TELEVISION: Modern Mythmaker

Television does for society today what religion did for our prehistoric ancestors

By George Gerbner

Storytelling is the great process that makes us recognizably human. A story is an attempt to make the invisible visible — it has to do with relationships, with the process of thinking. We have to have some device to make these intangibles visible, dramatic, revealing and embodied in human beings whose characteristics we know and whose actions we can understand. We live our lives in terms of stories we tell.

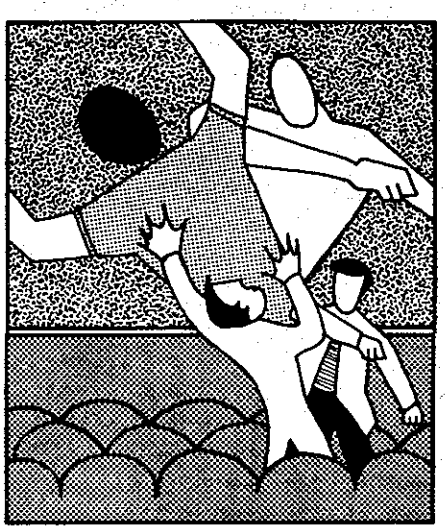
What are these stories? How do we weave them into the very complicated, uniquely human structure called culture?

Basically there are three kinds of stories:

There are stories essentially about *how things work.* Storytelling that makes the inner dynamics of life visible are typically called fiction and drama, sometimes mythology. There is no other way to tell the truth about how things work except to construct the facts of the case so as to lead to the natural development of the underlying message and significance of how things really work.

Into that context will fit the second kind of story — a story about *what things are.* It is a kind of factual story: the legend of yesterday or the news of today. It has no meaning by itself. It only has a meaning as we fit it into an immensely complex structure about the meaning of it all.

A third kind of story is a *story of action.* It's really a story of value and choice, which are the prerequisites for action. If this is how things work and this is what things are, we then contemplate a complex of choices, and do something. A story like this presents a desirable goal within a lifestyle. It can be an instruction or a sermon, but mostly it is a commercial — a story of value and choice with which



we are surrounded all the time. We happen to live in a culture that offers many, many things to obtain, presumably desirable goals. This is what you ought to do, ought to buy, ought to vote for, ought to consider.

The three kinds of stories have always been woven together in many intricate combinations in a seamless fabric of culture, in different ways in different times. Humankind has woven together the stories that we tell, as we humanize our children and ourselves, in three different ways: the Pre-print Era (30-50,000 years long), the Print Era (300 years long) and now the Age of Telecommunications.

Basically the Age of Telecommunications is the age of television. And television is the central cultural instrument whose historical predecessor is not print or even radio, but Pre-print religion. Television is that ritual myth-builder — totally involving, compelling, and institutionalizing as the mainstream of the socializing process.

Television as Myth

As in pre-print cultures, television (or storytelling) provides five functions for society.

First of all, television is *ritual.* It is very different from print and film because it is less selectively used. Most people don't watch television by the program but by the clock. In the average home the television is on over six and a half hours a day. It has its own rhythm, which often governs the rhythm of the home.

Secondly, television is highly *institutionalized.* There are basically only a few major sources of television program production. A group of about 100 people in Hollywood produce more than 95 percent of all the programs and essentially determine what most Americans will see.

Furthermore, television is an institution that is in the business of assembling

> ***"The fact is incontrovertible: People today live 'by the media' whereas once they lived 'by the book'."***
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> **William Kuhns,**
> ***The Electronic Gospel***

people and selling them to advertisers at a price. There's an overall concept of programming (storytelling) — whether it is news, drama, talk shows, audience participation , daytime serials, whatever — predicated on the formula of "cost per thousand." The basic formula that determines any programming is "how cheaply can we provide this without offending too

many of the people who will tune in anyway?"

Television is also *total* in terms of its grasp of an otherwise heterogeneous mass audience. Only about 7 percent of children's viewing time goes into "children's programming," so most children watch what adults watch. Of course, there is very little regional, ethnic, religious or other kinds of separate programming. So there is a totality of audience and a totality of program concept and program structure.

Needless to say, television is all *entertaining* (compelling) because it is predicated upon giving some kind of apparent reward all the time. We can argue about the quality of the reward; we can argue that no one is driven to watch television — yet people watch it a great deal. Why? Because it brings, I believe, some sense of instant satisfaction. It is the first instrument of humankind to bring the 30-40 million people who have always been "out of it" into the mainstream of cultural life. It has brought the famous, the powerful, the beautiful, into the lowliest homes. It has acquainted the poor with the images that the rich and powerful see, too.

People watch television because no one is going to take it away from them — until and unless something more attractive can be provided in their everyday lives. Television is a great bond among otherwise very heterogeneous and diversified groups of people.

Finally, television is the overall *socializing* process superimposed on all the other processes. By the time children can speak (let alone go to school and perhaps learn to read), they will have absorbed thousands of hours of living in a highly compelling world. They see everything represented: all the social types, situations, art and science. Our children learn — and we ourselves learn and maintain — certain assumptions about life that bear the impact and the imprint of this most early and continued daily ritual. In our age, it is television mythology we grow up in and grow up with.

Our studies since 1967 show that what television basically does is to keep those who are already in the mainstream *more imbedded in it* by helping them hold its tenets more rigidly. Then, television brings members of those groups that have less, or more, than what television has to offer into the mainstream, too.

What is the mainstream like? Let me pick out some of the more salient features on the basis of some 4,000 programs and 16,000 characters that we have analyzed.

First of all, it is a world in which men outnumber women at least three to one. This male cast makes the world revolve mostly around questions of power. That is why television is so violent: The best, quickest demonstration of power is a showdown that resolves the issue of who can get away with what against whom. On prime time there is an incident of violence on the average of 6 to 8 times an hour.

It is also a world in which a few professions (doctors, lawyers, entertainers, law enforcers and lawbreakers) far outnumber all other working people put together. It is a mean and dangerous world, and we find that those who watch more television are more insecure and apprehensive. They demand more protection. They are more likely to even approve of, if not welcome, repression, if it comes in the name of security. This is a dangerous syndrome we call the "mean world syndrome." It is potentially highly volatile, both politically and morally.

"Those who tell stories hold the power in society. Today television tells most of the stories to most of the people, most of the time."

George Gerbner

A Closer Look

There seems to be no doubt that television's appeal is based on its intimate connection with viewers' needs and aspirations. Although we may improve its content, we certainly will not break that link, and we definitely will not abolish television altogether. At best, we can only teach people how to use it.

Our sense of powerlessness about television is devastating and mystifying. To accept it is to accept disfranchisement. Television is a hidden curriculum for all people, financed by a hidden taxation without representation, paid by everyone regardless of whether they use the service or not. You pay when you wash, not when you watch. Every time you buy a bar of soap, a fraction of that price is a tax levy. The total tax amounts to between $55-65 per household a year, depending upon the market in which you live.

What then should be the terms of the engagement? The fact that there is an engagement is clear. It has to do with very basic conceptions of life and very basic dynamics of our society. The more explicit we make the engagement, the more we can help resolve it.

Bringing this to consciousness is the number one task of education today, which is no longer in the business of dispensing knowledge. (Pupils today learn most of their information from television before the teacher learns it, and then they bring it to school. If the teacher is not up on it, the teacher loses whatever authority may be left to him or her.)

It is very important, I believe, for traditional religion to address explicitly and specifically the issue of television as a cultural mechanism. Taking a position, or some combination of positions, already is an important step toward being in control of our own world, of our own perspective. Whether it is Television Awareness Training or critical viewing, whether it is something you call 'Let's Play a Game' (pulling out the hidden message from even a dull program and discussing it) — they are huge steps forward.

Above all, turning the set off is not liberation, but an illusion. You can turn the set off, but you still live in a world in which vast numbers of people don't turn it off. If you don't get it through the "box" you get it through them. The TV personality Jack Parr used to say, "I'm not a religious man, but I believe in Walter Cronkite."

So, for very logical reasons of enlightened self-interest, religious groups are forced, whether they like it or not, to take the leadership — both for survival and for a new role in a changed cultural situation. The schools — and other institutions of society that have a stake in the great storytelling process — will inevitably have to follow.

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