George Gerbner

Ministry of Culture, the USA, and the "Free Marketplace of Ideas"

A confluence of technological, institutional, and cultural currents, with television as their mainstream, is sweeping away the historical bases of democratic assumptions about the role of religion, politics, and the press in self-government. The situation calls for a new diagnosis of our predicament.

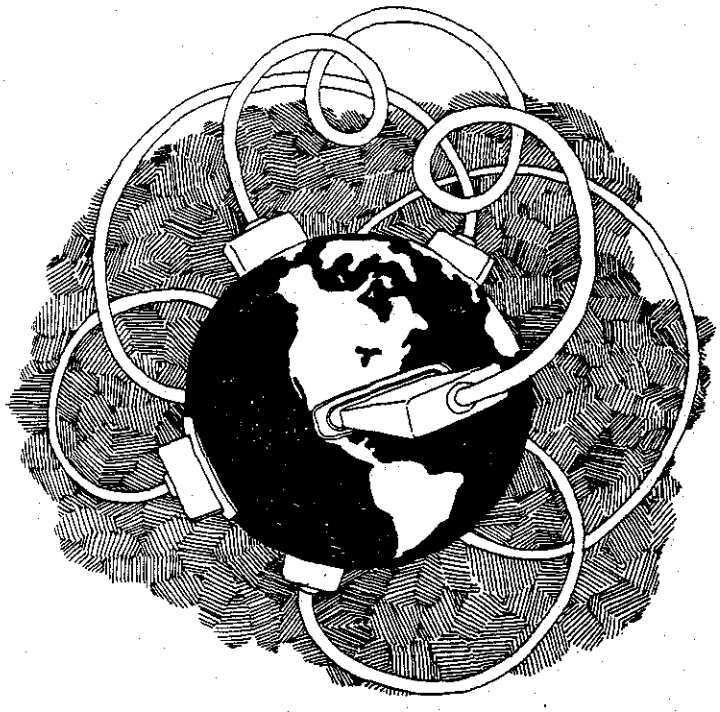
State and church ruled in the Middle Ages in a symbiotic relationship of mutual dependence and tension. State was the economic and political order; Church, its sometimes unruly cultural arm.

Capitalist revolutions separated the three orders. The political order became the public government; the economic order, a privately run government; and the mass media, the cultural arms of the economic order. The First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States tried to protect freedom of religion by forbidding its establishment; and freedom of speech and the press, by forbidding its abridgement by public government. The Founding Fathers did not foresee the rise of large conglomerates acting as private governments. Nor did they envision their cultural arms, the mass media, but especially television, forming a virtual private Ministry of Culture and Established Church rolled into one, influencing the socialization of all Americans. In licensing broadcasters and then letting the marketplace take its course, Congress has made law respecting the establishment of the modern equivalent of religion and has given a few giant conglomerates the right to abridge freedom of speech, something the elected public government is forbidden to do.

A book to be published next year by Sue Curry Jansen says: "There are no free markets, only markets controlled by capitalists, kings, communists or pirates, for markets are complex human organizations which cannot exist without order, hierarchy, power, and control." To put it bluntly, the market is plutocracy, not democracy. Markets are run by establishments that safeguard their own freedoms but do not confer them on others unless forced. Market-driven mass media like to speak in the name of the public but shun, marginalize, or criminalize public views not saleable to large groups of paying customers.

Freedom is the invention of outlaws, rebels, blasphemers, and others who challenge order, hierarchy, and control. They are more likely to be a nuisance or menace than profitable commodities to be supplied on demand. Their value for the survival of self-government is not set by the laws of supply and demand.

The mechanisms that govern the mass media marketplace are those of property and money. Such mechanisms include technology, capital investment needed to enter the communications marketplace, reliance on corporate sponsors, and relative insulation from democratic (public) participation in policymaking. These mechanisms generate the dynamics of concentration and conglomeration that tend toward the creation of an electronically based global empire. New communication technologies such as cable, cassettes, and VCRs, far from eroding the old, sharpen the aim and deepen the penetration of concentrated culture-power into new areas of life. Cable companies are on the way to becoming the usual Big Five or Big Three ruling the market with programs less diverse than those available through either network programming or the print media they replace.



VCRs are used to see fewer network programs at more convenient times or to substitute for moviegoing and reading—but with fewer choices. "Free markets" in the telecommunications age achieve ideological homogeneity and deflect serious challenge to their hegemony more efficiently (and less conspicuously) than any laws publicly enacted.

Rulers always define freedom as what *they* do. Control of communications is necessary for the freedom of action of any establishment. Their freedom is the freedom to censor. Censorship is the rule, not the exception, in all societies. Democratic theory counters that imperative with the requirements of self-government in a society of conflicting interests.

Application of democratic theory is difficult, often painful, and always incomplete. It requires that we accept the subversive challenge, the occasional disruption, the periodic and unpleasant but vital shock of recognition.

The First Amendment permits the creation of the dynamics of social survival but does not secure them. In fact, current interpretations of the First Amendment provide a shield for their evasion.

Every modern political theory includes some conception of the role of the "press" in governance. A secular press of politics and commerce was instrumental to the rise of diverse mass publics independent of church and nobility. The press was (and is) a relatively specific and selectively used organ of the more literate of every class. Its hard-won freedom to express and advocate competing and conflicting ideologies and class, group, and political party interests was supposed to sustain the diversity necessary for self-government in a complex society.

The demise of the party press in the nineteenth century, and the subsequent decline of political parties themselves in the twentieth, made commercial mass media the primary means of communication with voters. Parties exist today mainly to raise money for television, allocate patronage, and maintain the illusion of choice. The principal challenge to democratic theory and practice today is the rise to dominance of a single, market-driven, advertiser-sponsored, and ideologically coherent media system claiming to represent diverse publics and invoking Constitutional protection to preempt challenge to its controls.

Many studies document the trend toward media concentration. Two wire services, one near bankruptcy, supply most world and national news. Chains dominate the daily and weekly press, with the top ten controlling more than one-third of circulation. Only 4 percent of cities have competing newspapers. A strike can leave a city like Philadelphia without a daily paper for weeks. Magazines and books provide the most-varied fare, but electronically based conglomerates own the biggest publishing houses. Broadcasting is, of course, the most concentrated. The top one hundred advertisers pay for two-thirds of all network television. Three networks, increasingly allied to giant transnational corporate entities, what I call our private Ministry of Culture, control over 70 percent of the market. More importantly, they control programming for all people. "The greatest threat to journalistic independence and integrity is not the Jesse Helmses," a network news executive was reported saying, "and it's not the libel suit—it's red ink."

Entertainment—the universal source of information for those who seek no information—is even more constrained. Some fifty weekly series are cancelled every year, many without being given a fair chance to build a public. Many programs and films are made but never shown. A handful of huge conglomerates, probably not many more than forty, manage the bulk of mass media output. With the current "merger mania," their numbers are shrinking and their reach is expanding every year. Other interests, minority views, the potential to challenge dominant perspectives, lose ground with every merger.

There is not much ground to lose. The high point of ideological ferment following Allied victory in World War II provoked furious reaction: loyalty oaths, witch hunts, and intimidation were associated with the name of the late Senator McCarthy but were aided and abetted by timid and self-serving media. Their "free marketplace of ideas" had to be "saved from communism." But it did not save unions from being "purged"; radicals from being blacklisted or jailed; academic, political, and other leaders from being silenced.

The civil rights, women's, anti-war, gay, and environmental movements broke the chill of the fifties but provoked, by the seventies, the new virulence of fundamentalist and other orthodox attacks on minority rights, science, textbooks, education, and academic freedom. By then, however, the cultural mainstream itself had undergone a sea change. To appreciate its magnitude, we shall take a whirlwind tour of history from a communications perspective.

"If I were permitted to write all the ballads I need not care who makes the laws of the nation." Scotch patriot Andrew Fletcher made that comment in 1704. He may have been the first to recognize the governing power of a centralized system of "ballads"—the songs, legends, and stories that convey both information and what we call entertainment. Today we have such a system. It forms a compelling mythology reaching into every home, conferring power that kings, emperors, and popes could only dream about. To understand how this system came about, we need to recall what we are and how we reached our present predicament.

Humans interpret experience in symbolic context. Most of what we know, or think we know, comes not from direct (i.e., nonsymbolic) experience but from the stories with which we grow up and through which we live in a world far beyond the reach of our senses.

There are three types of stories performing different (though often overlapping) functions. The first are stories of *how things work*. Usually called fiction or drama, they make the all-important but invisible structure of social relationships and the hidden dynamics of life visible and understandable.

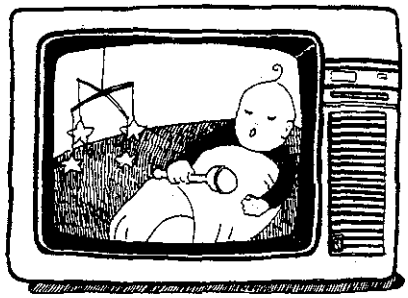
Second are stories of *what things are*. These are the facts, the legends, the news selected to relate to social values and powers. They give credibility to each society's fantasies and alert it to threats and opportunities.

Third are stories of *what to do*. These are stories of value and choice. They present some behavior or style of life as desirable (or undesirable) and propose ways to attain (or avoid) it. These are sermons, instructions, laws. Today most of them are commercial messages in the media.

These three types of stories (or story functions) mingle in the process that weaves the fabric of culture. That is the symbolic environment in which humans grow, learn, and live like humans. They compose, in different combinations, what we call art, science, religion, education.

Until the invention of printing, all three types of stories were told face-to-face. A community was defined by the rituals and mythologies held in common. Stories memorized and recited or read and interpreted from rare manuscripts united the tribe or community into a coherent structure.

Then came printing. It was the industrial revolution in storytelling, a prerequisite for all the other upheavals to come. Printing broke up the ritual, challenged sacred



interpretations, extended communities beyond previous boundaries of time and space. Printing ushered in the Reformation. Religious plurality paved the way for the rise of other pluralities. Consciousness of different religious, class, ethnic, and other interests, cultivated through the right (won after much struggle, but now again in doubt) to tell stories from competing and conflicting points of view, gave rise to modern mass publics. These publics are loose aggregations of people who never meet face-to-face and yet have much in common through the stories they share via media they can use for their own purposes. Modern theories of public policy formation assign the "press" the role of maintaining a diversity of publics reflecting and preserving a diversity of interests essential for self-government.

The latest transformation in storytelling is electronic. As print broke up the central mythology and ritual of the pre-industrial age, so television short-circuits the selective potentials of previous media. It is watched relatively nonselectively, by the clock rather than the program. It is the central mass-ritual of the telecommunications age. It abolishes isolation and parochialism and erodes pluralism. It reaches the previously unreachable with its streamlined and compelling centralized mythology. It tells "all the ballads" Andrew Fletcher wrote about, to all the children, parents, and grandparents at the same time. For the first time in history, children are born into a mass-produced, symbolic environment, which pervades the average home for more than seven hours a day. It is no longer the parent, the school, or the church but a distant corporation that tells most of the stories to most of the people most of the time, bringing to them the message and perspective of its sponsors.

We have studied that process for nearly two decades and found that television satisfies many previously felt religious needs for participating in a common ritual and for sharing beliefs about the meaning of life and the modes of right conduct. It is, therefore, not an exaggeration to suggest that the licensing of television represents the modern functional equivalent of government establishment of religion.

The essence of a centralized mass ritual like television is that it reaches nearly every home in widespread and otherwise heterogeneous communities with the same system of messages, bypassing family and other local channels and previous requirements for communication like mobility and literacy. This process tends to blur traditional social distinctions and class or minority interests, blend them into a more integrated perspective, and bend them to its own institutional interests.

The cultural tidal wave that is television alters viewers' conceptions of reality, shifts political orientations, and—vocal claims to the contrary—cultivates conformity and intolerance of differences. Provisions that had attempted to preserve fairness, plurality, and public participation in broadcast policy crumble under the impact of a shift of controls to ever-larger industrial combinations. This process is called deregulation and is justified by an appeal to the free marketplace. The trade paper *Variety* announced in its September 11, 1985, issue: "Diversity in the entertainment business, for decades the cornerstone of government policy and congressional oversight, seemingly has melted overnight into something akin to benign neglect." The last feeble remnant of broadcast fairness, the so-called Fairness Doctrine, was attacked by broadcasters as an infringement on their right to program as they (and their sponsors) please. The agency that was supposed to enforce the Doctrine decided to dismantle it because it "chills and coerces speech"—that is, the speech of sponsors. When Florida enacted a tax on advertising, those champions of the free marketplace of ideas proposed to blank out that state for national advertising, further confounding the distinction between free speech and the possible most-profitable speech.

We have drifted into a historic dilemma from which there is no easy way out. Many democratic countries face this dilemma and try to resolve it in ways from which we can learn. An analytical and critical approach to the mass media is an essential requirement for making the choices consumers have to make, and even more, the choices citizens have to make. Consumers choose from what is made available to them in the cultural cafeteria. Citizens must choose the cafeteria.

Television is a mass and not a class act; the task is not to make it into an elite pastime. It is to begin the long process of public discussion about the resources, ideas, and actions needed to liberate this great medium from the constraints imposed on it by the mechanisms misnamed the "free marketplace." The task is to extend the First Amendment's prohibition of an establishment of religion and abridgement of free speech and press to private as well as public government. NF

GEORGE GERBNER is professor of Communications and dean of the Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania. He is the author and editor of numerous articles, reports, and books on mass communications research; executive editor of the quarterly Journal of Communications; *and a Fellow of the International Communication Association.*