distrust any kind of concentrated power (governmental, corporate, or otherwise), Gerbner cannot abide censorship, which can be both a means to and an end of such concentrations. Thus he can be very explicit about the sorts of programming we should and should not have -- up to a point. *We should* have shows that depict minorities and women more favorably; we *should* have fewer mindlessly violent shows; but we *should not* use censorship to attain the programming we want.

The Cultural Environment Movement's basic mission, in other words, is to see that more stories by more different kinds of people are broadcast. Stories by people with something to tell, as Gerbner likes to say, rather than stories by people with something to sell. Think of a cafeteria, he says. When you enter a cafeteria, you feel that you have a right to choose what you will consume. But although some would argue that the choices in the cultural cafeteria are better now than they were for a parochial customer of the past, the choices remain limited: you have to choose from what's there. As a citizen, Gerbner believes, you have a responsibility to ask, What are the possibilities? How do we make this into a much richer and more nourishing and more diverse cafeteria? People don't realize that they have a say in what gets served here. CEM's mission is to make them aware of this fact, so that cultural choices get pushed into the political realm, where they belong.

"The Commons Is Needed"

OF course, one problem with this mission is that when culture is subsumed under a political rubric, debates about artistic values become debates about political values. The notion of aesthetic taste gets pushed aside. Taste, to be sure, can be a dangerous concept, a smokescreen to obscure political designs; Keyan Tomaselli, a combative South African media theorist who spoke at the CEM convention, points out that "good taste" can be its own form of censorship. For years in South Africa it was considered in "poor taste" to bring up certain aspects of race relations in middle-class white society; standards of "decency" ensured that art depicting these

issues would be rare and marginalized. Clearly, "decency" and "poor taste" were bourgeois prettifications conjured to dress up (and thereby protect) outright racist attitudes. Nevertheless, art in the Western tradition is generally founded in some sense on taste, maybe even on elitist taste. When CEM tries to make political values interchangeable with cultural ones, it risks junking the critical standards we do have, many of which can be and are used as arguments against the quality of Hollywood's standard violent schlock.

And then there are those, conservatives in particular, who will argue that what Gerbner is advocating when he speaks of diversity is really "identity politics," or quotas applied to culture. The implications of total diversity, these people will say, will be total fragmentation. True, in the ideal CEM imagining, shows would represent minorities more accurately and in truer proportions relative to the overall population. But taken to its logical extremes, that might mean accepting Pat Buchanan's *No Way José* show (exploring the lives and views of xenophobic white male economic protectionists) and the *Ralph Reed Family Values Show* (with nary a homosexual or nonbeliever in sight), not to mention *Madonna's S&M Hour* (for those who find their taste in sexuality inadequately represented by current programming). The pursuit of diversity, if overzealous, leads to proliferating factions and subgroups. The result is tribalization, as each group retreats to its own set of stories.

A nation, almost by definition, must have some stories its citizens hold in common. From the 1950s to the 1970s the three television networks provided considerable common cultural ground for the United States. Everybody watched the same programs and televised events and was in some sense linked by this shared experience. But in the 1970s, with the spread of niche marketing and cable television, channels proliferated. The audience fragmented. America lost its common hearth.

"To recognize diversity," Todd Gitlin wrote in *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked by Culture Wars* (1996), "more than diversity is needed. The commons is needed." The danger inherent in CEM's using cultural diversity as a political tactic is that the idea of the commons gets lost. Of course, without this tactic we're in danger of being stuck with a limited set of master narratives favored either by conservative absolutists or by corporate conglomerates whose first concern is profit, not

public interest, and for whom the universalist principle means appealing not to a common humanity but to the lowest common denominator. The trick for CEM will be to navigate between the Scylla of standardized, noninclusive, corporate-conglomerate-produced, market-strategy-conforming formulas that at least provide much of the nation with common cultural capital and the Charybdis of more-inclusive, more-diverse, less-formulaic, community-produced stories and programming that isolate each subgroup behind its respective cultural bulkhead. Gerbner believes that the Cultural Environment Movement can develop a mosaic that will to some extent incorporate ideological differences while representing the cultural claims of a larger cross-section of society than existing mainstream culture represents. In fact, he says, CEM can be the forum for all those who want to regain some say in what culture gets produced, in what they and their children consume.

At the convention's invocation, a slightly weird, touchy-feely affair with Jewish, Muslim, Christian, and Navajo prayers and progressive exhortations, Gerbner said his standard piece about returning cultural decision-making from the invisible Ministry of Culture to the people. To me, the most interesting words he spoke were these: "Our task now is to assemble a coalition like the anti-fascist coalition of the 1940s, with the partisan brigades."

Fighting Fascism

FASCISM is the specter that looms, tenebrous, over all of Gerbner's life and work. There are at least two ways to interpret the shadow it casts. The first is to grant his warnings about creeping fascism all the more authority for his having lived under fascism, and for his having risked his life to fight it during the Second World War. The second is to discount everything he says on the subject because his significant early experiences under fascism have unduly colored his world view: since the war he has seen everything in terms of it.

My initial instinct was to incline toward the second interpretation. In my early conversations with Gerbner, I sometimes had to stifle the urge to say, Lighten up. My own cultural experience -- watching violent cartoons when I was little, and violent action movies when older -- has yet to produce any obvious violent or fascist impulses. And I am by no means alone in believing that, disproportionate quantities notwithstanding, violence in culture generally

reflects the violence that is already present in real life. Family-court prosecutors scoff at the notion that television causes violent children; bad living conditions or bad genes do. Art since ancient times has depicted violence, and even tried to use it as catharsis. (Though Greek plays, Gerbner points out, never showed violence onstage; it was almost always reported by a messenger.) Moreover, although the studies that find the most-dramatic correlations between television and violence get the most publicity, there are other respectable studies whose conclusions are more restrained. "Television in the Lives of Our Children," for instance, one of the first major undertakings in the field, was published in 1961 after people became concerned about violent new shows like *The Rifleman* and *The Untouchables*. Researchers examined ten North American communities from 1958 to 1960, scrutinizing in great detail many aspects of television's effects. Their conclusion was a model of common sense.

For *some* children, under *some* conditions, *some* television is harmful. For *other* children, under the same conditions, or for the same children under *other* conditions, it may be beneficial. For *most* children, under *most* conditions, most television is probably neither harmful nor particularly beneficial.

Beyond this, CEM's criticisms of "the market" will not be popular. If the flip side of freedom, innovation, comparative material prosperity, and global leadership is some crass commercialism, philistinism, and formulaic television shows, wouldn't most people say, So be it? It is easy to imagine the bafflement of free-market conservatives -- and of the viewing public in general -- at the phenomenon of CEM: What's wrong with television? What's fascist about *I Dream of Jeannie*? What's bothering the leftist malcontents this time?

But CEM has at least as many relatives on the right as on the left. In fact, one of CEM's closest older cousins grew out of the Moral Majority. In the 1980s Jerry Falwell's Coalition for Better Television complained, as CEM does today, that the industry's commerce-at-all-costs ethos adversely affected programming. In advocating television that strictly reflected the cultural values of the Moral Majority, CFBT was more a predecessor of Dan Quayle than of CEM. But today people of all political persuasions are insecure. They worry about their safety and their future, and about the safety and the future of their children.

This insecurity is aggravated, if not actually caused, by the cultural environment. Conservatives have recognized the insecurity and speak to it. Gerbner's view is that conservatives exploit it, and use it to push the country in a repressive direction. If this is true, then it may be that CEM does have a role to play as a guardian against fascism. Only it is less television per se that CEM is guarding against than the tendency of fundamentalists to favor absolutist measures in both the political and the cultural realm.

The Hollywood version of Gerbner's life would probably be a great movie. It tells a heroic story. And I don't think it would do most people any harm to watch it. But I do understand why Gerbner might say that the movie would contribute in a subtle way to neofascist impulses. In its simplicity, its glorification of violence as a means of resolving conflict, and its glossing lightly over the suffering and tragedy of violence, the movie would add to an aggregate that fosters the Mean World Syndrome and greater acceptance of martial measures. Maybe Gerbner could afford to lighten up a little anyway. But I can see why he might find the independent film version of his life (its less straightforwardly heroic portrayal of him notwithstanding) superior to the Hollywood version in a way that is more than just aesthetic.

Television, in Gerbner's view, is by no means inherently bad. It does much that is good. For many people who would otherwise be just plain bored, television represents an enrichment of cultural horizons. It has gone a long way toward diminishing isolation and parochialism and has given us cultural capital to hold in common. No modern state can govern without television; it is the social cement that religion once was, holding disparate groups and subgroups together. But, Gerbner firmly believes, so potent is television's power to inform and control, so strong is its power to teach us who gets away with what against whom, that a democratic people that cedes control of television to a nonelected few will not remain a democratic people for long. The more one contemplates the pervasiveness of stereotypical patterns in television, the more one perceives the inaccurate picture of reality it cultivates in viewers -- and the more one inclines toward a charitable understanding of Gerbner's fears about fascism.

Illustrations by Warren Linn

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