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NOVAK, THE IMAGE-MAKER

→ Said Newsweek earlier this month: "Now, at last, with NBC's Mr. Novak, the teachers have an image with which they can live." The conclusion appeared to be less one by Newsweek than by a U. of Illinois professor of communications, George Gerbner. He heads a two-year study by the University's Institute of Communications Research into the "portrayal of teachers and schools in the mass media of 10 countries," financed by the University and U.S. Office of Education.

The one-hour NBC-TV Tuesday night dramatic show, first to feature a teacher as a central character in a serious role, is having impact, according both to Newsweek and to Gerbner. The magazine, in the Dec. 2 issue, pointed to medicine's Dr. Kildare and the legal profession's Perry Mason, said that "until this year school teachers were represented in mass media, almost exclusively, by rather pathetic and comical types."

Gerbner, interviewed by the magazine, pointed out that the weekly audience of Mr. Novak, totaling almost 20 million viewers, reaches more Americans than "all of the real-life high school teachers combined." The show, which as Newsweek points out, receives technical advice from rotating panels of teachers arranged by NEA, ranks in the front among newcomer shows to network TV this season.

The evaluation of Mr. Novak is a small slice of the study. It will include TV's Mr. Peepers, Miss Brooks, plus 2,800 other fictional characters in TV, movies, magazines. U. of Illinois student teams have checked 4,000 pieces of education reporting (on both sides of the Iron Curtain) as part of the study, according to Newsweek. The Gerbner report is not due to be released until April, but the director has reached some tentative conclusions. Gerbner told the magazine that fiction has tended to portray the teacher as a noble, impractical, poverty-stricken creature and puts them more often in comedy settings than in serious situations. "I have a notion that, as far as the U.S. is concerned," said Gerbner, "we'll find something like this: teachers (in the various media) are harmless and kind of funny when they're being funny, but when they're serious, they're most likely subversive of morals and politics. The kind of insight you get from this kind of study doesn't tell you what's good and what's bad. But it does tell you what a country values and why."

Meanwhile, Mr. Novak continues, under Producer E. Jack Neuman's able handling, to establish itself as a TV commercial property, tackling educational issues in a fictional setting which doubtfully could have been presented with comparable impact as a "documentary" or "discussion" show a few years ago.

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