

trayal of teachers and schools in the mass media of the United States, Great Britain, France, West Germany, East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and the Soviet Union, 1960–64

Investigator, research project on the portrayal of mental illness in the mass media, under a grant from National Institute of Mental Health, 1959–61

### *Editing, Publishing*

Chair, Editorial Board, *International Encyclopedia of Communications*, Oxford University Press, 1983–88; Editor, *Journal of Communication*, 1973–87; Executive Editor, *Journal of Communication*, 1987–91; Coeditor, Oxford University Press “Communication and Society Books,” 1985–91; Coeditor, Longman Communication Books, 1981–90; Associate Editor for Communication Theory, *Journal of Communication*, 1966–68; Book Review Editor, *Audio-Visual Communication Review*, 1958–68

### *Awards and Honors*

Excellence in Media Award, International Television Association, 1992; Distinguished Visiting Professor, American University, Cairo, Egypt; Commencement speaker and recipient, honorary degree, Doctor of Humane Letters, Worcester State College, Worcester, Massachusetts, 1992; First Wayne Danielson Award for Distinguished Contributions to Communications Scholarship, University of Texas at Austin, November 1991; Honorary degree, Doctor of Humane Letters, Emerson College, Boston, 1989; “Broadcast Preceptor Award,” San Francisco State University, 1982; “Media Achievement Award of Excellence,” Philadelphia Bar Association, 1981; “Communicator of the Year” Award, B’nai B’rith Communications Lodge, 1981; Honorary degree, Doctor of Humane Letters, LaSalle College, Philadelphia, 1980; Fellow, International Communication Association, 1979; Fellow, American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1972

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## Interview with George Gerbner

CONDUCTED BY JOHN A. LENT  
GUARUJA, BRAZIL, AUGUST 19, 1992

George, tell me about your background, the days in Hungary, your education, your antifascist stands at various times, and your entrance into the American culture. At the same time, discuss the motivating factors that have guided you down a different path in scholarship—factors dealing with personal, institutional, and academic situations.

I was born in Budapest, Hungary, in 1919, during the last real Hungarian revolution, short-lived as it was. I grew up in the 1930s under the rise of fascism, which eventually reached and began to dominate Hungary and began to dominate and oppress much of my own life and thinking. I was educated in a very good gymnasium (high school) in Budapest and became very much involved in Hungarian literature and folklore. I spent probably the most rewarding months each year of my teens in various villages in Hungary, living and working with the peasants and trying to learn their culture, their language, their dialects, collecting folk songs, folk tales. So my first academic interest upon entering the university was folklore and literature. I was fortunate since I was always good at what I was interested in but not in other things, so my grades were far from good enough for entrance into the university, which was a highly selective procedure. But it so happened that my school sent me, on the basis of a schoolwide competition and then a districtwide competition, to a national literary competition. The representatives from each high school—the winners of high school competition—competed for the national prize in Hungarian literature. And it so happened that I won the first prize in Hungarian literature, which led to an amusing incident at the end of our baccalaureate, a week-long examination. The day before that final day of the bac-

calaureate, the results of this national competition came out and were published in the newspapers.

The principal of our school came to the classroom where the final session of the baccalaureate examination was held and looked at the records and lists of graduating students and looked at mine and said, "They have made a terrible mistake in not recognizing this Gerbner who's so good," and in the presence of everyone, including myself, corrected every one of my grades to an A. That assured my admission to the university. It's one of the series of accidents, if you could call them that, that in many ways provided turning points for my life.

Now my matriculation at the University of Budapest was short-lived. Toward the end of the first year, in the 1938-39 academic year, I was about to be drafted into the Hungarian army. Although I had no particular objections at that time about serving in the army, I had grave objections about serving in the Hungarian army. So, I left the country, and although I had no money, about five dollars, my parents bought a train ticket to Paris. I went to Paris (this was in the spring, I believe, May of 1939). I recall that just while I was on the train into Italy (I was going to Paris through Venice and Genoa, and then the Riviera, and then to Paris), the Italian army marched into Albania. (So we can fix the time by that particular event.)

I arrived in Paris without any money. There is no need now to recount interesting experiences of a penniless Hungarian arriving in Paris. But I did eventually meet some relatives of my parents who lent me the money for a passage to wherever I could go. Now by that time (I have to fill in a few minor details)—I had a half-brother, Laslo Benedek (we have the same mother, different fathers; his father, my mother's first husband, died; my mother remarried and then I was born). He was about fifteen or sixteen years older; he recently died. He was a film director, and by that time he had gone to Hollywood. So my ultimate objective was to come to the United States. It turned out that I could not get a visa to the United States; this was in 1939. The visa list for Hungarians under the American quota was filled for about twenty-five years and I was not about to wait twenty-five years for that visa. So I had to bribe a consulate official to give me a visa to Mexico, which I learned was not unusual; it was pretty much the common practice, and I got a passage on the French ship, *Flanders*, (a wonderful passenger liner) which was, incidentally, sunk in World War II. The only passage open at this time was a first-class passage. So I was traveling first class but had no money, which led to an embarrassment later on of not being able to tip the people who were kindly serving me. I arrived in Mexico on a tourist visa valid for six months.

My stay in Mexico was interesting, rather difficult, because again, I had no money. Within about two or three weeks, I became a guide, a tourist guide, even though I spoke very little Spanish. I was staying in a boarding house where mostly American tourists—particularly, for some reason, American schoolteachers—came in their cars. They knew that I didn't speak good English, so they assumed

that I spoke excellent Spanish, which I did not. I offered my services to be their guide in their cars and to take them to places that were "off the beaten path." That was very easy because I didn't know what the beaten path was. So almost everywhere we went—I picked out some places on the map—was off the beaten path. We drove into the main square of a small town or village and I said, "Now we'll stop right here while I go out and make arrangements." I had enough knowledge of Spanish to go to some fairly clean-cut, local native hotel and say here is a group of tourists and how much would it cost. The accommodations were extremely cheap. They were usually clean and dependable and secure, so I would go back to the car and say that everything was arranged. This way I got around Mexico, including Acapulco at a time when Acapulco had only one more or less modern hotel, and I basically had a wonderful time.

At the end of six months, my visa was up and by that time the war had broken out in Europe. I went to the American consulate and said, "I would like to go to Los Angeles where I have a half-brother." About six months before, I had applied for admission to UCLA as a foreign student and I was accepted, but I couldn't get there because I had no American visa. The consul said, "Well, I don't know exactly what to do with you. I'd like to help you, but you know there is an American law that says that if you arrive in an adjoining country to the United States, which could be either Mexico or Canada, you cannot enter even legally or in any way through the border." That is in order to avoid illegal entries, which is a joke, because thousands of people are making illegal entries every week and were then, but anyway, that was the law, and so he said, "My best advice is that you go to Havana which is separated by water. Go to the American consulate there and see what they can do for you." So again, begging and borrowing money for a passage, I went to Havana, went up to the American consulate, told them what the situation was, and the American consulate said, "I don't know exactly how to resolve your situation either, but it's not going to be on my conscience to send you back to Europe—the war is already on, and very clearly, you have no possibility of safely arriving in Hungary, so I'll give you permission to leave Cuba and to go to New Orleans on a ship that's going from Havana to New Orleans and see what they will do with you."

So I arrived in New Orleans. My half-brother had alerted some friends who lived in New Orleans to wait for me in the Port of New Orleans. When I arrived at the port, we were lined up to examine documents but in addition to documents to examine the amount of money that we had with us. I didn't have enough money, so I was taken down to the Customs House. They had a hearing and I was ordered deported. As the hearing was over, a kind soul at the end of the table said, "You know, you can appeal." Nobody formally informed me of any rights. This was a person who had the decency to inform me at least after the hearing was over. So I raised my hand and I said, "Yes, I wish to appeal." That was considered a great nuisance by everybody because they had to sit down again and consider the

appeal. Finally they said, "Okay, your appeal goes to Washington. It will take about two weeks. You have to stay here in New Orleans. Do you have any place to stay?" I said, "Yes, as far as I know there are people waiting. I hope they're still waiting for me outside."

I was discharged from this hearing to the custody of these friends, who happened to be the director of the Theatre Le Vieux Carré, a well-known community theater in New Orleans. So I was their house guest. They took me to their home, and there was another house guest staying at the same house, whom I met on my first day in the United States, and his name was Sinclair Lewis. So upon arrival I was a house guest along with Sinclair Lewis, most of whose books I had read in Hungarian, so that was a great experience.

After two weeks, the verdict came back that I could be admitted if I put up a bond of two hundred dollars. That's what this was all about; for only two hundred dollars, which was more in those days than it is today, they would have, without any pangs of conscience, deported me to a totally unknown destination. I cabled my brother, who borrowed two hundred dollars from friends and sent it to me.

I hitchhiked to Los Angeles, entered UCLA, but I was dissatisfied because, before I left Hungary, as I mentioned, I was interested in literature and writing, and the closest to that that I could get, my thought about that was journalism, and UCLA had no journalism, so soon thereafter, I transferred to Berkeley, and journalism.

A little-known fact of recent history is that in 1939 Hungary declared war on the United States, and that classified me as an enemy alien, which was no great problem, except that I had to report once a year. But what that meant was that I could not volunteer or be recruited into the American army.

I graduated in journalism from Berkeley. My stay at UCLA and to some extent even at Berkeley really consisted of trying to sort out my own experiences. The experience of living under fascism, of a certain amount of antifascist activity as much as a teenager can engage in, of knowing great people who sacrificed, struggled, who were jailed, who were martyred, many of whom were Communists, and of becoming very much interested in their lives, in their activities and their cause. My interest in joining the American army also stemmed from that.

After graduation, I got a job on the *San Francisco Chronicle*, where I was working in many capacities on the copy desk as a copy reader, headline writer, reporter, book reviewer, critic, and finally assistant editor, where I think I originated the first consumer column in the country, if not in the world. I was not an economist and not a financial expert, but I knew that during war conditions consumers required a great deal of knowledge about the regulations, the shortages, the quotas, and the various rationing, and I conceived of the idea of writing a column for the consumer about what the consumer needed to know.

Along about 1942, the American army needed men sufficiently to abolish the ban on foreigners, even enemy aliens, so at that point I was permitted to be in-

ducted into the army, which I was. There was one option available. I was determined that if and when I got into the army, I didn't want to do a desk job or whatever I would be doing as a civilian because, you know, I felt that I could contribute to the war effort and to the antifascist effort as a civilian just as well as long as I was writing or editing or doing newspaper work—for that I didn't need the army. So when the inducting sergeant said, "There isn't much choice, but there is only one thing, if anybody wants to join the paratroops, step forward." I almost automatically stepped forward, and he said, "Well, you turn to the left, everybody else turn to the right." I went to the left and I was told to take a train to Fort Benning, Georgia, for paratroop training. So I underwent paratroop training, was assigned to the 541st Parachute Infantry in Camp Mackall, North Carolina.

When I heard that the regiment was about to be sent to the Pacific, I said, "Uh, uh! This is not my destination." So I went to Washington and visited with the OSS (Office of Strategic Services), which was the intelligence arm of the American army, who interviewed me and nodded and said, "Well, goodbye, don't call us. If we need you, we'll call you." In less than two weeks the order came down to my regiment saying, "Private First Class Gerbner report to Washington" at a certain place, which I did, and I was recruited into the OSS in the Operational Group called OG. There were two major field arms of the OSS. One was called OG, Operational Groups; the other one was called SI, Secret Intelligence. I was assigned to an Operational Group, which was a group of about fifteen trained to do small missions—sabotage, blowing up roads, bridges, etc.—and we underwent some training and were sent to North Africa. I had an extended and very pleasant period in Algiers and further training but basically was waiting for a mission.

Soon thereafter came the invasion, the landing in Normandy and Marseilles and so on. At one time we were supposed to go there, but that didn't materialize and we were taken to Italy, where the war was still going on. In Italy, since things went so slowly, I requested a transfer from OG to SI, which was granted, and I was sent to Bari, from Naples to Bari on the other side of Italy, for further training, and on, I believe, January 15, 1945, I parachuted with two others into occupied territory. The two others included one Austrian who was native to the area where we were supposed to land and another American soldier of German extraction, and I was an American soldier of Hungarian extraction, speaking some German, but no other of the related (Slavic) languages.

So on about the 15th of January 1945, the three of us jumped by parachute in what originally was designated to be a target in southern Austria. It so happens that the crew flying us—it was their fortieth (last) mission, and we ran into some flak, some anti-aircraft fire, and I guess, I can't blame them—they decided we were back in the hold, they didn't need us, they just knew that there were three guys who were sitting back there waiting for the target and their communication with us was simply a "green light." When they pressed the button, we were sup-

posed to jump. Well, they pressed the button a little too soon, so they could turn back a little faster, and we landed in very strange territory—across the Drava River, actually in Slovenia, which was a surprise to us. We landed in very mountainous territory instead of a plateau, which was our original designated landing site. So we were separated in the air and never found the Austrian partner.

The other American and I found each other after some searching. We landed in seven feet of snow, in strange terrain. Soon after we found each other, only a few miles from us, all of a sudden the street lights went on, which was a big surprise because we didn't know we were that close to inhabited territory. In fact, we were not far out of Maribor, and at that point we knew that something was very wrong and that the Germans by now were probably after us. So we started climbing the mountain as rapidly as we could, living on our emergency rations that we had in our pockets for about three or four or five days in big snow, occasionally singling out certain farmhouses and going in and asking for food, claiming—this was our cover story—that we were American flyers who had to bail out and asking about the partisans. At first, nobody knew anything about the partisans, but the higher we got—and the language we spoke was German and most of those people in that area, since it used to be part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, did speak it, especially the older people—so as we got higher and higher, they seemed to know more and more about the partisans. One night, they said, "Well, just go to sleep here on the floor and we'll see what we can do." The next morning there was a partisan courier who took us to one of the brigades operating in that area. For the rest of the duration of our stay, we were with the partisans. Germans were retreating from Greece and trying to secure their communication lines against the partisans working in the area and trying to cut off their rail and road transportation. So we were under severe attack. A brigade that started out with maybe 350 or 400 men, at that point, when we joined them, was down to about 60 or 70 or 80. And that kind of struggle for survival lasted, in fact, until VE Day.

When VE Day came, we changed places with the Germans—we went on the roads, the Germans went up to the hills because they did not want to surrender to the partisans, who fought the Germans furiously.

We in the meantime found our way to Trieste, and then back to Foggia in Italy, our headquarters, where we had been reported missing because they hadn't heard from us (through partisan radio) for quite a few weeks. We were sent to a rest camp, a very nice camp in Italy, where, after two days, I was paged and told that rest was over, there was a large army of about 250,000 Hungarians who had fled from the Russians and camped on the Austrian countryside. No one knew who they were, so would I mind going up and finding out who they were and trying to dispose of these people, or at least report what should be done. So I was flown to Salzburg and given all the necessary provisions—a jeep and a jail, which was what I needed. With an American sergeant also of Hungarian extraction, we started to explore the countryside to find out what this was about. We found the Hungarian

prime minister, a pro-Nazi politician, his general staff, his high command, his cabinet, and about 250,000 men who were encamped under their command. So I had the privilege of arresting the prime minister under whom I left Hungary and his entire general staff and his high command and of taking them back to Budapest for war crimes trials. I followed some of these trials because soon thereafter I was assigned to the American military mission in Budapest. I was somewhat comforted by the impression that those were real trials; some of these people were acquitted, some of them were convicted, some of them were executed, including the prime minister.

During my stay at the American military mission in Budapest, another turning point in my life was meeting my wife. I used to go to the theater, which I liked very much, and one evening I was invited to a party under somewhat false pretenses. I was there to impersonate another American officer, also of Hungarian extraction, for whom this party had been arranged but who was unexpectedly transferred to Vienna and could not attend the party. But only the host knew him. Everybody else knew that there was an American officer coming but didn't know who it was, so they asked me to impersonate this friend of mine whose name was also George, so that's how I attended this party.

Upon arriving at the party I saw this beautiful young woman sitting on a couch and I sat down next to her and, what should I say, I've been sitting there next to her ever since. I said, "I've seen you somewhere before." She said, "Uh ha, I heard that before." And I said, "No, I really saw you on the stage in such and such a play," and I remembered the part, which at least gave me some credibility. At the end of the party, I invited her to join me to go to the American officer's club not too far from there, just for a drink, and maybe a dance, and she said, "Well, I'm not accustomed to coming with two other young men and leaving with somebody else." Thereupon, given no choice, I invited the whole party to come and we all went to the officer's club, and that's how all of this began.

After a few months at the American mission in Hungary, I too was transferred to Vienna to edit a newspaper for the American occupation forces in Austria.

Ilona and I got married and she joined me in Vienna, and after a few months of that, we returned to the United States (to Los Angeles), where I had been registered as a member of the Newspaper Guild waiting for a newspaper job to turn up. While I was waiting, I got a call from the agency where I was registered and they said, "Mr. Gerbner, we don't have the job you are waiting for, but there is something else that came up in which you may be interested, at least temporarily. There is a teaching job in journalism at John Muir"—which was at that time a junior college in Pasadena. "The journalism instructor left abruptly." This was on Thursday. "They need somebody to start on Monday. Would you mind doing that while you are waiting for what you really want?" "Well," I said, "I may as well do it." So I started teaching that Monday. I must say I've been teaching ever since because I discovered something that I had never really—this is another one of those

so-called accidents that provides a turning point for one's life—I discovered that indeed, that was what I really wanted. Although I liked journalism, I always felt like a hired hand, basically did what other people told me to do, and I found that as a teacher, and later on as a researcher, I found the style of life, the only style of life I know, in which you don't have to work for anybody else. Basically, you design your own program, and if you're lucky, you can conduct it with a minimum of interference and a certain amount of protection. The protection is never absolute. There is no such thing, but at least you have some claim to independence and freedom.

I started teaching, but I had no certification. In California at that time you could start on an emergency credential, provided that within two years you got the necessary credits and credential. So I started graduate work at the University of Southern California. I got my teaching credential, then I went on to the master's. I wrote the first master's thesis ever, I believe, on education and television. That was completed in 1950, before there was even a national television service.

Then, I entered a Ph.D. program in the only place where communication was taken seriously, and that was in the Audiovisual Department of the School of Education at USC under Professor James D. Finn. He was one of the pioneers in educational technology and in the audiovisual movement. I was fortunate enough to be his student and, later on, his friend, and wrote a dissertation on "Toward a General Theory of Communication." That was simply an attempt to summarize what was written and known about communication in the fields of history, philosophy, social psychology, sociology, and cybernetics. Out of the exploration and that dissertation came what is sometimes called the Gerbner Model of Communication, which has served me pretty well since. So, putting it all together, I came to the conclusion that communication is really where the action is—the political action, the social action, the cultural action.

I was not able to follow my literary interests and my literary career, which led me to publish a book of poetry in Hungary before I left, because literature and poetry are like music. If you don't do it every day, if you don't live in it, if you're not totally into it, you lose it. Being uprooted meant isolation from the language, from everyday practice in the language and its dialects, and its subtleties. I have never been able to recapture that in any language. So partly my circumstances and partly my own interests led me to become more a researcher, an analyst, and social critic of cultural production. This led me, after Pasadena, first to a part-time teaching position while I was a doctoral student at USC; then I was recruited to the University of Illinois by Dallas Smythe. I met Dallas while he was a visiting professor in the summer teaching in the Department of Cinema at USC.

I should come back, I think, to one significant episode. Even before I got my teaching job, while I was still looking for a job in Los Angeles, I became active in political life, as a volunteer worker and editor for a newspaper for the Independent Progressive party, the party that nominated Henry Wallace for president in 1948.

This was the beginning of the McCarthy years, and the California State Un-American Activities Committee came to the city of Pasadena, not so much to get at me—I was small fry—but to get at the superintendent, Willard Goslin, because he committed the unforgivable offense of redistricting the totally gerrymandered school districts of Pasadena in order to alleviate, if not abolish, racial segregation. That must have been a Communist plot, in their opinion, and the Un-American Activities Committee came down to get rid of Willard Goslin. They subpoenaed me because I was appointed to edit a school district newsletter for the Goslin administration. They had me on the stand for about forty-five minutes, asking what I was teaching, asking if it was true (it was) that I showed in my class the documentary film called *Races of Mankind*, based on anthropologist Ruth Benedict's work. They asked me if I was a member of a Communist party. I was not, and said so. Then they excused me without any further ado.

The law in California says, or said at that time, that if you are not notified by the end of the working day on the 15th of May that you have or not been reappointed, you are automatically reappointed. The 15th of May arrived, and four o'clock passed, four-thirty, four-forty-five passed, and I was not notified, so I thought I must have been reappointed. Five minutes before five o'clock, the phone rang from the Board of Education, and someone said, "Mr. Gerbner, we have to inform you that you are not reappointed for the next year." So I lost my job, which was very fortunate, because I got a much better job, but in the summertime—since we just had a child, and I needed a job—in the summertime, I became a research assistant at the Cinema Department at USC. That's how I met Dallas Smythe, who visited there that summer. And Dallas and his wife, Jenny, and the family became friends, and when I completed my dissertation, he proposed my appointment to the Institute of Communication Research, University of Illinois. That's how we arrived in Urbana, Illinois, where we spent eight years, from 1956 to 1964. During that time, I established some of the basic applications of my dissertation ideas and some other ideas about the analysis of the everyday cultural climate of our societies, in the United States, and eventually on a cross-cultural comparative basis.

One of the term papers that Jim Finn asked me to write while I was a graduate student in his class was, "What would you do if you were appointed the dean of a graduate school of communications? What kind of a program would you propose?" Well, in 1964 I was invited to become the dean of the Annenberg School of Communication. There was no faculty and there was no program to speak of. So the first task was to get at least two or three key people with whom jointly we could start building a new curriculum, which we did.

We defined the field of communications as a discipline that is focused on the process of human and social interaction through messages. This is a process that is on the periphery of every other social science discipline but at the center of none. We divided it into three parts: the concern over messages that ranges from

semiotics to content analysis; the concern over the relationships between communicating parties, mostly sociological-psychological types of approaches; and, third, the concern over large social institutions that are in the business of producing and distributing messages. We built a strong faculty, established a Ph.D. program in addition to the initial masters' program, and I guess the rest is the history of the school. My own work has developed despite the administrative concerns because, although I was the dean, ours was by far the smallest school at the university, smaller than many departments. The reason we were a school and not a department had to do with the legal terms of the Annenberg grant, and that was purely extraneous but a fortuitous necessity, because it gave us a great deal of independence. A school of about ten to twenty faculty members had the same status as the medical school, the school of engineering, and the school of law, and so we were very independent and successful in trying to implement our own vision of our program, recruit our own faculty, and set up our own criteria and requirements for students. Since much of the administrative work in which I was involved was in my own field, unlike deans who administer a great variety of fields and disciplines, I was able merely to cultivate my own interests and use my own judgment as I worked with our faculty and students on building the school.

My own work then became an extension of a continuing attempt to analyze and try to understand the everyday symbolic environment in which we live and in which we develop our notions and mythologies about life and the world.

I was inevitably drawn into cross-cultural, comparative work because, in order to understand the cultural environment of your own, it's inevitable and necessary to compare it to others. My empirical work was always historically inspired and conceptually guided to test certain propositions about media and society.

More recently, I entered into and launched an activity that attempts to apply the conclusions, or at least the challenges, and many of the dilemmas that I found in my analysis, into a form of citizen action that my colleagues and I call the Cultural Environment Movement. It poses an enormous challenge and requires rethinking cultural policymaking.

**George, you have gone a different path. There must have been some penalties over the years that you had to pay for doing that, and also for being politically active at various times. Could you talk about that?**

Except for being uprooted from my family and native country, by and large, I've been very fortunate in that penalties were few, far between, and relatively easily remedied, like losing my job in Pasadena and other relatively minor things. The major price that I had to pay is not being able to put it all together in book form, doing mostly fragmentary work that exposed certain aspects of a critical view but never in a totally coherent way. That still remains to be done. As dean for a whole faculty and school, I had to be fairly prudent in expressing personal

points of view. So I worked mostly as a researcher supporting conclusions by a great deal of evidence that is publicly and methodologically defensible. It was, in a way, a kind of fortified way of proving or testing propositions in which I was interested. It turns out that it is a very good way because if you get to be too polemical your opinion against anybody else's opinion has no special value. But if you can support your arguments and your conclusions with publicly credible, repeatable evidence, you assume an authority that otherwise cannot be gained.

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. As I said, my early experiences under the McCarthy era, and a few incidents, and a certain degree of isolation, and a certain degree of having to rely on one's own like-minded friends and colleagues for collegiality, for critique, and of being known as an analyst and a critic of the mainstream, rather than a part of the mainstream, is a price that I would consider well worth paying.

As to what I consider to be my major contribution—it's hard to say. I'd like to think that my major contribution is still to come in an attempt to synthesize and to put together many of the things that I have done. I am heavily involved in research projects, mostly outside-funded, contractual, or grant type of research projects that have kept me going and kept me extremely busy the past thirty or forty years. So, fighting brush fires and being involved in specific projects, applied to social issues, has in many ways fragmented my work into many parts. As I look at my work, if and when I have the opportunity to put it all together, I think I'll find that they are all organically connected.

**How do you feel your research has been used by various sectors, and do you think it has been misused in some cases? Explain some of those. Also, what do you feel, in the field of mass communications studies, have been some of the important changes, let's say, since you began your research career?**

Our research has been used in a great variety of ways, including misuse, but most of the misuse, so called, comes from people who have never read it, who read about it from newspaper accounts, or who read about it from other people's critiques, but who have never really taken the trouble to read it carefully. The major misrepresentation has been by the media. My research has always touched some issue of public policy. I am not really that interested in individual behavior. I think that if it were "totally understood" it could be more easily controlled. So I'm satisfied that that is a quest that's beyond, and perhaps should be beyond, our scope of interest. I'm interested in those aspects of culture that are policy governed, are governed by large-scale industrial, social, political interests. And for that reason, when my research gets into the industrial policy area, it is often distorted and used as ammunition for purposes other than those I intended. That is inevitable, but I try to resist or counter it as much as possible.

The best example is our violence research. We analyze violence as a demonstration of power and demonstrate its long-term consequences. There may have been more violent periods than the present, although I am not sure of that, but I'm sure that there has never been an era when every home was drenched with violent imagery. It is mass-produced, happily sanitized, violent imagery with which our children grow up.

When our violence research gets into the media, it is always interpreted in a law and order context. In other words, will it lead to or will it result in imitation, will it result in threats to the established order. The answer to that is yes, but on a relatively small scale. But that is a small price for the enormous pacifying effect of exposure to violence. Exposure to violence cultivates, in most people, a sense of insecurity, a sense of dependence, a sense of demanding protection, and a consequence of being more easily controlled. You make large parts of your population afraid and insecure and say, "Well I can help you and protect you," and you have the best historically developed and tested form of social control that anyone has devised. Media are simply not interested, and if they are, they would not want to look at violence from that point of view, as a way of terrorizing populations. They want to look at it only from the point of view of justifying further repression.

The theory of cultivation is different from effects as a kind of short-term change. Market-oriented communication research came to the conclusion that, well, media are not very effective; they just maintain preexisting ideas, but they really can't change people's ideas. The "limited effects" theory arose. It overlooks the fact that the reason why campaigns to persuade people to change their patterns of thinking and action are so limited is that the everyday cultivation of a consistent orientation is so strong. Those are the real effects of media. They are so strong that they are not easily changed. So I consider our cultivation research a strategic intelligence exercise. That doesn't tell you how best to mount a campaign, but it's going to tell you what you are up against. You're up against a daily long-term cultivation of stable tendencies that large communities absorb over long periods of time and that are not easily changed, unless there is a societal change. So the theory of cultivation has as its target the making of social policy. It demonstrates the difficulty of changing opinion and policy without structural change in society. Academics sometimes interpret this as assuming that there is a passive audience, that they are totally dependent. Of course, there are obvious individual and group differences, and cultivation analysis shows some of them. But it's the long-term continuities and commonalities that determine the formation of public policy, not all the individual variations that some people point to as a way of countering the implications of cultivation theory. I think that these reinterpretations and misinterpretations have a functional value of attempting to defuse or confuse the policy implications of our theories.

What do you feel are the most important changes in the field of mass communications that you've witnessed in the last generation or more? What do you think has changed in the area of critical studies in mass communications?

This is a difficult question to answer because there are so many different strands, and because the temptation and the risk of overgeneralizing from some selected examples are so great. So I approach this question with great hesitation.

On one hand, the study of mass communication and culture has moved to the center of social concerns. On the other hand, the trendy term "cultural studies" was often used to distract from the social policy focus. In many ways, it's a diversion and regression. But that trend has passed and systematic research of the media-dominated, increasingly commercialized, militarized, and globalized cultural environment is becoming the central arena of the national and international struggles for power and privilege and of the resistance to power and privilege and for a more equitable form of society. That the struggle is shifting from older arenas, including military, economic, and political, to the cultural arena. That this is where most of our battles are fought and going to be fought. So we find ourselves center stage, unprepared for our role, unrehearsed in our scripts, and not at all agreed as to what should be done. This is not unusual, especially for critical studies. But there are also very positive developments, such as in critical media literacy curriculum building. There is a demand for communication graduates to teach in liberal arts programs. There is anxiety among parent groups and citizen groups about our cultural environment. Indeed, the liberal arts today include, as an essential part of general education, an analytical view of the everyday cultural environment.

The more academic developments are going in several directions at once—some of them forward, some of them backward. The tendency of some theorists to become abstruse, involved in ideological terminology, or to quibble about "proper" methodology is inhibiting research, and it's a waste of time.

The inclination to look on research that is systematic, that is methodologically self-conscious, that looks at the real world and demands empirical evidence of a systematic and replicable nature as some kind of logical positivism is misplaced. It is both philosophically and historically incorrect. The encounter with the real world has been a liberating force. It liberated thinking from clericalism, from theocratic and other axiomatic propositions that were sacred and therefore not presumed to be available for critical scrutiny. That was the renaissance in art and science. I think it can and should continue to be a liberating force. It has the authority of systematic and representative views of reality behind it. There is no greater authority than the authority to be able to say, "You don't have to believe what I say. This is the way I make my observation. You do it for yourself and see what you find." That to me is the ultimate human authority. Anybody who throws

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?

## 6

### 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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