Television: the American schoolchild's national curriculum day in and day out

by George Gerbner,
The Annenberg School of Communications,
University of Pennsylvania

Television comes to us as a combination of radio, movies, the pulps, games, circuses, comics, cartoons, and a dash of journalism—but it is none of these.

Instead, television is the first mass-produced and organically composed symbolic environment—a universal curriculum into which our children are born and in which they live from cradle to grave.

No other medium or institution since preindustrial religion has had a comparable influence on what the people of a tribe, community, or nation have learned, thought, or done in common.

Although television broadcasting today is a private business, it is an officially licensed enterprise operating in the public domain. Television thus has become an organ of governance as well as of acculturation.

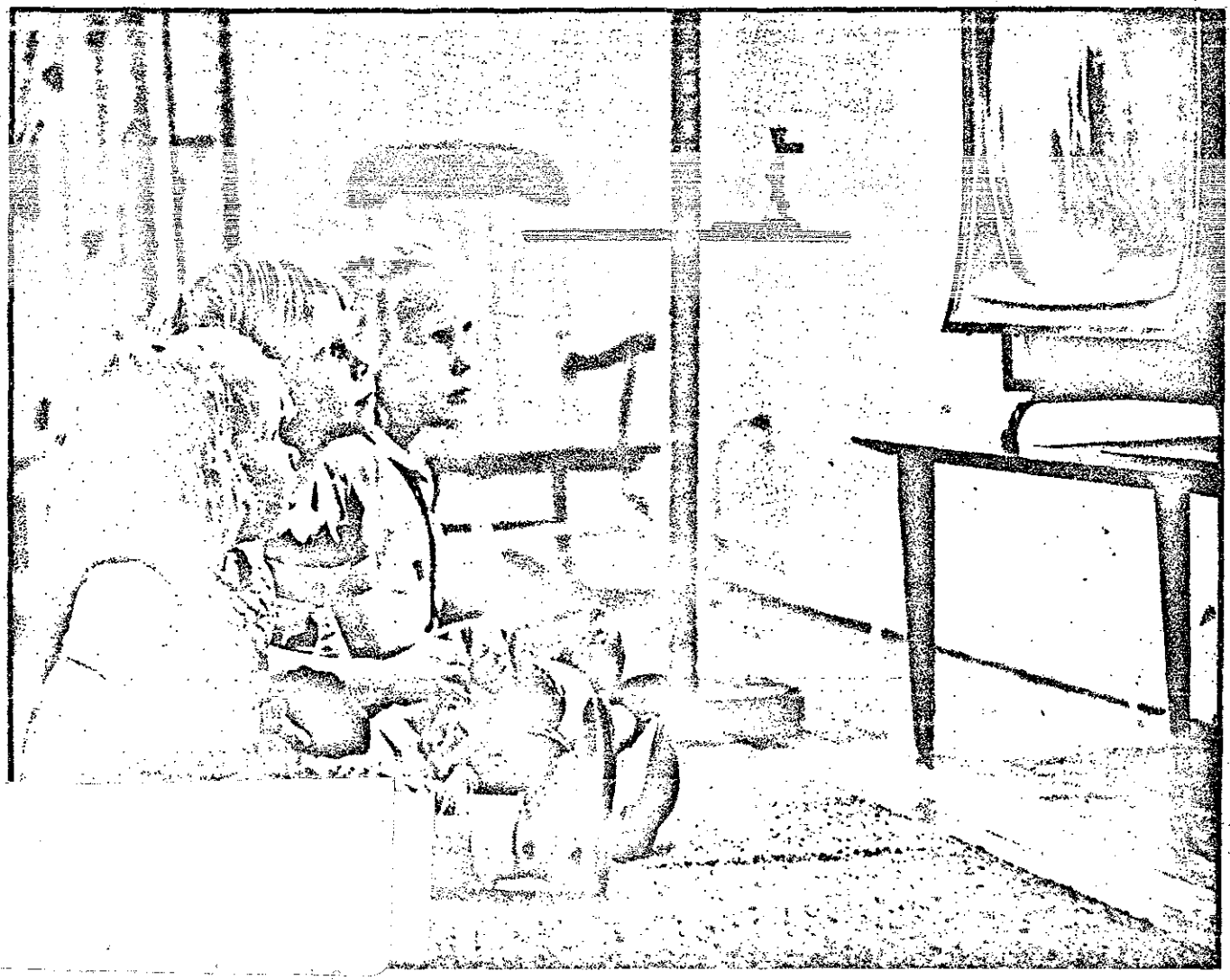
The First Amendment's prohibition against "an establishment of religion" didn't prevent (and it continues to shield) the establishment of television, its modern functional equivalent.

In fact, television relates to the State as only the Church did in former times. Its nearly universal and ritualistic use fits its cyclical and repetitive programming. People attend to television as they used to attend church, except that they attend to television more often and more regularly.

More than four million hours of programming a year are discharged into the mainstream of our common consciousness—claiming the time and attention of 200 million Americans.

Television demands no mobility, literacy, or concentrated attention. Its repetitive patterns come into the home and show—as well as tell about—people and society. Presidents, police officers, surgical operating rooms, courtrooms, spies, and celebrities are familiar parts of a selective and synthetic world that nearly everyone knows about.

Television is a total cultural system. It has its own art, science, statecraft, legendry, geography, demography, character types, and action structure. The world of television encapsulates those selected features of the larger "media culture" that lend



themselves best to its basic sales and socializing functions.

The television audience is not only the most heterogeneous public ever assembled but also the most nonselective. Most viewers watch by the clock and not by the program.

Viewing is a ritual governed by styles of life and time. Different kinds of programs serve the same basic formula designed to assemble viewers for the most profit and to sell them products or services at the least cost.

The classifications of the print era with their relatively sharp differentiations between news, drama, documentary, etc., don't apply as much to television. Regular viewers watch more of everything. Different time and program segments complement and reinforce each other as they present aspects of the same symbolic world.

Most regular viewers of television are immersed in a vivid, illuminating world that has certain repetitive and pervasive patterns.

At the center of this coherently constructed world is network drama. Drama commands the bulk of audience viewing time. Drama illuminates total human problems and situations —rather than abstract topics or fragments.

We have conducted the longest running (and so far still the only continuous and cumulative) research on what it means to live with television at the national average of 30 viewing hours a week (slightly more for young children).

Since the bulk of viewing for all people occurs during the prime-time dramatic programs (8:00 to 11:00 p.m.), and about one-fifth of children's viewing takes place during children's program hours (weekend mornings and early afternoons), we shall deal here with these most important parts of the television world.

Action, power, danger

The world of prime-time (and children's weekend-daytime) network dramatic programming is by and large a man's world of action, power, and danger.

Our analysis since 1967 of nearly 5,000 major and some 14,000 minor characters in more than 1,600 programs reveals patterns that change little from year to year despite shifts in format and genre. For example:

- Living with television means growing up in a vivid and compelling world in which men outnumber women at least three to one.
- Most women on television do not work outside the home, and most of them are younger than the men they deal with.
- Television is a world in which young people comprise one-third and older persons one-fifth of their true proportion in the population.
- Nonwhites and especially Hispanics are underrepresented on television.
- White male Americans and all characters in the "prime of life"—television's prime customers for the sponsors' products—number more than their true share of the population.

The lessons?

Having less than one's proportionate share of resources—including numbers and youth—means the cultivation of a sense of fewer opportunities in life, a restricted scope of activities, and more rigidly stereotyped portrayals.

Disproportionate representation on TV also means easier acceptance of minority status as natural, inevitable, even right or deserved. In a sense, it confirms the "propriety" of fitting into an inequitable structure of power.

Of course, television didn't create—and doesn't singly cultivate—minority-group status. But watching television contributes to the daily cultivation of such status. Our research shows that—except for those who hold fast to an even more bigoted point of view—watching television tends to strengthen certain prejudices about women and old people.

- Living with television means knowing more about certain types of professionals (but not about their education or training) and more about law breakers, law-enforcers, entertainers, and other celebrities than about all other working people combined.
- The typical viewer sees about 12 television doctors, 30 policemen, seven lawyers, and three judges every week, but only one scientist or engineer and hardly any workers.
- Doctors are omniscient on TV and easily accessible, and most lawyers provide selfless service for needy clients; but scientists present a relatively strange and forbidding image.

The lessons?

Children know more about rare occupations frequently portrayed on television than about common jobs rarely seen on the screen.

Except for the poorest and least educated, heavy viewers score lower on IQ and other tests of scholarly aptitude and aspiration than light viewers in the same age and social groups.

Viewing boosts the confidence-rating in doctors but depresses that in scientists, especially among those who otherwise support science.

22,000 commercials

Living with television means growing up in a world of about 22,000 commercials a year, 5,000 of them for food products, more than half of which are for low-nutrition sweets and snacks.

The programs themselves contain references to eating and drinking an average of *10 times an hour*—largely junk food grabbed on the run and hard liquor gulped to cope with pressure, tension, and crisis. Yet few television characters are overweight, and even fewer are alcoholics.

The lessons?

Research shows that except for viewers in the lowest-income and lowest-education groups, watching television cultivates a complacency about health—coupled with an exaggerated belief in the miraculous healing powers of medical science.

It is as if to suggest: eat and drink as all the beautiful people do, and don't worry. If something goes wrong, the doctor will cure it all—a situation set up for frustration, litigation, and tragedy.

Where crime is rampant

Living with television means growing up in a world in which crime is ten times as rampant as in the real world.

- An average of five acts of violence an hour in prime-time TV (and 18 acts an hour in children's-time programs) victimize half of the prime-time characters and two-thirds of those on children's time programs.
- Yet pain, suffering, or medical help rarely follow this mayhem. Its function is not preventive or thera-

peutic but dramatic and social. Symbolic violence demonstrates power: *who can get away with what against whom.*

The structure of that demonstration also reveals television's distribution of powers:

- Adult white males are most likely to get involved in violence and, along with older males, the most likely to get away with it.
- Old, young-adult, and minority-group women—as well as young boys—are most likely to be victims rather than victimizers in violent conflict. (Children's programming increases these unfavorable ratios of risk, especially among young women.)

The lessons?

There's the opportunity to learn violence for the few—and an exaggerated sense of mistrust, vulnerability, and insecurity for the many.

Our research also shows that heavy viewers of TV are more likely to think they will encounter violence in real life than light viewers (in the same age and social groups, exposed to the same real hazards).

Living in television's relatively mean and dangerous "macho" world seems to contribute to making us anxious and alienated from democratic institutions and increasingly receptive to simple, strong, tough "solutions" and hard-line posturings—both political and religious.

All in all, television has become the cultural mainstream of our society. Its general level isn't necessarily the lowest but certainly it's the cheapest common denominator. Programming is predicated on viewer inertia—and provides the least objectionable fare that can sell products to the largest number of the best customers at the lowest cost.

If the hidden curriculum of images and messages in television sounds alarming, it must also be said that television is well suited to the pragmatic specifications of the institution and is also useful and functional for an increasingly hard-sell, power-oriented, rigid, and brittle society.

On the positive side, television has managed to abolish provincialism and parochialism; reduce loneliness and isolation; and enrich the cultural horizons of the poorest segments of our society. It also has given us a means for educating and governing masses of people—albeit through a ritual of sweep and power that can be turned to whatever service citizens, as builders and shapers of institutions, demand of it.

Those who would shape television more according to the democratic values of justice, equity, productivity, health, and community rather than the pragmatic values of whoever pays the tab are cropping up more and more in our society, and they should know what they're up against.

Critical-viewing curricula, citizens' organizations, and advice to parents are all necessary, but these are not sufficient. First, we need a fresh approach to liberal education.

Liberal education was designed to free the growing person from unwitting dependence on the immediate cultural environment. That is why art, science, history, and literature are the heart of a liberal education. But that kind of preparation has always involved only a small minority.

Today's fresh approach to the liberal arts demands freedom from unwitting dependence on the mass-produced television environment that involves all of us every day. That fresh approach confirms that *we now need education for the age of television.*

Second, the rigid imperatives of television as a commercial institution must give way to a freer market in television production. The resource base for television must be broadened to liberate the *institution* from total dependence on advertising monies and purposes.

The potential riches of television—and the willingness to pay for more diversified fare through cable television—show that consumers and citizens want a television system more responsive to their diverse needs.

Third, a high-level national commission is needed to examine the ways in which democratic countries around the world manage their television systems in the interest of children and minorities, as well as in the interest of the middle-class majority.

The commission also should recommend a mechanism that will finance a freer system—one that can afford to present a fairer and more democratic world of television.

Finally, television should become as much a part of the process of self-government—overcoming its present policy of insulation from the citizenry—as have energy, education, and health.

This may require the establishment of a broad-based advisory group—a coalition of prominent citizens representing the National PTA and other major civic organizations concerned with education, culture, and health.

The goal of this coalition must be to offset the pressures of other interest groups in order to protect the freedom of creative professionals from both governmental and corporate dictation.

Only under circumstances such as these will TV's professionals be free, finally, to produce the diversified and equitable—as well as entertaining—dramatic "curriculum" they know how to produce but cannot create under existing constraints and controls. □

Dr. George Gerbner, dean of The Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania, is regarded as the foremost expert on monitoring TV for incidents of violence. Dr. Gerbner's collaborators in the studies reported in this article are Dr. Larry Gross, Dr. Michael Morgan, and Dr. Nancy Signorielli. Their ten-year study on the impact of television on society is of great value to all persons who are interested in the subject.

PTA TODAY
(UPS 810-120)
700 NORTH RUSH STREET
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS 60611

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Pauline Rhiner, *Managing Editor*
Carol Ann Bales, *Senior Editor*
Moosi Rizvi, *Art Director*

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