IDEAS

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TV: The New Religion Controlling Us

With its all-pervasive message and its pulpit in every home, television is making all of us see the world as it does.

By George Gerbner

Whoever tells most of the stories to most of the people most of the time has effectively assumed the cultural roles of parent and school. If that story-telling process also includes teaching us most of what we know in common about life and society and, in addition, can speak in every home, it has also replaced the church in its ancient role in the partnership of church and state. That process and power is television.

The only other cultural force before television that transmitted identical messages to every social group and class, so that all shared essentially the same culture, was religion. After more than 10 years of intensive research into its social function, I have concluded that television is best seen and studied as a ritual, as a virtually universal new religion that tends to absorb viewers of otherwise diverse outlooks into its own "mainstream."

These conclusions come from findings of our long-range ongoing research project, called Cultural Indicators, and those of independent investigators in the United States and abroad. They are published in detail in such scholarly quarterlies as the Journal of Communication and the Journal of Broadcasting. My colleagues, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan and Nancy Signorielli, and I believe the conclusions to be the most coherent data-based theory of television's role in society. Here I will describe the theory in nontechnical terms, illustrate it with some key findings, and point out some of its political, religious and cultural implications.

Television presents a synthetic but coherent world of fact and fiction which most people experience relatively nonselectively. In other media, people choose individual items—an author, a magazine, a subject. But in television, most people do not select particular programs, they just watch TV. Most people watch not by the program but by the clock. The television set is on in the average home for more than 6½ hours a day. Watching has become a ritual, as routine, almost, as brushing one's teeth. For the first time in history, the rich and the poor, the urban and the provincial, the cosmopolitan and the isolated, the very young and the very old share a great deal of cultural imagery in common, although none of it is of their own making.

Relatively few people have witnessed real trials and even fewer have watched surgical operations. But most television viewers have a vivid image of how surgeons work and see an average of 30 cops, seven lawyers and three judges a week—every week—on television. And it is the same with saloons and penthouse apartments, the jailhouse and the White House, and a tightly programed world of human types, situations and fates. The most recurrent patterns of the ritual, as in any religion, tend to be absorbed into our framework of knowledge; they become assumptions that we make about the world.

What are those patterns? By now we have analyzed about 1,500 programs more than 4,000 major characters, and some 14,000 minor characters appearing in prime time and weekend daytime network television. Basically, on television men outnumber women 3-1, young people comprise one-third of their real numbers, persons over 65 comprise 2 per cent of the TV population but 11 per cent of the real world's; professionals and law-enforcers greatly outnumber all other working people; crime is about 10 times as frequent as in the real world, and an average of five acts of violence per hour (four times that

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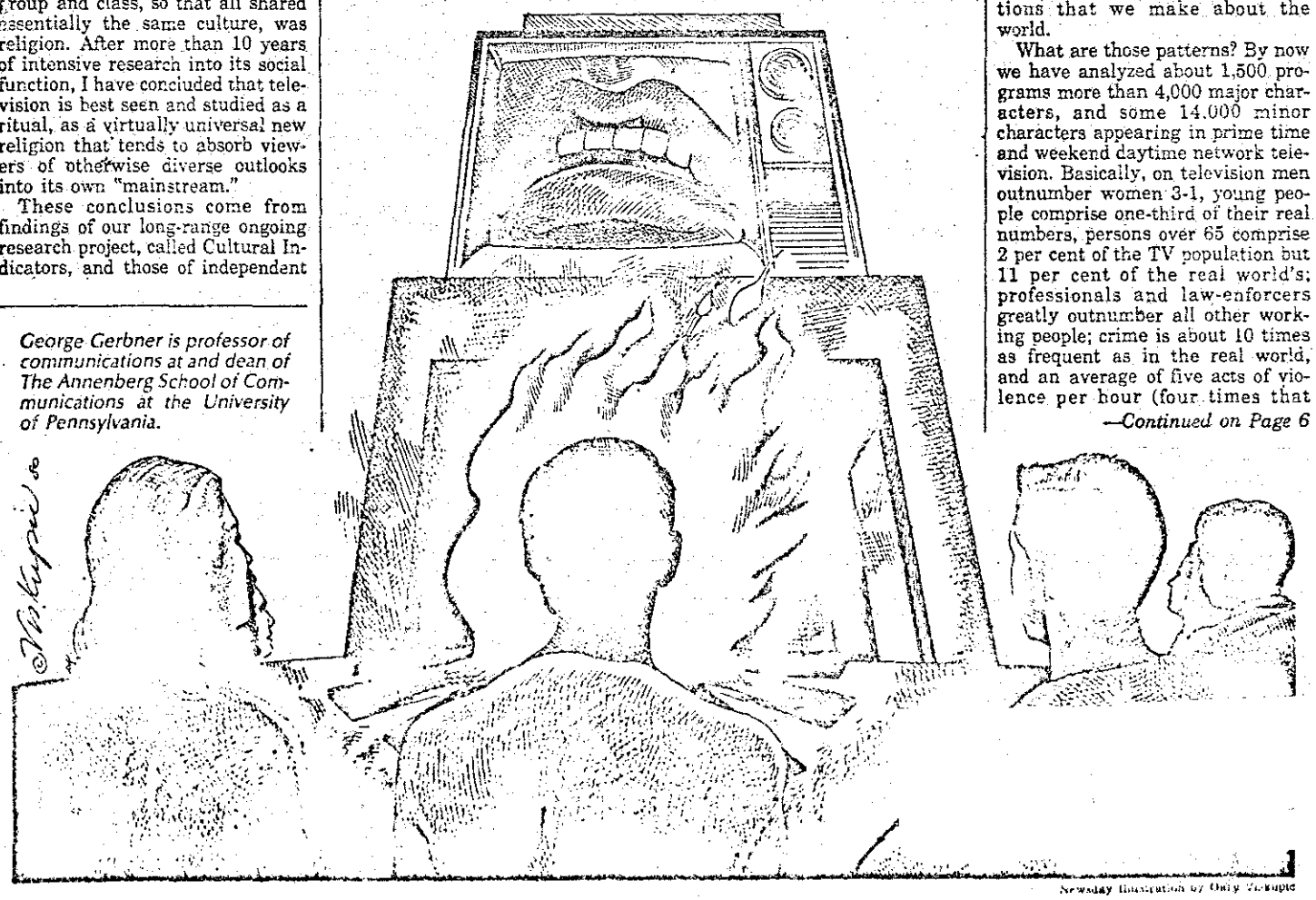

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many in children's programs!) victimize more than half of all leading characters each week.

What do we learn from TV's world and how do we learn its "lessons"? Conventional research methods investigate the effects of specific programs or viewing habits—with few consistent results. They may demonstrate, for example, that children exposed to a show with violence exhibit more violent behavior afterwards. But if most viewers watch nonselectively, it is useless to look for the effects of individual programs. It's the total pattern that counts. So we measure how much television people watch and relate that amount to their responses to questions about the world. The questions are based on the most recurrent and pervasive patterns of the world of television. If the heavier viewers respond to our questions significantly more according to the way television depicts things than do the light viewers (given similar living conditions and the same socio-economic group), then that difference reflects the contribution of television to their conceptions of reality.

The synthesis of these findings goes under the heading of "cultivation theory" because it assumes that for most people long-range exposure to television cultivates stable conceptions about life.

To test our theory, we compared the responses of heavy TV viewers to particular questions with those of light TV viewers. We found that in most cases heavy viewers respond more in terms of television's concepts. In other words, television overrode the effects of other factors, such as socio-economic elements. This we call "mainstreaming," because the heavy viewers tend to become absorbed into the mainstream of TV culture.

For example, people of differing income and differing TV viewing habits were asked whether they thought they might become involved in violence—which appears frequently on television. The percentages of those who said they thought that they might were: light viewers with incomes under $10,000, 84; heavy viewers (under $10,000), also 84; light viewers with incomes between $10,000 and $25,000, 68; heavy viewers in that income range, 76; light viewers with incomes over $25,000, 62; heavy viewers (over $25,000), 80. People with higher incomes have valid reasons to think that they are less likely to become involved in violence than do persons with lower incomes; they generally do not live in high-crime areas, for one. So the response percentages should decline as income rises. And indeed, for light viewers, they do. But for heavy viewers, they do not. This suggests that the heavy viewers are absorbing some of the fears of violence generated by the frequent showing of violence on television regardless of income.

Again, groups of people were asked the following question: "Do you agree or disagree with the statement 'It is hardly fair to bring a child into the world with the way things look for the future.'" It was designed to test assimilation to the negative views implied by the violence on television

Persons without a high school education, who might fairly be expected to agree with this philosophy, responded fairly uniformly whether they were light or heavy viewers: 60 per cent of light viewers agreed with the statement, 58 per cent of heavy viewers. Persons with a college degree, because of their greater chances for advancement, were presumed more likely to have an optimistic outlook and so to agree less with this question. And indeed, among college-educated light viewers, only 12 per cent agreed with it. But of the heavy viewers, 24 per cent agreed. Television was reducing the effects of their college education. They were joining the mainstream.

Further questions demonstrate that heavy viewers consistently exaggerate their risks in life and mistrust strangers more than light viewers do. But TV can also moderate extreme views, can bring them into the mainstream. For most people, television, which is sexist, increases sexism. But among people who are the most traditionally sexist, light viewers retain their old views, but the heavy viewers show less sexism. Mainstreaming implies a kind of homogenization.

Such homogenization seems to take place in more than just the areas of anxiety, insecurity and stereotyping of people. One other area involved is adolescent reading and IQ scores. For example, in most cases, the more viewing, the lower the scores. But in the lowest IQ groups, television viewing leads to some improvement in the scores. This suggests that television's cultivation process is broader than many people assume.

Television also sometimes appears to have an effect upon people different from mainstreaming. This is to reinforce their views. This phenomenon seems to occur when an issue is extremely relevant to a person's life—more particularly relevant than the more general matters involved in mainstreaming. For example, contrary to real life, persons over 65 are the most victimized group on television. We asked people whether they agreed with the statement that older persons are more likely to be the victims of violent crime than anyone else.

Among young people, about 70 per cent of both light and heavy viewers agreed. Among middle-aged people, there was likewise virtually no difference between light and heavy viewers: approximately 74 per cent of both agreed. But among older people, while only 75 per cent of light viewers agreed, 88 per cent of the heavy viewers agreed Television was re-emphasizing their views. We say that they were resonating to TV and we call this phenomenon "resonance."

We are still trying to define more sharply when mainstreaming occurs and when resonance does. We think, however, that they are not contradictory phenomena, as they may at first appear, but complementary ones, as refinements of cultivation theory.

Considering television as the ritual of a new religion rather than as a selectively used medium, such as books or film, enabled us to isolate its general trends and contributions to conceptions of reality. We have also found that people under 35, the "television generation," are more imbued with its view of life than those who grew up before television.

Understanding the dynamics of television as ritual helps to make some puzzling aspects of the current scene fall into place. Simple, strong, tough measures and hard-line postures—political or religious, or both—appeal to the anxious and alienated who are perplexed by and resistant to change but powerless to prevent it.

The electronic church with its formal trappings of traditional religion speaks to them.

The "moral majority" and its political allies speak to them. The actual majority finds television itself the most attractive choice among different things to do each night.

Its reliable ritual speaks to them—confirming the fears, feeding the hopes, cultivating the assumptions television shaped in the first place—and dominating the cultural climate in which political parties, traditional religions, and all other institutions must now find their way. □