WAYNE DANIELSON AWARD

for Outstanding Contributions to Communication Scholarship

Address by the 1991 Recipient

Dr. George Gerbner

College of Communication
The University of Texas at Austin

THE WAYNE A. DANIELSON AWARD 1991

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DR. GEORGE GERBNER

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Communication Building A Auditorium

The University of Texas at Austin

WAYNE A. DANIELSON AWARD

For Distinguished Contribution

to Communication Scholarship

from the College of Communication

presented on its behalf by

Dean Robert C. Jeffrey

Communication Association and a member of the American Sociology Association.

Dean Gerbner, we welcome you to Austin. We can think of no one better to receive the first Danielson Award, and we look forward to your remarks on "Instant History in the Persian Gulf: Like Going to a Movie."

ACCEPTANCE ADDRESS BY DR. GEORGE GERBNER

I have long admired Wayne Danielson's many contributions to tracking new trends in communication. Today I will try to follow in his footsteps, though you should not hold him responsible for the turn my path may take. The new trend I want to spot and to illustrate is the role of communication in the writing of history, with the war in the Persian Gulf a case in point.

The writing of history is a communicative activity that relates the past to the present and future.[1] But, as any communicative activity, it depends not only on the events to be communicated about, but also on the means employed to communicate about them. When the means change, as Hold Innis, Marshall McLuhan and others have observed, access to and control over communications change, meanings change, and the telling of all the stories, including history, also changes. All is well established in communication theory and research. But there is one recent particular and specific change that has not yet been fully explored. It is sharply focused and limited to brief periods of intensity, but it is far-reaching in its implications. I call it instant history. After a long buildup of technological developments, it came about rather suddenly.

Mao Zedung was once asked what he thought about the French Revolution. Chairman Mao replied that it was too soon to tell.[2] That is to say, as the world changes, new meanings and new interpretations become possible, and it takes time to sort them out. That is what historians do, or used to do. Now they will have something else with which to contend.

Another astute observer of the world scene, Saudi financier of Irangate fame, Adnan Khassoghi, was asked what he thought about the war in the Persian Gulf. He said it was "like going to a movie: we paid our money, we went to the theater, we laughed, we cried, the movie ended and an hour later we had forgotten about it."[3] If that is true, and I think it's a useful description of the public experience of that war, our case in point to which we shall return the deliberate process of recording, writing, and interpreting history got a swift kick in the pants.

The accelerating tempo and expanding reach of media-driven historic events in the twentieth century are evident to most observers, though a full account of their quickening pace has not yet been written. But I think there is something new and qualitatively different involved in the dizzying convulsions of the last decade. There comes a point in the accumulation of quantities when a qualitative

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[1]Ernst Briesach on "Historiography: in the *International Encyclopedia of Communications*, Vol. 2, p. 280. Oxford University Press, 1989.

[2]Cited in "Poland After Solidarity" *by Timothy Garton Ash. The New York Review of Books*, June 13, 1991, p. 57.

[3]In a review by Tom Masland, *Philadelphia Inquirer* book review section, September 1, 1991, p. 2-F.

transformation takes place. Add heat to a pot of water and after a certain period of time the water begins to boil -- a qualitative transformation from liquid to gas. Or compress time and reduce heat, as in fast food and frozen meals, and we have new eating patterns. Well, the accumulation and convergence of communicative technologies confer controls, concentrate power, shrink time and speed action to the point where the communicative acts of reporting and writing of history turn into something different. The new phenomenon occurs in crises, or, if not, it tends to precipitate crisis, situations when, one would think, deliberate speech and careful interpretation are needed the most. Instead, however, past, present and future can now be packaged, witnessed and frozen in a flash into the memorable moving imagery of instant history.

Instant history is made when access to video-satellite-computer technologies blanket the world in real time with selected images that provoke immediate reactions, influence the outcome, and then quick-freeze it into the official text of received history. Instant history is simultaneous, global, mass, living, telling, and making history in brief and intensive bursts.

Instant history is a magic lantern projecting images on a blank screen in a temporal void. The show has a clear beginning, middle and end but no before or after or context. It telescopes roles, parts, and outcome into the same act. It appeals to prior beliefs and predilections. It triggers familiar responses. It blends into our repertory of imagery. It is not easily dislodged, re-interpreted, or even attributed to one particular show. We have even forgotten the title.

Images of Vietnam took hours or days to reach us, after the fact. It may have been the first "living room war," but not in real time. It was a long, slow buildup in every way. Body counts were in headlines but did not have a public witness. The tide of public reaction turned only after seeing images of the Tet Offensive, a summary execution of an "enemy" suspect, naked "enemy" children fleeing napalm, thatched "enemy" huts being put to the torch. (When cameras turn to focus on the fallen, the war is lost, or soon will be. The body bags coming back from the Gulf War were strictly censored.) The Iraq-Iran war, totally out of sight, dragged on for 10 years. But chaotic perestroika, made visible by glasnost, rolled into Eastern Europe where each successive counter-revolution took half the time of the previous one.

Instant history forces the pace of events. The crisis unfolds before our eyes, too fast for thoughtful consideration of antecedents, alternatives, or long-range consequences, but just in time for conditioned reflex. The show is on, we're in it, and the deed must be done before second thoughts, counter-acts, and regrets can slow it down. A gathering crisis builds up its own backlash that instant history avoids. The long pent-up (and, I think, still far from spent) Soviet backlash led to the attempted coup, or, as the plotters saw it, counter-coup intended to prevent chaos and disaster. But the plotters lost control and the magic lantern was seized from their hands. A tidal wave of domestic and world reaction to competing imagery swamped them, and in 72 hours they became instant history.

Speed and imagery give instant history its punch -- and its burden. Milburn points out that "to obtain peaceful resolution of conflict, it is vitally important to be able to entertain a variety of perspectives; that is, to engage in complex rather than simplistic thinking."[4] Images reveal what presumably happens; they do not need logic to build the case. Postman argues that pictures "have no difficulty overwhelming works and short-circuiting introspection."[5] He cites studies that found

the complexity of diplomatic exchanges in international crises that end peacefully to be significantly higher than crises that end in armed conflict. Milburn's own experiments show that dramatic imagery tends to inhibit both complexity and alternatives. And research by Grimes concludes that works also influence the memory of imagery.[6] That means the narration will often be recalled as actuality witnessed on the screen.[7] All that makes image-bound instant history-making in a crisis particularly effective and potentially disastrous.

The case in point I want to examine is the war in the Persian Gulf. It was an unprecedented moving picture spectacular. It crammed into its first month alone the entire imagery -- and firepower -- of all the bombings of Europe in four years of World War II. But unlike visions of a carpet of explosives leveling cities and setting off firestorms, or of jungle paths with G.I.s "flushing" out Vietcong from their hiding places, we were shown "seeing eye" bombs zooming in on their targets followed by maps of a four-day air-and-ground offensive against an invisible enemy. The body counts of Vietnam were replaced by sortie counts of streaking aircraft over an unseen country, and sound-bites of photogenic crews. The few unauthorized ground shots by CNN of bombs falling on civilian targets were rationalized as inevitable and regrettable "collateral damage." Never before were selected glimpses of actuality strung together under the omniscient voice-overs of safari-clad reporters and a parade of military experts with maps and charts at the ready, so mesmerizing, so coherent, and so contrived.

Desert Storm was the first major successful global media orchestration that made instant history. The Soviet coup six months later was the first major attempt at media orchestration that miscarried. A year before the coup Gorbachev signed a new Soviet press law that gave "editorial collectives" autonomy not known in the democratic West. That may have saved his life. It made for a relatively fragmented and leaky communication system. When the coup came, the plotters could not conduct the increasingly cacophonous media orchestra. The baton was snatched from their hands. What happened then also made instant history. But that is another story. What are the common elements that distinguish instant history from the ordinary kind? Let me suggest five types of actions necessary for making -- or losing -- the chance to make instant history. They are: control, orchestration, witness, feedback, and quick-freeze. Here are the instructions for successful crisis-management by instant history:

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[4]Milburn, Michael and Ann B. McTrail. "The Dramatic Presentation of News and its Effects on Cognitive Complexity." *Political Psychology*.

[5]*Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business by Neil Postman.* New York: Penguin Books, 1985. p. 103.

[6]"Encoding TV News Messages Into Memory" by Tom Grimes. Journalism Quarterly, 67:4, Winter 1990.

[7]The "Tianenman Square massacre," which many claim to have witnessed on television, did not take place there but in another part of town, off camera.

(1) Gain access and keep control of real-time global imagery. One brief burst of saturation coverage is all you have. Suspense and uncertainty are trying. The resolution must be forced before discordant voices, costly network preemptions, and audiences missing their prime-time violence-with-quick-happy-endings could blunt the momentum.

(2) Orchestrate mainstream media with other signs and actions while the critical event is still going on. Successful instant history requires a suitable total environment of talk shows, slogans and signs such as flags, parades, ribbons, and other reminders of "our troops" sent over, if all works out well, as the supporting cast in the play.

(3) Offer the witness-audience a sense of participation not only in the events (as selected and interpreted), but also in what appear to be spontaneous (but still carefully stage-managed) occasions such as press conferences, panel discussions, "briefings," and interpretations. This will suggest that alternative perspectives have been explored and exhausted. It will simplify and isolate the crisis from distracting complexities and unplanned inquiries.

(4) Translate witness and participation into active feedback to indicate support, from letters to the editor to driving with lights on. Making it "like going to a movie" evokes conventionally cultivated responses. Let this feedback reverberate across all media, crystallize in public opinion that brooks no opposition, and hasten the desired outcome. (Needless to say, brute force is also needed; image can triumph over reason and doubt only as allied to power.)

(5) Celebrate the outcome as the Happy Ending. Quickly produce and distribute videos, CD-Rom disks, paperback books and lavishly illustrated texts to saturate the market for instant nostalgia and school use. Begin planning the next campaign (probably political) to use the triumphant imagery to pulverize any opposition. Ritualize the imagery and resist revisionists.

When the balance sheet of critical events of the 1990s is finally tallied, if such tallies will still be possible, the world will marvel at the mischief wrought by the new force of instant history. The war in the Persian Gulf, our case in point, is indeed fading to a few flickering images: Scuds streaking in the sky and Patriots rising to intercept them, or so we thought; bombs falling down factory smokestacks with deadly accuracy, or so, too, we thought. But that was no movie. Its fallout will linger on in the real world for a long time to come. I can sketch only a few brief strokes of the scenario.

The curtain rises on an operation long in preparation. Every U.S. administration wanted to land troops in the Middle East to secure a strategic foothold and reduce reliance on sometimes balky allies. Eisenhower landed troops there and Reagan landed troops there (only to have 216 marines killed in one bombing attack) until, finally, Hussein gave the right cue. Iraq's historic claims and economic grievances were ignored, as was Hussein's advance notice of the march into Kuwait. Framed as a simple effort to rebuff "naked aggression," the U. S.-led military buildup proceeded swiftly with little or no consideration of the colonial and recent history of Middle East boundaries, of other invasions, occupations, conflicts, and provocations, of other repeated violations of U. N. resolutions and international law (including by the U. S., formally condemned by the International Court of Justice.)

Diplomacy was faked for the media. Bob Woodward in his book *The Commanders* describes the panic in the White House when it seemed that the Saudis might "bug out" (in Bush's words) and accept some settlement. King Fahd did not buy the excuse of Iraqi threat to Saudi Arabia, and said he did not need foreign ground troops to defend

his country. While the White House sent Secretary of Defense Cheney with an offer the King could not refuse, and Secretary of State Baker to Baghdad to "negotiate," National Security Chief Scowcroft told Saudi Ambassador Bandar that "the President has made up his mind"; diplomatic efforts "are all exercises."

Exaggerated intelligence estimates of Iraqi military might and the "crack Republican Guards" were leaked to media eager to heighten the drama and justify the buildup. Disinformation rationalized as "confusing the enemy" confused everybody. Decision-making was restricted to a small group headed by a former CIA director (now President) with good access to reliable information. Even the National Security Council was cut off,[8] as were, apparently, the commanders themselves. Woodward reported that Colin Powell and other commanders urged caution, advised that continued "containment or strangulation" was working, and found themselves excluded from the decision-making. Later they complained of "faulty intelligence." The order to attack came from a White House apparently acting on superior intelligence and confident of success.

The Prologue ended with the U. S. ultimatum of January 15, 1991. Final preparation for the offensive began in September, but *The New York Times* published the "news" only on March 3, after the war ended. *Newsweek's* account of the preparations, published on January 28, quoted "one of his closest advisers" saying "This is a fight George Bush has been preparing for all his life." Elizabeth Drew wrote in *The New Yorker* of January 25: "...John Sununu...was telling people that a short successful war would be pure political gold for the President -- would guarantee his reelection." Reporters who rush on the air and into print with every big scoop, now held back. "The road from Watergate to the Gulf War is marked by ever greater cautiousness and opportunism on the part of the press," wrote Michael Massing. "Bob Woodward (who saved revealing details for his book) provides a particularly disquieting example of the change."[9]

Meanwhile, we had brought the U. N. out of media mothballs and bent it to our will. *The New York Times*, silent on the world organization since the press campaign against UNESCO,[10] now editorially complimented the U. N. on September 11, 1990, for having "provided legal and political armor" for the operation. Vague resolutions authorizing force were rammed through without significant opposition (absent on the world scene since the collapse of Soviet power). The resolutions concealed, but were later used to justify, their ultimate objectives. Having achieved them, we exploded the equivalent in bombs of the next 12-15 years of the entire United Nations global budget. But we were "The U. N.'s Biggest Deadbeat," complained *The New York Times* editorial, still delinquent $720 in overdue membership payments.

The deception, suppression, misinformation, and disinformation that characterized the buildup overwhelmed and disoriented the public and defused the opposition.

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[8]See e.g. "Twilight of the Gods" by John B. Judis, *Wilson Quarterly*, Autumn 1991, p. 55.

[9]"Sitting on Top of the News" by Michael Massing, The New York Review of Books, June 27, 1991, p. 11.

[10]See "Unesco in the U. S. Press" by George Gerbner in *The Global Media Debate: Its Rise, Fall, and Renewal.* George Gerbner, Hamid Mowlana and Kaarle Nordenstreng (Eds.) New York: Ablex. In Press.

Many watched in disbelief as the juggernaut assembled in the Gulf was set to strike. When the non-negotiable ultimatum was about to expire, the public was still deeply divided: four out of ten responding to a *Times Mirror* poll still thought sanctions should be given more time. The same number also wanted to hear more about the views of 41 percent of Americans who did **not** think Bush "did the right thing" sending troops to the Gulf.[11]

Even though the Congressional authorization had passed by only seven votes, once the war started, dissenting voices fell silent, or were silent, and the media-driven instant history kicked in. The often simplistic and tendentious media construction of the buildup paled into insignificance before the anti-historical image-bound instant history blitz.

The precision bombing spectacular was, in fact, a dumping of the equivalent of five Hiroshimas on a small country where it hurt the most: the life-sustaining infrastructure. One may question whether there really was a war, if by war we mean a conflict in which an enemy shoots back. The slaughter, as it is more properly called, claimed an estimated 100,000 Iraqi soldiers, civilians, women, and children. The kill ratio of 100,000 to 150 U. S. and allied soldiers, mostly by accidents and "friendly fire," is unprecedented in the history of armed conflict. Poorly equipped and demoralized troops sitting in trenches, caves, and bunkers without air cover were napalmed to deprive those inside of oxygen, and then bulldozed, burying dead and alive alike. Defenseless convoys fleeing in panic were bombed and strafed into oblivion in what pilots called a "turkey shoot."

There was much media concern expressed about the threat of Iraqi chemical and missile threat. The few erratic Scuds and (as it turned out) the even more erratic Patriots got extensive coverage. Missing were signs that the massacre, in fact, inflicted on Iraq was more lethal than any nuclear, chemical, or biological warfare has ever been. It left two countries in ruins and Iraq's infrastructure systematically destroyed with long-term misery and disease in its wake.

The main facts of war cost and damage were carefully kept out of the briefings and censored from the reports. U. S. and allied reporters were rigidly controlled and few other foreign journalists were even admitted to Saudi Arabia. Of course, ordinarily you don't need battlefield news to understand the war itself; varied sources and vigilant press can help. But instant history does not admit intelligence it cannot control. The few independent reporters who obtained information on their own were excluded from media mainstream or vilified as traitors. The most extensive documentary footage of the conflict is still locked in Pentagon vaults.

What was represented as a clean, swift, surgical strike to "deter aggression," get rid of Hussein, and secure oil, petrodollars, peace, jobs, and democracy was, in fact, a calculated human and ecological disaster of "cataclysmic proportion" (reported the U. N. inspection team) that achieved few, if any, of its declared aims. Hussein is riding high, the Middle East is in turmoil and arming faster than before, the Western

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[11] "The 1990-91 Panel Study of the Political Consequences of War." American National Election Study, 1991. Center for Political Studies, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan.

alliance has been strained, the Third World, especially Islam, shaken. Kuwait's oligarchy was restored, more repressive than ever. The Kurds have been abandoned again, as have the democratic forces in Iraq, who, apparently, pose a threat to the New World Order.

The only clear successes have been the extension of American power into an increasingly troubled region, the renewed flow of petrodollars propping up increasingly shaky economies, and the domestic "political gold." These "successes" can hardly be considered vital to national interest or security.[12] In light of their cost in resources, lives and long-term devastation, they are a blot on our history and on the conscience of humankind. Yet, the operation is celebrated as a victory.

Time-Warner compressed imagery that would fill 500 floppy disks into a single CD-Rom history of Desert Storm in record time, days after the war ended, and sped the disk to stores and school libraries. Pentagon-aided victory parades, an ABC-TV docudrama, "Heroes of Desert Storm," (with a 30-second introduction by President Bush) and the first deployment of Gulf war imagery in an election campaign[13] mark the triumphant quick-freeze stage of Desert Storm in instant history.

Let us now consider how this triumph of instant history came about. Once the saturation bombing started, the tide of saturation coverage began to rise, dissent was marginalized and challenge suppressed, most respondents to the *Times Mirror* poll were swept up in the flow. Half of them, most of whom wanted more diverse views before, now said they heard **too much** opposition. As the operation entered its second full week, instant history found its true believers. Nearly eight out of ten believed that the censors were not hiding bad news; and 57 percent wanted **increased** military control over reporting.

Two months later the public rated press coverage, military censorship and general information about the war even higher. The "very favorable" rating of the military rose 42 points from 18 to an unprecedented 60 percent. Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney's rating jumped from three to 33 percent, extraordinary for a Secretary of Defense. Desert Storm commander Norman Schwarzkopf's 51 percent was the highest "very favorable" score in over 150 *Times Mirror* public favorability surveys conducted since 1985, second only to John F. Kennedy's 59 percent in the spring of 1987.[14]

Let us ask again: How is it possible that the engineering of a vast and unnecessary human catastrophe was made not only acceptable but politically advantageous, even triumphant, and a virtual breeding ground for presidential prospects? The buildup, orchestration, saturation and fabrications provide only part of the answer. Another

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[12]See, e.g. "What is the National Interest" by Alan Tonelson in *The Atlantic*, July 1991.

[13]The "test run" by the National Republican Congressional Committee in a November 1991 race in central Virginia yielded positive results. The 30-second spot superimposed a photo of the Democratic candidate over an antiwar demonstration showing a "Victory to Iraq" banner. Although it was acknowledged (after the election) that the candidate did not attend the rally, she lost the election 37-63 percent.

[14]"The People, The Press and the War in the Gulf." *Times Mirror* Center for People and the Press releases of January 10, January 31 and March 25, 1991, Washington, D.C.

part comes from those characteristics of instant history that isolate critical events from their broader historical context and throw the spectator-witness back upon conventional conceptions of how things work in the world. In our culture many of those conceptions are cultivated by what we should recognize as the cult of violence.

Humankind may (or may not) have had more bloodthirsty eras, but none was as filled with images of violence as the present. We are awash in a tide of violent representations the world has never seen. There is no escape from the massive invasion of colorful mayhem into the homes and cultural life of ever larger areas of the world.

Of course, there was blood in fairy tales, gore in mythology, murder in Shakespeare, wars in all the textbooks. It is a violent world. Violence is a legitimate cultural expression, necessary to balance tragic consequences against deadly compulsions. But the historically defined, individually crafted and selectively used symbolic violence of heroism, cruelty or misanthropy has been swamped by violence with happy endings produced on the dramatic assembly line, saturating the mainstream of the common culture.

Our children are born into a symbolic environment of six to eight violent acts per prime-time hour alone, four times as many in presumably humorous children's programs, and an average of two entertaining murders a night. Contrary to the hype that promoted them, most actual uses of cable, video, and other new technologies make the dominant pattern penetrate even more deeply (but not more cheaply) into everyday life. No historical, esthetic or even commercial rationalization can justify drenching every home with images of expertly choreographed brutality.

Our research has found that exposure to violence-laden television cultivates an exaggerated sense of insecurity, mistrust and anxiety about dark forces in a "mean world."[15] These are highly exploitable sentiments. They contribute to the irresistibility of punitive and vindictive actions presented as quick and decisive, enhancing a sense of security. They lend themselves to political uses and to the appeal of wars on those easily defined as enemies.

The Cold War is over and the cultural props for imperial policy are shifting from their anti-communist rationalizations to a sharp and selective offensive against real and concocted terrorists, narco-terrorists, petro-terrorists, unfriendly (as opposed to friendly) aggressors, and other demons of the Third World. The ultimate payoff of the cult of violence is its ritual demonstration of power and its projection into politics and war. An overkill of violent imagery helps to mobilize support for taking charge of the unruly at home and abroad.

Bombarding viewers by violent images of a mean and dangerous world without illuminating the real costs of violence and war, is, in the last analysis, an instrument of intimidation and terror. It was indispensable to the triumph of instant history in the Persian Gulf.

These are not isolated problems that can be addressed by focusing on media violence or crisis coverage alone. They are integral parts of a global cultural condition that increasingly permeates and poisons the mainstream of the common symbolic environment. Only a new international cultural environmental movement dedicated to democratic media reform can do justice to the challenge and terror of instant history. But that, too, is another story.

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[15]See, for example, "Violence and Terror in the Mass Media" by George Gerbner. *Reports and Papers in Mass Communication*, No. 102. Paris: Unesco, 1988.