

# TELLING STORIES: How Television Skews Our View of Society and Ourselves

An Interview with George Gerbner by Derrick Jensen

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*A few centuries ago, Scottish patriot Andrew Fletcher wrote, "If one were permitted to write all the ballads, one need not care who should make the laws of a nation." Over the past fifty years, says George Gerbner, the job of writing ballads – or, more broadly, stories – has shifted away from parents, schools, communities, churches, and nations, and onto a television industry run by corporate conglomerates with products to sell. This transformation has profoundly changed the way children are socialized, and done much to shape the way our society is governed. In short, it has changed the way we live.*

*When people cite statistics regarding violence on TV – for example, that an average child witnesses forty thousand televised murders and two hundred thousand violent acts by age eighteen – they are often referring to Gerbner's work. I met him for this interview in San Francisco while he was on a speaking tour.*

Jensen: Most children today are born into homes in which the television is on an average of seven hours and forty-one minutes per day. What are the effects of all this viewing?

Gerbner: Actually, the amount of time spent watching TV isn't the main problem. The main problem is that the stories children see and hear are limited to only a few types. The number of channels may be great, but the content is much the same. By content, I don't mean style or plot, but what I consider to be the real building blocks of storytelling: casting and fate. I mean, for example, the sort of characters who populate prime time – which is where people do most of their view-

ing. What are the characters' demographics, and what is the respective fate of each group: men and women, young and old, rich and poor, and so on?

Our studies show that casting and fate follow stable patterns, especially in prime time: Men outnumber women two to one. Young people are underrepresented. Older people make up only one-fifth of their actual proportion in the population. Poor people are virtually absent.

Jensen: Why is this important?

Gerbner: Socialization makes us who we are, and stories are how we learn our social roles. If you are overrepresented in the culture's stories, you see many opportunities, many choices. If you are underrepresented, the opposite is true. For example, women between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five are generally cast only in romantic roles. What message does that send to young girls?

According to the Screen Actors Guild, most of its female members stop getting calls when they turn thirty-five, and only start getting them again when they're old enough to play grandmothers. If you're a man, by contrast, you can play romantic roles until you totter into your grave. You see men playing romantic leads at fifty, sixty, even seventy. What does this teach women about their role in society? What does it teach all of us about romantic relationships?

The over- or underrepresentation of certain demographic groups on television skews the types of stories that can be told. Because most scripts are written by and for men, they project a world in which men rule and play the most roles. Furthermore,

scripts must be constructed to satisfy the demands of a market – which is not, by the way, the same as the demands of an audience. The market is controlled by many factors besides what audiences like.

For example, because a film or television program cannot make big money solely in the U.S., most producers develop stories for a world market. The world market demands stories that can be told essentially with images, and that fit any culture. Sex and violence are universal. Violence as a primary ingredient calls for male roles. So the demands of an international market reinforce the predilections of male scriptwriters.

In life, as in fiction, the choices available to people from different groups go hand in hand with the power relationships between those groups. Casting determines the role each demographic group is likely to play: success or failure, victimizer or victim. Individual programs might have a great diversity of plots, but if you look at who is doing what to whom – or the "fate" of different characters – you see great consistency and homogeneity.

Jensen: What keeps this pattern in place?

Gerbner: The pattern has remained stable because the power structure of the society that produces it has been stable. From year to year you might see a 5 to 15 percent change, but there's no steady trend in any one direction.

Jensen: How do you determine this?

Gerbner: Every year, our organization takes a sample of prime-time dramatic

erned by codes that regulate what can be shown. Television stations can't broadcast the kind of extreme violence you see in the movies, because advertisers don't want to be associated with such brutality. The message that advertisers send to stations is straightforward: "Deliver the audience to my commercial in a mood to buy." So, in a strange way, advertisers act as a moderating force.

Jensen: The influence of advertisers is at best a double-edged sword, though, because it also guarantees you won't see television programs attacking the corporate structure.

Gerbner: Absolutely. TV producers don't want to bite the hand that feeds them. That's why there is no political life in the U.S.: because there's no choice of ideologies on television. We have a single party consisting of two factions: the Ins and the Outs. When the Outs get in, they do the same thing the Ins did. You cannot have a true democratic government if there are no strong ideological differentiations. You've got to have a capitalist party, a socialist party, a green party, a communist party, a fascist party, indigenous groups, anarchists, and so on, each of which should receive significant air time. Other democratic countries have laws that try to do this. In some Scandinavian countries, the government subsidizes opposition newspapers, because they believe it's important to have a diversity of opinion.

Ironically, it's the First Amendment's guarantee of freedom of press that forbids our government from demanding diversity on the air. The First Amendment was designed to ensure that the expression of diverse opinions was not prohibited by the government. What has happened, instead, is that the country has come to be run by a private, nondemocratic government of, by, and for corpora-

tions. A handful of chief executives, maybe five or six men (and they are almost always men), determines the stories that socialize our children.

Jensen: How did you get started studying television's influence on culture?

Gerbner: After the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy in 1968, the National Institute of Health set up a commission to study violence in the culture. They were looking to blame televi-

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sion, so we received a grant to study it. They just wanted to know the violence count on TV, and we gave it to them, but more importantly we began a broad study of the cultural environment, through the annual monitoring of the content of prime-time television.

Jensen: What was the count?

Gerbner: The number of incidents of violence in prime-time is five per hour.

Jensen: So, do media depictions of violence lead to more violence in real life?

Gerbner: Not particularly. If you control for other factors, you find that people who watch more television are

not more aggressive; in fact, they lack aggressiveness. The major effects of exposure to TV violence are insecurity, dependence, and emotional vulnerability. If people were more aggressive, then they would begin to stand up for their rights. So people are taught to be submissive, to be insecure. They are taught to be afraid.

Jensen: But we've all heard countless times that TV violence leads to real violence.

Gerbner: The notion that exposure to violence incites violence is itself media-driven. Exposure actually does something much worse than incite violence: it cultivates a sense of insecurity and dependence that makes people submit to indignities no human being should ever have to bear.

Those in power are not foolish enough to incite violence against their own rule. They know very well that television cultivates passivity, withdrawal, and insecurity. That's exactly what the corporations want.

Jensen: So you are not in any way against depictions of violence?

Gerbner: No, not at all. Violence is a legitimate dramatic and artistic element, especially when you show its tragic effects and consequences. But these consequences are hardly ever depicted: sponsors don't like it.

Jensen: This should come as no surprise, given that our entire culture is based on ignoring the consequences of our actions, whether it's the consequences of environmental destruction, the consequences of smoking and drinking, or what have you.

Gerbner: Exactly. TV is saturated with alcohol, but the consequences of alcohol use, of course, are rarely shown.

– meaning fictional – programming and adds its demographics to our database, which by now contains forty-five thousand TV characters. We've been doing this for thirty years, and throughout this time the patterns have remained stable.

Jensen: But how do television's "demographics" affect the real world?

Gerbner: How does schooling affect the real world? By socializing us. Casting and fate on TV works the same way, except that these lessons start in infancy and continue throughout life. Television has become the universal curriculum of our people.

Television programs – and movies, as well – project the power structure of our society, and, by projecting it, they perpetuate it, make it seem normal, make it seem the only possibility. Once viewers have become habituated to a certain story, they experience great consternation if you try to change it. Let's say you try to cast against type and have a woman wield power and use violence. Suddenly, you can't tell any story other than one describing how this came to be – that is, why a woman is doing these things, which seem unnatural for her, yet normal for a man. Just imagine a group of writers talking about a story, and one says, "Why is the victim a woman? Why don't we turn the tables?" The answer would be "A violent woman is distasteful to viewers."

Jensen: But it's not distasteful to see Bruce Willis kill dozens of people.

Gerbner: To me it is, but in the culture it's expected.

Jensen: What does seeing all this unreal violence do to us? A hundred years ago, if you saw someone get slashed with a knife, you were witnessing an actual injury – probably quite a traumatic experience. But we think nothing of watching it happen on TV.

Gerbner: Most of the violence depicted on television is pretty sanitized. It has none of the tragedy, none of the gore. It's what I call "happy violence" – cool, painless, and spectacular. It's designed not to upset you but to entertain you and deliver you to the next commercial in a mood to buy. People are shocked by violence in real life. I've heard of children, when they've seen somebody actually get hurt, saying, "It wasn't like in the movies."

I don't believe, however, that either the frequency or the explicitness of violence is the primary issue. Violence is a demonstration of power, and the real issue is who is doing what to whom. If time and again you hear and see stories of conflicts in which people like yourself prevail, you become more aggressive. If, on the other hand, you are a member of a group that is more likely to be victimized on TV, you grow up more insecure, more dependent, more afraid of getting into a conflict, because you feel your risk is higher. That's the way we train women, who in reality are a numerical majority, to act like a minority. The instilled sense of potential victimization and vulnerability is the key.

For every woman in prime time who possesses the kind of power that white male characters have, there are two who are victimized. If you look at just women of color, the ratio is slightly higher. In other words, your chances of victimization double if you are not a member of the group for whom it is acceptable to be an aggressor.

Jensen: But doesn't that just represent reality? Although in domestic violence women sometimes beat men, it is overwhelmingly the opposite.

Gerbner: Children are not born knowing these roles. Stories teach them how to act, whether they are to be the victim or victimizer, and how and toward whom they may vent their

aggression. Both men and women learn from television that women are legitimate victims, and white males are not. Once the stories have shaped reality, they then mirror it.

But a mirror is not a passive instrument. It offers a kind of exchange: first you see something – your tie perhaps, or your makeup – and then you either change what you see, or you don't. The same is true of television. You look into it and see who you are supposed to be, and then you either conform or you don't. But it takes a conscious decision not to conform, and even the decision to rebel is based on what you have seen: you have to have something to rebel against, and that is what these stories provide.

Jensen: Don't these stories determine not only who does what to whom, but also what we see as acceptable modes of conflict resolution? Instead of seeing two people hashing out their differences, we see them fight it out.

Gerbner: That's because creating lively and realistic dramatic dialogue takes talent. Most violence on television is the result of a poverty of imagination. It's an easy out for writers and producers who want to create cheap, easily exported product. Violence is not even what audiences want – it depresses ratings. But because violence travels well, it is still profitable.

The audience's relationship with violence is complicated; even though it's not what they want, they have become accustomed to it. And, over time, the violence must grow more extreme in order to make an impression. This is especially true of movies. In order to compete with TV, Hollywood producers must ask themselves what viewers aren't getting enough of from television. These producers not only have to appeal to expectations created by television; they have to go beyond anything television can offer.

Television, you see, is still gov-

Through a special study of alcohol and tobacco in the media, we've found that there are 2.1 alcohol-drinking incidents per hour in prime time. And when Seagram bought MCA, the rate of drinking incidents increased. Companies are buying up media outlets to make sure they can control the stories.

Tobacco use is, thankfully, down on television, with one tragic exception: young women are smoking more on TV than ever before. And the fact that we have a lung-cancer epidemic among young women is no coincidence. These women get the message television gives them: that smoking is a way of asserting their independence, of rebelling. And while smoking has gone down on television, it has become rampant in movies. It's difficult to see a movie today in which the star doesn't light up.

Jensen: Are tobacco companies behind this?

Gerbner: Absolutely. In order to amass wealth, those in power are leading people to use an addictive drug that is practically guaranteed to kill if used as directed. Smoking kills more than a thousand people per day – more than all illegal drugs combined – yet it is legally promoted, advertised, and sold, and consistently embedded in the stories that socialize us.

Jensen: You've written that "we are headed in the direction of an upsurge in neofascism in a very entertaining and...amusing disguise."

Gerbner: Fascism is essentially a corporate-run, highly repressive ideology that abolishes political choice and imposes a certain type of ethnic dominance and preference. It no longer requires a brutal government takeover of culture to accomplish this. In our case, it's been accomplished in a very entertaining and seemingly democratic way. Of course, in reality, it's far

from democratic.

For one thing, in the last twenty years, the monopolization of our culture has proceeded at a rate that was unimaginable when antitrust laws were still enforced. The Telecommunications Bill of 1996, which was passed without any public discussion, has opened the floodgates to even further monopolization of the media. All of our stories are now being told by a handful of conglomerates: Sony, Time-Warner, Disney, and Rupert Murdoch. What kind of a democracy is that?

Jensen: What we're talking about here is the monopolization of perception.

Gerbner: I think it's more than that. It's a monopolization not only of perception but of conception. What we're talking about here is the monopolization of one's entire world view, which goes far beyond what we see and hear. The stories we tell about the world help form the world in which we live. And if you can control the telling of stories, you can control people's concept of the world around them, and even their behavior, because we act in light of how we conceive the world to be.

In the past, there have been efforts to prevent this sort of monopolization. Ten or fifteen years ago, for example, the Supreme Court held that studios could not control both production and distribution. But that's been forgotten. The deregulation of the Reagan era has left a long-lasting imprint on our cultural life. And in the current political environment, there is virtually no opposition to the monopolization of the media, largely because politicians are so dependent on the media to get elected. We have to fall back on citizen movements and small organizations like the Cultural Environment Movement, of which I'm a part. We work for gender equity and genuine diversity of ownership, employment, and representation in the media.

Jensen: How do you see yourselves accomplishing that?

Gerbner: That's a good question. It's a people's movement, so we have no money, no funding. We've had to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, because corporate sponsorship isn't an option when you're addressing corporate control as a problem, not an asset. But if you believe in the notion of citizenship, then you have to believe you can organize to make a difference. Our motto is an old union slogan from the 1930s: "Don't agonize. Organize." They showed it could be done then, and we want to show it can be done now.

Finding support may not be as difficult as it seems. People are searching for an answer. Underneath all that passivity that television generates, there is resentment, even rage. Those feelings have to be tapped and channeled in a democratic direction. People often say they've been concerned about these issues, but never knew there was anything they could do. That people feel so helpless about a major cultural issue is a powerful indictment of our democracy.

Jensen: What do you think is the most important thing people can do?

Gerbner: The most important thing is not ridding our stories of violence. The single most important thing is diversity. We need to demand that producers cast more women and more people of color. If we can achieve that, we will see a more accurate representation of humanity and a greater diversity of roles. Stories will change. They will no longer be only about white-male power plays. That simple act – changing our stories – will change the future.