
George Gerbner

Industrial Folklore

George Gerbner's (Tele)Vision

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When George Gerbner passed away in December at the age of 86, most Americans had never heard of him. Most still haven't, which is unfortunate, because Gerbner was one of the most perspicacious students of the social and political effects of a device found in more than 98 percent of American households: the television. The Associated Press obituary summed up the common wisdom, that Gerbner was a "pioneer researcher into the influence of television violence on viewers' perception of the world." Yet even this encomium does not get to the heart of his method or main insight, something that most of the elected officials who encouraged the funding of his work also failed to grasp. It even took a while for his academic colleagues to understand what George Gerbner was really saying.

As I learned as one of his advisees and, later, as a colleague, Gerbner was really asking us to see what happens when powerful industries tell the equivalent of society's folk tales. To understand what that means requires a more than superficial knowledge of culture and socialization, literature and metaphor. That knowledge takes one beyond the superficial yet seemingly timeless question of whether anti-social behavior depicted on television is mimicked in reality. That takes us to a far deeper set of political and philosophical issues that speak to media's contemporary relation to the academy, government and public. It's a topic that few in the public or private sector have wanted to address. Gerbner's work, properly grasped, adds urgency to issues of ethics and public oversight of media corporations, issues that have until now have received mostly lip service from corporate executives and elected officials alike.

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Ken Curtis and James Arness on the CBS series *Gunsmoke*, 1960s

When Gerbner started his television violence research in the late 1960s, it drew attention primarily because of roiling concerns such as political assassinations, civil rights, riots and mass demonstrations against the Vietnam War. Government officials came under enormous pressure to understand the causes of such incidents and learn how to mitigate or stop them. One interpretation—of the riots, at least—held that they were uprisings against inequalities that African Americans and others believed were still hard-wired into American society despite landmark legal changes. Another interpretation—one that encompassed the assassinations and the riots, and so seemed more broadly explanatory—maintained that it was television's fault. Some concluded that television had contributed to rapidly rising expectations by showing ordinary people the opulent lifestyles and whiz-bang space age appliances enjoyed by the rich people. Not finding this luxury and these gadgets within realistic reach, and filled with anger brought on by a particular incident such as the King assassination, mobs broke into stores to acquire what they saw on TV. Others argued more broadly that television's violent programming encouraged people to see mayhem as a way to offload their frustrations.

Blaming violence on the media was nothing new, of course. Radio, film and dime novels before them had all been similarly accused. In the early 1960s primetime series with violence at their core, like *The Rifleman*, *Have Gun Will Travel* or *The Untouchables*, prompted Congress to hold hearings in which several representatives chastised TV executives. It was this environment in 1961 that led Newton Minow, the Kennedy-appointed chair of the Federal Communications Commission, to famously call television "a vast wasteland." Although the networks apologized and soon conjured up several non-violent dramas (including hospital shows, where the fight over life and death was presumably more pro-social), critics argued that television was still filled with a gore that encouraged society to bleed in real life. As part of its attempt to understand the situation, a National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, formed at the request of President Johnson in 1968 and chaired by Milton Eisenhower, wanted a systematic appraisal of the amount of violence on TV. Enter George Gerbner.

In some ways, Gerbner was a strange person to become an auditor of television violence. Of half-Jewish descent, he had grown up in Budapest as a recognized poet and lover of folklore. He had intended to study folklore at

the University of Budapest but was forced to flee fascist Hungary in 1939. With the help of his half-brother, filmmaker Laszlo Benedek, he made it to the United States, and before long graduated from the University of California at Berkeley with a journalism degree. He then joined the Office of Strategic Services in 1942 and was deposited in Hungary behind enemy lines to ferret out fascist leaders and, eventually, bring them to trial.

After the war Gerbner worked briefly as a journalist, but he decided that there was more intellectual autonomy in university teaching and research. He earned a Ph.D. in education from the University of Southern California and, after a short stint at a junior college, he was hired in 1956 as a professor and researcher at the Institute for Communications Research at the University of Illinois. In 1964, he became dean of the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication, where he remained until 1989.

Each line of this biographical sketch could be expanded to yield insights on the man and his work, but those most relevant to his scholarly trajectory are the ones that took him from folklore and fascism to Southern California and Illinois. Based on his folklore studies, he understood that telling stories is fundamental to every society. Folklorists emphasize that tales of all sorts serve up norms, reinforce values and moral definitions, and tell people how to frame the world. To the immigrant Gerbner, who combined the idealistic soul of a Hungarian poet with the breadwinning practicality of an American journalist, the similarities and differences in storytelling between traditional and modern communication stood out starkly. The key difference lay in folklore's "handicraft" nature. Created and diffused organically through society, folklore is a product of "the people." Modern media tales, by contrast, are industrial products in which the concerns of advertisers and other "patrons" take precedence over all else.

On the surface, this perspective on media and influence was not much different from that of many Marxist-inflected academics who commented on the forces driving the modern world. Certainly, a number of the top-notch communication faculty with whom Gerbner worked at the Institute in Illinois—especially Dallas Smythe, Herbert Schiller and Thomas Guback—were fundamentally sympathetic to his views. But there was an important difference. Smythe, Schiller and Guback sought a critical political economy of communication. They believed they could best understand the American media by focusing on how the capitalist system shaped them. Schiller argued, for example, that coordinated activities by American communication companies and the U.S. government in the post-World War II era had established an "American Empire" knit together less by military power than by a media hegemony. Guback similarly borrowed from political economy to explain the domestic and international flow of certain types of films.

Gerbner didn't reject these positions, but, more than his colleagues, he focused on the actual materials that the industrial apparatus created. His training in folklore and its relationship to anthropology undoubtedly influenced his approach to those materials. More nuanced than Marxist political economy, Gerbner's ideas about media content resonated with those of anthropologists such as Hortense Powdermaker of New York's Queens College, whose 1947 book *Hollywood: The Dream Factory* seems to have influenced him. "The dreams of sleep", he later wrote, "are individual and private in any society. But the popular daydreams of our industrial culture are privately mass produced for a public market of shared desires."

Gerbner believed it was crucial to understand the social impact of these mass-produced daydreams because they likely influenced the hierarchy of values as they developed in our minds, particularly in the minds of young people. The key was not to dwell on the positive or negative aspects of individual television shows, movies or songs. Instead, Gerbner insisted, because popular culture is mass-produced, it should be analyzed as a system of industrially-patterned, rather than idiosyncratic or artistic, messages. With the "message system" as a central concept, communication research should pursue three fundamental goals: Explore the forces that shape the pattern of messages; examine the overall nature of those message patterns; and understand the social roles or functions that those patterns play in society.

Gerbner called this approach the "three-legged stool." He believed that an integrated exploration of the process of creation, content and consequences of culture would lead to useful critical understanding of the environment of symbols that surrounds us. It would, he wrote, "sharpen and deepen our understanding of the cultural sources of our consciousness and actions." This awareness was critical to modern society, he wrote in 1959. "Know thy communications to know thyself", he posited in a modern Socrates as saying, adding that "the unexamined culture is not worth living."

At the turn of the 1960s Gerbner had already begun to promote his approach through a wide gamut of media studies. By the time he became dean at Annenberg in 1964, his research included such diverse topics as a content analysis of ideological perspectives in U.S. and foreign newspapers, the portrayal of mental illness in motion pictures and television programs, the nature and social meaning of magazine covers, and the presentation of teachers across different forms of popular culture. Gerbner saw the consistent themes suggested by his three-legged stool running through all of them. Through content analyses he showed that media themes and portrayals were sharply patterned and quite repetitive. From his analyses of media industries, he argued that the content patterns are not objective reproductions of reality. Nor, he said, do media patterns rise from any social desiderata. Rather, the mass media's "system of messages" results from media firms' need to satisfy advertisers and politicians who benefit from showing people certain views of reality and not others.

This theme, the profound contradictions between America's avowed social aims and the American media's actual messages, was an abiding one. Gerbner stuck to it until the day he died, adjusting his aim in accordance with changes in the patterns of the data he relentlessly collected. The patterned messages that serve the goals of large symbol-making industries, he argued, are generally not those that would cultivate an educated and egalitarian society. His research found, for example, that pressures on television producers led them to consistently (and inaccurately) depict insane people as violently dangerous in ways that would undermine medical leaders' call for more humane approaches to the mentally ill. More trenchantly, he showed that the industrially-created popular culture's portrayals of teachers as either impotent or dangerous were part of a pervasive and enduring negative image of education. This "hidden curriculum", he argued, created an illusion of caring about education while actually serving private enterprise's interests in undermining schools' "political capital and popular aspirations for mobility, equality and social reform."

Media executives easily parried the small political tempests that were whipped up by Gerbner's research on depictions of the mentally ill and of education, portions of which were funded by the U.S. Office of Education. It was when he turned his attention to television vio-

lence as dean at Annenberg that media executives really began to pay attention, and get very angry. Industry-hired experts amplified and publicized academic critics who questioned key research assumptions that guided Gerbner's definition of violence (especially his inclusion of cartoon mayhem in his count of violent incidents) as well as his interpretations of his audience research. In 1992, a few years after retiring from Penn, he recalled that "there have been a few instances of my political interest arousing the ire of more or less powerful academic individuals, even some benefactors, but they were not fatal." Gerbner added that because of his position "as a dean for a whole faculty and school, I had to be fairly prudent in expressing personal points of view." Therefore, he said, he focused on sticking narrowly to conclusions about television violence that were supported "by a great deal of evidence that [was] publicly and methodologically defensible." For the same reason, he refrained from distilling his beliefs about the functions of symbolic violence into a book.

The odd result is that for many years even many scholars didn't really understand Gerbner's *fundamental* concern about television violence. In the 1960s most thought that, like other researchers, Gerbner feared that children and adults would commit violent acts as a result of seeing them on television. That seems to have been the belief of government officials, such as Senator John Pastore, who supported giving Gerbner research funds. Anyone paying attention, however, would have noticed a different stress on the effects of violence, especially after Gerbner and his colleague Larry Gross developed what they called "cultivation theory." Comparing survey answers of individuals who watched lots of television with those who were light viewers, Gerbner and Gross consistently found that heavy viewers overestimated their chances of being victims of violence. Because heavy viewers were likely to see a great deal of violence in news and entertainment, Gerbner and Gross concluded that television was helping to reinforce and extend a view of the world as mean and dangerous.

In itself the conclusion was provocative, adding yet another reason for parents, advocates and government officials to complain to television executives about their programming. Yet if one reads some of the later Gerbner and Gross studies carefully, one will see a far more critical, even subversive, conclusion about the social functions of television violence, a conclusion that rarely made its way into public discussion, but that fit perfectly with Gerbner's understanding of the functions of mental illness and education in popular culture. At its core was his insistence that the most widespread and socially significant negative consequence of a person's exposure to mass media is not the instigation of anti-social or violent behavior; most people, he noted, know not to perform antisocial acts witnessed in media presentations. Much more important, Gerbner argued, is the reinforcement and extension by the media of discriminatory cultural norms that serve the interests of

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elites and media industries while undercutting the democratic values those industries and elites pretend to espouse.

Gerbner saw violence as a perfect embodiment of this dynamic. Violence, he insisted, is the most elemental form of symbolic control. In two decades of analyses of network television programming, Gerbner consistently found high levels of killings, injuries and threats between individuals. It didn't matter to him whether such actions were in news or dramas, live-action shows or cartoons. To him, the cultivation studies suggested that all television violence presented a message of mayhem that led heavy viewers to worry excessively about their world. Moreover "viewers who see members of their own group underrepresented but overvictimized seem to develop a greater sense of apprehension, mistrust and alienation, what we call the 'mean world syndrome'", he wrote in 1995.

Here Gerbner again saw the hands of private and government power working together to amass symbolic influence. Violence grabbed viewers for media firms and votes for politicians:

> Insecure, angry people may be prone to violence but are even more likely to be dependent on authority and susceptible to deceptively simple, strong hard-line postures. They may accept and even welcome repressive measures such as more jails, capital punishment, harsher sentences—measures that have never reduced crime but never fail to get votes—if that promises to relieve their anxieties.

The difficulty for Gerbner, and for all of us, is that he didn't know how to deal with the deeply undemocratic inclinations he found in America's late 20th-century industrial folklore. To call for political censorship, he realized, merely played into the hands of politicians who might welcome such repression and be tempted to extend it. After his retirement from Annenberg, Gerbner started a Cultural Environment Movement to encourage grassroots activities that would demand greater public participation in decisions about cultural investment and cultural policy. In a 1995 book chapter titled "Television Violence: The Power and the Peril", he wrote that "more freedom from violent and other inequitable and intimidating formulas, not more censorship, is the effective and acceptable way to increase diversity, reduce the dependence of program producers on the violence formula, and reduce television violence to its legitimate role and proportion."

It can't be said that the Cultural Environment Movement has taken off. Michael Morgan, the editor of Gerbner's major works, suggested the idea may well be a "pipe dream." Gerbner, a bit more optimistic, recalled Soviet dissidents who toasted "to the success of our hopeless endeavor." But Gerbner's concerns ought to be the concerns of all those involved with the media today. We are in the midst of a tumultuous period, when flashy new delivery systems, the clashes of corporate media titans, and questions of the government's role in determining winners and losers can often cause us to lose sight of the central aspect of media: the stories they tell and the impact those stories have on the way we see the world. Drawing on his experiences with folklore and fascism, Gerbner urged us to look beneath the surface of television tales to uncover the systems of power those stories might serve, and to discuss their social implications out in the open. How to do that ought to be part of the American political agenda for the 21st century.

Surfing Alone

I know that there are truly great television shows available now, and I concede that it is possible, with the help of TiVo, to watch lots of TV without ever having to waste time on crap. But does anybody lie on their deathbed wishing they had watched more television? How many couples drop their 18-year-old off at college for that first freshman semester and drive away reminiscing about all that great family time in front of the tube when she was growing up?

Now here is where I confess my computer addiction. I love blogs, Web sites, and e-mail. Julie rides me all the time about the time I spend at home on the computer. What can I say? She's right. I tell myself that being online is not like watching television, because it's not passive, it's active. I'm engaged in discussion and debate, which I find stimulating. That's not the point, Julie keeps saying. *You are spending time alone, communing with the computer and not with your family.* I have no defense. In this way, the computer is TV for intellectual snobs: a timewaster for eggheads who would never throw away an evening watching cable, but who tell themselves the evening was well spent jumping around blog comment boxes and conducting five debates simultaneously on e-mail.

—**Rod Dreher**, *Crunchy Cons* (2006)