

that away because of some misplaced claim of ideological puritanism simply throws away the best political, social, academic, and intellectual tool we have.

All in all, I think communication studies as a systematic critical exercise is becoming more centrally located than ever before. The key question we should ask is not what is respectable to do, what has been successful, what the leaders in the field have done, but simply, Is it right? Does it make any real difference? Would the world be any different if I didn't do it?

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### The Critical Contribution of George Gerbner

M I C H A E L M O R G A N

*For a dozen years, from a modestly staffed war room in Philadelphia, a quiet-spoken, self-possessed man from Hungary has been chronicling the collision of two colossi and explaining the impact of one on the other. The two colossi are the world of television and the world of reality.*

—*Philadelphia Bulletin Sunday Magazine*, February 24, 1980

*Hungarians Think the Darndest Things.*

—*Headline, New York Times Book Review*, January 24 1993

#### What Is "Critical"?

It is extremely appropriate for the work of George Gerbner to be featured in a volume devoted to critical thinkers in communication. There is a hint of irony in this, in that at some times and in some quarters his theories (and especially his methodological approaches) have been seen as the *antithesis* of a "critical" perspective. This (dare I say) criticism stems from a false assumption, endemic in the 1980s, that the use of empirical research methods was somehow incompatible with the adoption of a critical stance; this presumed dichotomy, happily, seems to be breaking down in current scholarship. What goes around comes around.

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*I appreciate the helpful comments made by Larry Gross and Nancy Rothschild on an earlier draft of this chapter.*

In order to assess anyone's critical contribution, it is first necessary, I suppose, to clarify precisely how one is using the adjective "critical." As Raymond Williams (1976) noted in reference to the related term, "criticism," however, it "has become a very difficult word" to define. To grasp the variety of senses in which the term is used, one has only to thumb through the Summer 1983 double issue of the *Journal of Communication* (edited by Gerbner and Marsha Siefert), devoted to the "Ferment in the Field" brought about by the ascendancy of "critical" theories. In recent years, the problem has grown even more complex; the range and diversity of scholarly enterprises that have adopted the term (from law to ethnography to cultural studies, all with different shades of meanings and implications) is such that the label, now almost *de rigueur*, risks losing its meaning altogether.

There is always a temptation to define "critical" by means of opposing it to something else, for example, "empirical," "administrative," or "liberal-pluralist apologetics." I will resist this temptation and instead will rely on the traditional (wimpy) strategy employed by at least one Supreme Court justice and numerous presidential commissions when confronted with the need to define "pornography": I know it when I see it. Indeed, it is difficult *not* to see the profoundly critical thrust that permeates George Gerbner's career.

In this chapter, I offer nothing as presumptuous as a full (or "objective") chronicle of his voluminous and varied work. Nor will I address the many specific professional activities and large-scale projects he spearheaded, such as the *International Encyclopedia of Communication* (1988), the numerous international conferences he organized at the Annenberg School, and his long tenure as editor of the *Journal of Communication*, despite the considerable impact all these endeavors have had on the field. I will only attempt to trace a few major highlights, those which I think have made and will make the most significant and enduring contributions to communication theory and research. In particular, because of my own biases and interests, I will emphasize Gerbner's ideas about *cultivation*, but I will also try to illuminate the critical threads that run throughout his writings.

### Mesh of European and American Traditions

In 1957, Robert Merton sketched out what he saw as differences between "European" and "American" approaches to social research, the sociology of knowledge, and mass communication. For example, whereas European scholars sought "knowledge," their American counterparts amassed "information." Europeans studied the ideology of social movements; Americans surveyed the opinions of voters. Europeans tackled Very Important Matters in empirically questionable ways, with little concern for "reliability"; Americans brought great empirical precision to bear on trivial issues, with much emphasis on reliability. Europeans, working as lone scholars (presumably in dingy garrets, by candle-

light), pondered incomprehensible theories about how ideas emerge; Americans, working in research teams (presumably in labs, wearing white coats), investigated simple models of how to change attitudes and affect behavior. The Europeans could conclude, "At least it's true"; the Americans could claim, "At least it's (statistically) significant." And so on.

These were generalized caricatures even in the 1950s, and although they are perhaps still recognizable today, the geographic distinctions are certainly less sharp than they may have been in the past. Because of historical happenstance, Gerbner was shaped by and trained in *both* traditions, and his work has always embraced both. (As *Newsweek* put it in 1982, his methodology "meshes scholarly observation with mundane legwork.") It encompasses, in some ways, the best of both worlds (which inevitably means it must suffer from some of the weaknesses and excesses of both as well). He understood the special *power* of empirical methods (why else would they be appropriated by powerful groups?), but he was usually able to avoid being *limited* by them.

Gerbner recognized that a general theory could be only partly confirmed by empirical tests derived from it and that, by extension, the failure of specific tests could not fully disconfirm the theory. This is another way of saying that he has never let data get in the way of what he believes, even when the data do not fit the theory. (I leave it to others to determine whether this counts as a virtue or a vice.)

Thus, a vital and lively synthesis of scholarly traditions underlies and informs Gerbner's contributions. This shows up in numerous ways. For example, Merton also claimed that the Europeans took the audience for granted and neglected any systematic analysis of it, whereas for the Americans the audience was uppermost. Also, Europeans were obsessed with broad patterns over the long run, whereas American research was often ahistorical. In all these and other dimensions, Gerbner's work has avoided either extreme. Instead of simply finding some comfortable compromise between them, it has dynamically combined them to forge new ground.

### Freedom: Organized Diversity

In 1956, Gerbner wrote, "The structure of freedom is *organized* diversity whether it pleases or not." That statement, I think, pretty much sums up the point of his work. (The emphasis is in the original, and we will consider what it stands for later.) It is possible to identify three major phases in which Gerbner has worked to develop the implications of that statement, in different ways.

First, in the 1950s and 1960s, he developed multidimensional theoretical models of the communication process, in mediated and unmediated forms, and at micro and macro levels. These models both led to and elaborated the concept expressed in that statement. Second, in the 1970s and 1980s, he conducted and

directed massive amounts of empirical research, under the aegis of a long-term research program known as the Cultural Indicators Project, focusing on television and devoted to documenting and analyzing the consequences of the absence of this "organized diversity." This work grew out of an earlier series of large-scale content analyses (of confession magazines, film heroes, and others) that were often international in scope, and from several cross-national studies of media institutions. Together, these studies bridged the first two phases. Third, in the 1990s, he has been struggling to mobilize a new social and political movement made up of public groups, unions, and professional and minority organizations and dedicated to the transformation of the cultural environment so that it might someday achieve that diversity and, by extension, become a liberating rather than a repressive force. (If that's not "critical," then what is?)

Gerbner (1990) has noted that "research rarely advances in a straight line," and the thumbnail sketch above may give the impression of a more linear scholarly itinerary than is in fact the case. Nevertheless, as we will see, there has been quite a bit of continuity in his work over the years, and some recurrent guiding themes. In retrospect, his work, for all its diversity, indeed seems to reflect some "natural" and coherent intellectual progressions.

Much of Gerbner's work has sparked controversy. This is fortunate; it would be far worse to be ignored. As he said in a recent interview (Closepet and Tsui 1992), "If nobody screams, you are not doing anything." There were, for example, heated debates in the 1970s with researchers from the television networks over the methods and findings of message system analyses (these debates were mostly, but not entirely, about televised violence). Yet it is safe to say that of all Gerbner's work so far, it is his ideas and the research findings about cultivation that have received the most attention—positive and negative—within and without the academic community.

How influential is Gerbner's Cultural Indicators paradigm? The current (1993) version of the full bibliography of "Publications Relating to the Cultural Indicators Project" runs more than twenty single-spaced pages. Bryant (1986) quipped that studies of cultivation seem "almost as ubiquitous as television itself." Bryant noted that a systematic study of more than 100 "Mass Media and Society" courses in U.S. colleges and universities showed that "cultivation was one of only three topics receiving detailed examination in more than half the courses." Moreover, he argued, "cultivation research is one of the few contributions by mass communication scholars to infiltrate" textbooks in such fields as social psychology and sociology "with some regularity." Clearly, his theories have been the object of considerable attention.

It is not simply the ideas themselves that account for the attention they have received. It is, at least in part, due to Gerbner's skill in "packaging" ideas, in framing them in memorable, and often alliterative, terms (e.g., "risk ratios," or the Three Bs: "blurring, blending, and bending").

The elegant simplicity and obviousness of the idea of cultivation accounts both for what has attracted its adherents and for what has antagonized its opponents. After years of intense theoretical and methodological development, testing, criticism, and refinement, however, it turns out that the cultivation process is in fact neither so simple nor so obvious. That realization has both guaranteed and fueled its continued prominence.

The issues involved in the debates over cultivation analysis have been discussed in overwhelming detail elsewhere and need not be repeated here. Nor will I describe the procedures, assumptions, and findings from the corpus of cultivation studies; that too exists elsewhere (see, e.g., Gerbner et al. 1986, 1994; Signorielli and Morgan 1990). The more important task here is to lay out the general framework of Gerbner's theory of cultivation and how it evolved. In some respects, the "roots" of cultivation have gotten lost in the barrage of charges and counter charges, in the ever widening spiral of conceptual and analytical refinements, and sometimes in hearty doses of theoretical (in Merton's terms, American?) statistical manipulations.

"Cultivation" as a concept did not emerge fully formed. Contrary to the way it is usually presented today (both by some of those doing cultivation analysis and by many of those writing about it), Gerbner's early theoretical arguments about cultivation were vaguer in their empirical implications but more complex and more ambitious in their theoretical scope. Over the years, researchers have, in some respects, increasingly and (probably) unwittingly simplified the notion of cultivation, stripping it of some of its subtler nuances while allowing its methodological and analytical aspects to become almost monstrously complicated and permuted.

The simplified and most commonly encountered version of cultivation says something to the effect that "watching a lot of television makes people afraid." This is the sort of description one might expect to find in the popular press, but all too often it appears in mass communication, sociology, and psychology textbooks as well as in scholarly articles. Indeed, results from cultivation analyses are often erroneously referred to as "cultivation effects," an unfortunately sloppy twist that tends to equate cultivation with the very assumptions, inadequacies, and problems it was designed to go beyond. By stepping back and looking at where the idea came from, it may be possible to reinfuse some of the richness of Gerbner's early ideas and theories into the current debates.

### Focus on Messages

Gerbner attempted to alter the nature of the conventional discourse about the social and cultural implications of mass communication. His first struggle was to develop an approach to mass communication that saw it in terms different from those of persuasion and propaganda research and to escape the scientism and

positivism of that research. (Later, he applied similar criticisms to experimental work on media violence.) He also argued for the need to dispense with traditional formal aesthetic categories along with conventional concerns about style, artistic quality, high culture vs. low culture, and selective judgments and interpretations. He tried to draw attention to the interplay of the *systems* of messages, in the aggregate, and of the institutional structures that produced them. In almost all of his writings over nearly forty years, he expressed fundamental disagreements with whatever dominant paradigms were currently in vogue. Any assumption, approach, or procedure that seemed widely accepted as the “normal way of doing things” was, by definition, suspect. (Again, if that’s not critical, then what is?)

As did many others at the time, Gerbner focused heavily on “messages,” but he imbued them with some special characteristics and functions. He acknowledged that messages were the “what” in Harold Lasswell’s famous formula, but as early as 1958, he dismissed that conceptualization as “too restrictive and too one-directional for a general theoretical communications model, or for a framework for critical research.” From the start, he sought to develop models of the communication process that distinguished it from other forms of social interaction, and he sought to develop approaches to communication research—cast, importantly, as a form of *basic cultural inquiry*—that were distinct from dominant concerns with prediction and control. He argued that this was, by definition, a critical turn. In doing so, he drew heavily in those days on Paul Lazarsfeld’s notions of critical vs. administrative research; in that context, his goal was to free the analysis of media content from the narrow limits of administrative research.

To Gerbner, any message is a socially and historically determined expression of concrete physical and social relationships. Messages imply propositions, assumptions, and points of view that are understandable only in terms of the social relationships and contexts in which they are produced. Yet they also reconstitute those relationships and contexts. They thus function recursively, sustaining and giving meaning to the structures and practices that produce them.

Communication to Gerbner is “interaction through messages,” a distinctly human (and humanizing) process that both creates and is driven by the symbolic environment that constitutes culture. The symbolic environment reveals social and institutional dynamics, and *because* it expresses social patterns, it also cultivates them. This, then, is what I think Gerbner originally meant by “cultivation”: the process within which interaction through messages shapes and sustains the terms on which the messages are premised.

The *production* of messages then takes on special significance, since the resulting social patterns imply cultural and political power—namely, the right to create the messages that cultivate collective consciousness. With *mass* communication we have the mass production of messages, the cultural manifestation of the industrial revolution. Given the social functions of messages, the mass production of messages and of the symbolic environment then represents a profound transformation in social relationships and power. He summed this up in 1963:

Message-systems which provide many of the raw materials of our consciousness (and of the terms of our perceptions) have become mass-produced, institutionalized commodities. Bigness, fewness, and costliness in cultural, as in any other, mass production brought centralization of control, standardization of product, streamlined efficiency of technique. These changes meant increasing penetration of influence into many spheres of life and across many previous boundaries of place, time, and social status. (Gerbner 1963:35).

Since messages reflect social relationships, mass-produced messages bear the assumptions of the organizations (although not necessarily of the individuals) that produce them. Early on, he identified as a problem the fact that the major message-producing organizations tended to be profit-oriented, commercial corporations: “Industrial and market conditions and the corporate positions of cultural enterprises . . . implicitly shape the assumptions, contexts, and points of view embedded in mass media products” (Gerbner 1959:269).

Thus, the transformation of message production by the process of industrialization is only part of the story. The more central (“critical”?) point is that message production became dominated by commercial interests. Gerbner quoted Van Den Haag’s (1957) observation, “Unless the requirements and effects of industrialization are fully grasped, popular culture does not become intelligible,” and then added: “Even more specifically, unless the requirements and effects of a specific system of industrial and market relationships (such as the corporate structure) are fully grasped, mass media content analysis remains superficial” (Gerbner 1958:90). This warning has been lost on all too many of those who have conducted content analyses of media output.

Even in the 1950s, of course, it did not take any unusual gifts of wisdom or superhuman observational skills to realize that the mass media were advertiser-supported, profit-seeking businesses. What Gerbner did was to point out some of the less obvious implications of this arrangement in some new ways and to keep hammering the point home for almost forty years.

### “We Are the Stories We Tell”

The key to Gerbner’s analysis was to place special emphasis on the cultural process of storytelling. He drew on L. Lowenthal’s (1957) notion that “man is born, strives, loves, suffers, and dies in any society, but it is the portrayal of *how* he reacts to these common experiences that matters since they almost invariably have a social nexus.” (Presumably, Lowenthal did not mean to imply that these processes did not apply to women, although females certainly figure less prominently in the stories of Western societies.) Some years later, he argued that “whatever else they do, stories confirm authority and distribute power in specific ways. Story-telling fits human reality to the social order” (Gerbner 1986).

Gerbner contends that the basic difference between human beings and other species is that we live in a world that is created by the stories we tell. (I am quoting

and paraphrasing rather liberally here.) All living organisms exchange energy with their environments. Many creatures process and exchange information, store impressions, and change their behavior as a result of learning. But only humans *communicate* by the manipulation of complex symbol systems.

Humans therefore uniquely live in a world experienced and conducted largely through many forms and modes of storytelling. Most of what we know, or think we know, we have never personally experienced; we “know” about things based on the stories we hear and the stories we tell. We are, he claims, the stories we tell.

Gerbner identifies three types of stories. There are stories about *how things work*, in which the invisible dynamics of human life are illuminated. These stories are called *fiction*, and they build a fantasy we call reality. There are also stories about *how things are*; today, we mostly call them *news*, and they tend to confirm the visions, rules, and goals of a particular society. And there are stories of value and choice, of *what to do*. These have been called sermons, or instruction, or law; today they are called *commercials*. Together, all three kinds of stories, organically related, constitute culture; they are expressed and enacted through mythology, religion, legends, education, art, science, laws, fairy tales, and politics—and all of these, increasingly, are packaged and disseminated by television.

Gerbner is especially fond of quoting Andre Fletcher of Saltoun (1655–1716), who wrote in a letter to the Marquise of Montrose: “If a man were permitted to make all the ballads, he need not care who should make the laws of a nation.” Such a romantic notion is not easily testable by empirical methods, but that makes it no less compelling. Storytelling occupies a crucial role in human existence, and it is being increasingly monopolized by a small and shrinking group of global conglomerates whose attention does not extend beyond the bottom line and quarterly reports to stockholders. Therefore, the world we are inhabiting and (re)creating is one designed according to the specifications of marketing strategies.

### A Multidimensional Communication Model

The impacts on those who consume messages and stories are not linear, mechanical, or hypodermic. Because this is a dialectical process (Gerbner 1958), the “effects” of messages are relatively *indirect*. Uncovering aggregate and implicit patterns in mass-produced messages “will not necessarily tell us what people think or do. But they will tell us what most people think or do something *about* and in *common*” (Gerbner 1970). This argument has some affinity to the notion of agenda setting, but it is cast on a deeper and more fundamental level. It is not so much the specific, day-to-day agenda of public issue salience that culture (and cultural media) sets as it is the more hidden and pervasive boundary conditions for social discourse, wherein the cultural ground rules for what exists, what is important, what is right, and so on, are repeated (and ritualistically consumed) so often that they are invisible.

In its earliest forms, then, “cultivation” had little to do with percentage differences between heavy and light viewers in giving “TV answers.” Instead, it sought to describe the process by which mass communication creates publics and defines the perspectives and assumptions that are most broadly shared among those publics. In “Toward ‘Cultural Indicators,’” Gerbner wrote:

A message (or message system) cultivates consciousness of the terms required for its meaningful perception. Whether I accept its “meaning” or not, like it or not, or agree or disagree, is another problem. First I must attend to it and grasp what it is about. Just how that occurs, how items of information are integrated into given frameworks of cognition, is also another problem. My interest here centers on the fact that any attention and understanding cultivates the terms upon which it is achieved. And to the considerable extent to which these terms are common to large groups, the cultivation of shared terms provides the basis for public interaction. (1969:139)

Since the symbolic environment gives direction and meaning to human thought and action, cultivation is then the (continuous) outcome of interaction within the symbolic environment, assuring shared terms of discourse and behavior. The cultivation of “shared terms” and “collective consciousness,” however, is not to be mistaken for *consensus*: “On the contrary, the public recognition of sub-cultural, class, generational, and ideological differences and even conflicts among scattered groups of people requires some common awareness and cultivation of the issues, styles, and points of divergence that make public contention and contest possible” (Gerbner 1969:138).

Moreover, cultivation is not in itself the punch line. Again, the point is not so much that it occurs at all (it is, after all, the historic and universal function of all sociocultural institutions and the stories they tell) but that the cultivation of collective consciousness is now institutionalized and corporately managed to an unprecedented degree. As mass communication creates publics, it can also dissolve (or blur and blend?) them. The *critical* point is that the “dissolution of publics into markets for mass media conceived and conducted in the increasingly demanding framework of commodity merchandising is the cultural (and political) specter of our age” (Gerbner 1958). Or, as he put it elsewhere: “The rise of cultural mass production, creating audiences, subjecting tastes, views, and desires to the laws of the market, and inherently tending toward the standardized and the safe rather than the diversified or critical, creates new problems in the theory and practice of self-government” (Gerbner 1959).

A few decades later, the analysis of television’s contributions to political orientations (Gerbner, et al. 1982, 1984) only made that statement stronger. These problems, and the challenges to democracy they pose, may not be as “new” as they were in the 1950s, but we do not seem to be any closer to solving them.

In sum, Gerbner’s early theories grew from his studies of folklore and literature at the University of Budapest and his studies of psychology and journalism at the University of California. Coupled with influences and arguments drawn from the

works of T. W. Adorno, Franklin Fearing, Paul Lazarsfeld, Lowenthal, and others, this provided a unique mix and produced novel and provocative syntheses of these perspectives, culminating in an ambitious and multidimensional model of communication. The model itself (Gerbner 1956) did not really catch on, but its corollary notion of cultivation certainly did, especially as it evolved in the 1970s.

### “Three-Legged Stool”

The mid-1970s brought about empirical testing of cultivation and some shifts in the original meanings discussed above—at least in terms of emphasis and focus. Earlier, Gerbner had discussed his “institutional approach” to mass communication as requiring the study of relationships between social structures, message systems, corporate forms and functions, collective image formation, and public policy. When it all came together under the cultural indicators umbrella, it became a three-pronged approach consisting of institutional process analysis, message system analysis, and cultivation analysis. “Cultivation” had thus become a form and technique of operationalizable, empirical analysis.

As it developed, cultivation analysis, put most simply, attempts to determine the contribution that differential amounts of television viewing make to people’s conceptions of social reality. The main change from its earlier conceptualization was the incorporation of the empirical assessment of statistical differences in the beliefs, assumptions, and attitudes of light, medium, and heavy viewers. It is not clear from the early writings exactly how this particular strategy developed; compared to institutional and message system analysis, the operational and analytical terms and procedures of cultivation *analysis* were relatively unspecified, and any number of empirical approaches might have emerged. Yet, through Gerbner’s collaboration with Larry Gross (Gerbner and Gross 1976), with his work on images of mental illness providing an interim conceptual model, that strategy became synonymous with cultivation analysis.

The trick was to investigate television’s contributions to viewers’ conceptions without directly asking people about television. Instead of asking people what they thought about television, people were simply asked about what they *thought*. Then, the question of whether or not amount of television viewing made a difference in conceptions could be addressed. This was not a minor methodological departure.

The more elaborated, data-based concept of cultivation was born in a time when over-the-air network broadcasting ruled people’s media behavior essentially unchallenged. The term “broadcasting” originally meant to sow seeds at random. In that context, “cultivation” was the perfect metaphor, connoting “culture,” which itself has deep etymological implications concerning the practices by which the basic human need for food can be nourished and sustained by means of livestock and agriculture (Williams 1976).

In one sense, and despite its aptness for describing the primary functions of culture, “cultivation” is an uncharacteristically land-based metaphor for Gerbner.

He has often been drawn to *water*-based analogies to describe the “sea-change” of television and its role in redirecting the “flows” and “currents” of cultural “tides” (not to mention the notion of the “mainstream”). Interestingly, in a recent interview (Closepet and Tsui 1992), Gerbner claimed to be unaware of his watery proclivities.

In any case, based on Gerbner’s arguments about the cohesiveness of television content, cultivation analysis deals with overall, cumulative exposure to the total world of television. An individual story or program is simply “a drop in the ocean.” This emphasis contrasted sharply to most previous research (and public debate), which tended to focus on individual programs, episodes, series, or genres, usually in terms of their short-term “effects” on viewers’ attitudes and behavior. Such questions are not “wrong,” and such effects are not unimportant; but they do not take into account what makes mass communication in general and television in particular different from earlier cultural media.

As Gerbner (1970) put it, “Most ‘effects’ research stemmed from theoretical perspectives that did not consider relevance to the mass-cultural process a principal criterion.” When “effects” are defined as immediate “change” among individuals, we ignore the unique functions and distinctive features of contemporary mass communication—which means massive, long-term consumption of centrally produced, mass-distributed, repetitive stories among large and heterogeneous publics who never meet face to face and have little in common except the messages they share.

This issue—so central in all of Gerbner’s work and at the forefront of many cultivation debates—continues to be important today, perhaps even more so given the spread of VCRs, the impending prospect of 500-channel cable systems, and other new technologies that on the surface appear to offer more “choice” and “diversity.” The original premise was that since similarities among different content “types” are more important than their differences, what counts most is overall exposure to and immersion in the world of television. Indeed, it is this global, aggregate, general focus that differentiates cultivation from mere “attitude change” studies. But that’s another story.

For now, however, it is worth noting that Gerbner (1966:96) defined the “effects” of communication as “the history and dynamics of continuities, as well as of change, in the reciprocal relationships between social structures, message systems, and image structures.” The term “reciprocal” is important here, and is another indication that simplistic S-R (sender–receiver) models of cause and effect are insufficient and irrelevant to the idea of cultivation. A less unwieldy version of this formulation emerged in his “three-legged stool” notion of the relationships among (in effect) social patterns, media output, and public beliefs and ideologies; asking which of the three (i.e., media, culture, society) is the most important is like asking which leg holds up a three-legged stool. In this context, debates over the relationship between base and superstructure, or between materialistic and idealistic explanations for social and cultural phenomena, seem a bit quaint.

Communication is thus neither determinate nor symptomatic but rather an essential cultural nutrient. The critical task is to reveal the dynamics of power in communications and of communications in society, in order to transform them.

### Violence and Television

Going back a bit, the "middle ages" were the heyday of the Violence Profiles and the 1972 Surgeon General's report, when an overwhelming amount of research and public attention was being paid to the question of television and violence.

Gerbner saw the problem of television violence in a different way from most others. The message data showed more victims than victimizers: they revealed a clear social pecking order, with some groups (minorities, women, old people) consistently more likely to be victimized. He hypothesized that rather than imitating the acts of violence they see, most viewers might be more likely to identify with *victims*—that rather than disrupting the social order, television violence maintains the status quo by demonstrating and protecting the power of the powerful. By cultivating fear, apprehension, and mistrust, television might contribute to a climate in which demands for security outweigh any remnants of concern about repression and violation of civil liberties. By cultivating "traditional" conceptions of women, minorities, older people, occupations, and so on, television's messages contribute to the maintenance of specific power hierarchies. The connection with the early version of cultivation is that, in both cases, mass-produced messages are seen as fundamental mechanisms of social control.

Violence played a special role in these theoretical developments, both because it was (and is) such a salient public issue and because of the remarkable and consistent frequency with which it is portrayed on television. Stories from mythology to fairy tales to the Bible to Shakespeare have, of course, prominently featured violence. But the sheer amount of violence that television brings into every home on a daily basis is historically unprecedented.

Moreover, what we are awash in (another water metaphor) is entertaining, thrilling, happy violence, quite useful and efficient for solving conflicts, upholding the social order, and demonstrating the consequences of transgression. (I am again paraphrasing liberally.) It is useful for mobilizing massive support for police action at home and for military action abroad, especially when enough of the audience (excuse me; I mean "the public") can be convinced that some "vital interest" is threatened or that some villain (from a Third World dictator to the errant motorist) "needs" to be punished. As a cheap production ingredient, it is useful for the creation of "product" (i.e., television programs) that can be more easily sold to broadcasters in other countries; unlike humor, violence travels well. Most of all, it is useful for delivering to advertisers audiences who are in a "proper" mind set for commercial messages.

The specific, observable, independent contribution of television to conceptions of violence and other issues was assessed by analyses of data from many surveys, comparing responses of heavy and light viewers, other factors held constant.

Other techniques were explored, but cultivation analysis has almost entirely meant the analysis of survey data.

As the data piled up and the reports churned out, Gerbner and his colleagues may have made some overly sweeping claims. The underlying theoretical premises were not forgotten, but there were some gaps between those premises, the empirical data, and the interpretations offered of those data. At the least, they admitted to being (a bit) guilty of "rhetorical excess." In fact, only one or two reports suffered from this "excess," and even there a good deal of scientific caution was expressed (see Gerbner, et al. 1978). Also, the "causality" issue—whether television viewing leads to or is symptomatic of social conceptions—refused to go away, even though it was seen as trivial and irrelevant by Gerbner, and despite longitudinal cultivation data showing an independent influence of amount of viewing on attitudes over time. But by then attention to cultivation analysis was skyrocketing.

Some of the attention took the form of independent replications and confirmations and refinements, but some took the form of (occasionally vituperous) criticism. Some of the criticism was helpful, some mildly annoying, and some beside the point. Some critics lost sight of the theory and became submerged in statistical minutiae. Only later did scholars begin to pay serious attention to the critical and epistemological underpinnings of cultivation theory (e.g., Good 1984).

In a letter to the *Pennsylvania Gazette* (March 1982), TV screenwriters Richard Levinson and William Link bemoaned their feeling that "we and many of our colleagues find ourselves wishing, perhaps in vain, that Gerbner will eventually recognize that people of good will may disagree with him, not because they're misinformed but because they simply think he's wrong." In contrast to this sentiment, Gerbner has demonstrated a willingness (even, at times, an eagerness) to incorporate into his ideas the kernels of truth in the criticisms directed at those ideas, in order to strengthen and advance them. The continuing development and elaboration of cultivation theory is witness to this flexibility.

Still, I have been involved in these controversies for too long and too deeply to claim more than a modicum of objectivity. It seems to me that cultivation came out of the onslaught stronger and clearer than ever—if not quite as simple (For further discussion, see Gerbner, et al. forthcoming).

### Internationalization

Gerbner's original ideas and the intense work done in the late 1970s have branched off in dozens of directions. Researchers have examined a variety of conditions and variations of cultivation analysis—mainstreaming, resonance, the roles of cognitive processes, personal experience, selective viewing, perceived reality, new technologies, peer groups and the family, personal vs. society-level conceptions, and so on. Moreover, differences in cultivation patterns among different

groups, and in numerous substantive and topical areas, have been investigated (for examples of recent advances in cultivation, see Signorielli and Morgan 1990). Cultivation theory and analysis have continued to develop and progress as new findings and conclusions have further extended and refined the theory.

An especially important outgrowth of Gerbner's work has been the attempt to carry out research in other countries and cultures under the cultural indicators paradigm. The development of cross-cultural, comparative analyses of message systems and cultivation patterns is a major challenge in theoretical, methodological, and pragmatic terms. It provides the opportunity to investigate how relationships between television exposure and conceptions vary according to diverse policies, structures, message patterns, cultures, and audiences.

Again, cultivation means that the dominant modes of cultural production tend to generate messages and representations that nourish and sustain the ideologies, perspectives, and practices of the institutions and cultural contexts from which they arise. It does *not* simply mean that television viewing universally fosters fear, apprehension, sex-role stereotypes, or other related conceptions. If a particular message system (and culture) contains a great deal of (for example) violence, then the media system of that society should cultivate corresponding conceptions; if it does not, then it should not. The fact that U.S. television repetitively portrays (and cultivates) a particular set of images of violence, sex roles, occupations, aging, health, science, social power, minorities, and so on does not mean that other countries' television systems, which may or may not disseminate similar images, cultivate similar views. The fact that most other countries import so much of their programming further complicates the picture.

The early 1980s saw a flurry of attempts to replicate cultivation analysis in other countries, mostly in Western Europe (England, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Germany), Australia, and Israel. More recently, cultivation has been explored in cultural, political, and historical contexts that are more different from those of the United States, such as in Asia (Taiwan, South Korea, the Philippines, and China) and Latin America (Argentina and Brazil). Some of the studies have confirmed general findings from the United States and some have not. (For overviews of these and other studies, see Melischek, et al. 1984; Morgan 1990; Morgan and Shanahan 1992.) Analyses of comparative message and/or cultivation data from Hungary, Japan, Finland, Russia (before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union), and elsewhere are currently in progress.

Some of this international work stemmed from Gerbner's attempt to organize a global project, "Television Around the World," whose purpose was to conduct parallel analyses of television policies, content, and effects with researchers in twenty-six participating countries. A week's worth of programming was videotaped in December 1987 in all of those countries, and much effort was devoted to the collaborative development of research instruments that were comparable but tailored to the specifics of each country. Unfortunately, due to the failure to ob-

tain the funding needed to support such a massive project and to the scarcity of resources in many of the countries involved, the project to date has accomplished far less than originally hoped. Only a few countries were able to complete the analysis of the message data, and survey data for cultivation analysis were collected in even fewer.

The upheavals of old orders and the transition to what is nominally being promoted as "democracy" in many countries in Latin America, Africa, and the former Eastern bloc, place all this in a new context. In many countries, state-run media systems are being privatized and often quickly snatched up by multinational corporations. Veils of oppression are apparently being lifted, only to be replaced by new ones. Gerbner sees the current chaos in such places as Eastern Europe as leading to the resurgence of "neo-fascism, parochialism, and chauvinism." Many cheer the prospect of new freedoms, but Gerbner wants to "warn them of uncritical acceptance" of commercial control of the media, since "they're mortgaging the socialization of their children to global conglomerates" (Closepet and Tsui 1992).

In this context of widespread movement toward "democracy" (often conflated with "capitalism"), the critical implication of "organized diversity" in message production as a means of achieving cultural freedom has only become sharper. To Gerbner, the state is not a benevolent grantor of such diversity; it needs to become a force to promote it, to guarantee it, whereas, in contrast, it has usually worked, complicitly, to obstruct it. As the tyranny of the state is replaced by the tyranny of the market, it is falsely assumed that the *absence* of governmental controls and regulation somehow automatically means diversity and liberation. Although he does not see state involvement or benignly paternalistic regulations as a panacea to the problem of the media, his point is that government has been anything but an innocent bystander.

### Cultural Environment Movement

All this brings us, not to the end of the story, but to the next chapter, still largely unwritten. It is a new phase of activism on Gerbner's part, as a political organizer (and occasional op-ed pundit). This chapter is the Cultural Environment Movement (CEM), and it is Gerbner's attempt to take matters a step further, to go from the critique of existing cultural policy to its transformation. It represents a shift from a critique of the practices of cultural industries to an attack on the very system that regulates, deregulates, and protects them. It is about how to turn a research project into a political project.

The Cultural Environment Movement is based on Gerbner's assertion that existing media structures in the United States are beyond the reach of democratic policy making. Since advertising is a tax-deductible business expense, and since the costs of advertising are hidden in the price of the products we buy ("We pay when we wash, not when we watch"), we have taxation without representation. But what can we *do* about it? The question is, How can we work toward a freer,

fairer, and more liberating cultural environment? Gerbner has answered, in part: "We must reclaim the rights gained through centuries of struggle and conferred by law, the Constitution, and the basic principles of liberal education and self-government in a democracy. We must mobilize Americans to act as citizens as effectively as commercials mobilize us to act as consumers" (Gerbner 1991).

Through CEM, Gerbner seeks to build a broad-based coalition of media activists; of educational, health, environmental, legal, and other professional associations; of consumer groups and agencies; of women's groups; of religious and minority organizations; and of many other groups and individuals who are "committed to broadening U.S. and world cultures" (Gerbner 1991). CEM wants to have a broader range of voices and interests heard in cultural decisionmaking, to assist grassroots movements in the United States and elsewhere, to promote media literacy and critical viewing efforts, and to support media workers struggling within existing institutional constraints. Most of all, the goal is to put debate over cultural policy on the sociopolitical agenda.

This is a tall order, of course, and one that aims for far more than piecemeal reform. To date, Gerbner's CEM efforts have been directed more toward building a constituency and consolidating a coherent vision for the budding movement than toward specific legislative actions (although the recent passage of a bill, authored by Senator Paul Simon, which allows the broadcast and cable networks and Hollywood producers to develop industrywide standards on violence without fear of prosecution for violating anti-trust statutes, was significantly bolstered by Cultural Indicators' Violence Profiles).

One obvious problem is that "the public interest," historically and ostensibly the guiding principle in media regulation, in practice consists mainly of balancing competing *industry* interests. The "public" component of the interest equation is generally given short shrift by politicized administrative agencies (especially the FCC) and by those in Congress whose reelection campaigns are heavily financed by the various industries. Allowing other voices to be heard, much less making sure that they are heeded, will not be easy to accomplish.

An even more formidable task is to democratize the mechanisms and processes by which program production is funded. Production costs are astronomical; advertisers are more than willing to invest in these efforts, but the idea of federal support is political anathema. This of course serves as the perennial justification for the present system. The few alternatives available have their own problems; PBS's are well known, and the non-commercially supported cable channels (such as pay cable and pay-per-view) do not provide meaningfully alternative content. The problem of the lack of feasible alternatives to the current economic basis of program production is likely to be the major way to dismiss CEM's goals (by both governmental and media organizations), and CEM has not yet reached the stage where it has been able to propose specific, realistic, and workable alternatives that could help to develop the more democratic system it hopes to be about.

CEM may be but a pipe dream, as much "a drop in the ocean" as any individual program or episode, but Gerbner's optimism is not Pollyanna-ish and can give one second thoughts about writing off the movement. As he said in an interview, "To turn things around that almost everybody takes for granted is going to take a long time. And many people will consider it impossible. But then look around the world and see how many things that only five, ten years ago we considered impossible, are now reality. So I would say, if it's impossible, if it seems impossible, it means it's worth doing" (Gerbner 1992).

Gerbner follows this admonition by asking us to remember the slogan of Soviet dissidents of the 1960s and 1970s: offering a toast, they said, "And here is to the success of our hopeless endeavor." Indeed.

### A Summation

If there is one central argument in Gerbner's work, it is that the cultural process of storytelling, that most distinctly humanizing phenomenon, is being increasingly taken over by global commercial interests who have something to sell. The traditional functions of the family, the school, the church, and other cultural institutions are being shaped by transnational corporations—a private government run by people nobody knows and nobody elected. Through the nascent Cultural Environment Movement, he hopes to consolidate and strengthen the work of diverse community, professional, and advocacy groups to "take back" the cultural environment, to provide a means of expression for those whose voices and interests do not fit commercial and market needs; that is, to harness the media to promote rather than undermine democracy. "Technological developments in communications hold out the possibility of greatly enhancing culture-power on behalf of existing social patterns—or of their transformation" (Gerbner 1973). In the problem may lie the solution.

Again, "The structure of freedom is organized diversity whether it pleases or not." Whether one embraces or scorns his theories and research, and whether the Cultural Environment Movement succeeds or fails, George Gerbner has made significant, far-reaching, and critical contributions to the field of communication.

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