

To Free the World

George Gerbner wants to save us from the global media monopoly

For the past 25 years, George Gerbner, dean emeritus of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, has led the Cultural Indicators Project, which examines the way the mass media portrays our culture. Troubled by the results of his research, Gerbner last year founded the Cultural Environment Movement (CEM), a coalition of more than 150 individuals and organizations dedicated to reclaiming control of world media, which he says has, "drifted out of democratic reach" because of global consolidation. The CEM, explains the Hungarian-born septuagenarian, aims to "introduce a public voice into cultural decision making, which is now conducted behind closed doors and is accountable to no one." In the following interview with Philadelphia writer Sara Kelly, Gerbner elaborates on his ideas of how to break the media's monopoly on our hearts and minds.

What kinds of problems does global media consolidation create?

Most of what we see and what our children see on television and in the movies is not produced for us; it is produced for the global market. The reason other countries import it is because our syndicators present them with an irresistible deal. They say, "We can sell you an hour's worth of this television show or motion picture for less money than it would cost you to produce one minute of your own programming." That's destroying their own industries, their own creative people, the integrity of their own culture. Most people in many of these countries resent our syndicators for dumping action-packed, cheaply produced violent material on them.

But how does that affect the United States?

Since programs essentially serve as an atmosphere for sales, they have to be compatible with the advertising message. That means that they present a world in which the best customers dominate. In this world, men outnumber women three to one. Young people, old people, people with any kind of disability or special interest are underrepresented

and overvictimized. One-third of our population—namely, people with lower incomes and less education—is represented by 1.2 percent of the characters. They're invisible. Young people in the inner cities who have no jobs and don't know anyone who has a job feel that they're forgotten and out of sight and that the only way they can be recognized is if they do something atrocious. That is what's tearing this country apart.

How can we curtail corporate freedom of speech without threatening our own?

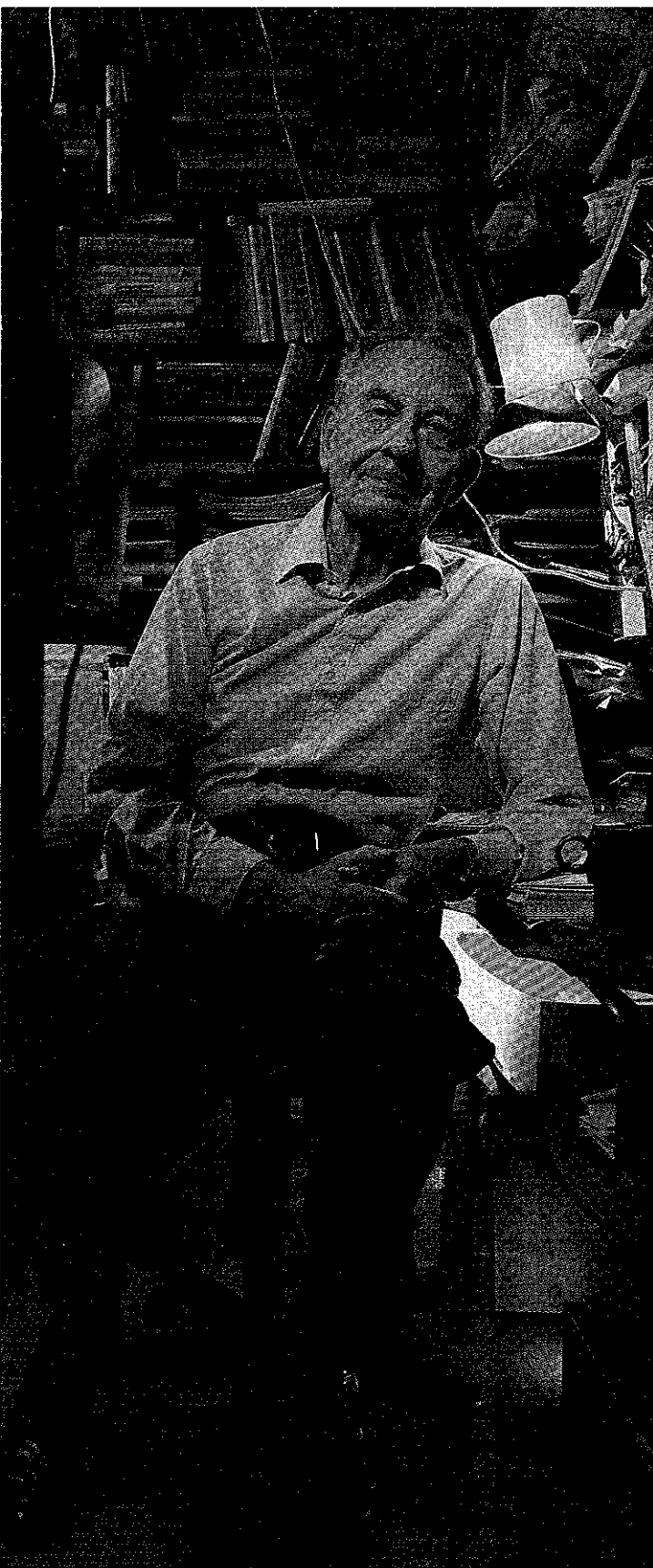
You have to turn the question upside-down. Censorship is what we have now—the imposition of a marketing formula on journalists and creative people, which is then foisted on the children of the world. That is not an expression of freedom. What we want is greater freedom for the journalists and the creative people, a loosening of the noose on the market formula, and a greater diversity of perspectives. The First Amendment has been perverted to shield monopolies as censors, and that's unacceptable.

Could it be argued that Americans willingly surrendered control of the media?

The Telecommunications Act of 1996 passed without any public discussion. The media kept it a secret. The only discussion was about telephone rates, not about changes in the ground rules for everyday culture in every home. We're the only democratic country that has no choice in programming. In other democratic countries, public and private television are essentially equal. We don't have that here, and the reason the public has never had a choice is the reason the fish in the ocean don't know that they've been swimming in salt water: They've never known anything else.

Has the quality of TV programming been declining at a faster rate since the Telecommunications Act was passed?

Television programming is getting worse very rapidly



because with every merger staffs are reduced and new entries are denied. Homogenizing formulas are spreading wider and wider. It's very peculiar, because people say we have all these channels now. But today, more channels are owned by fewer companies, and you get pretty much the same representation of men and women, rich and poor, young and old.

What, specifically, is the CEM doing to initiate reform?

CEM held its founding convention last March in St. Louis. Fifteen countries were represented there, and the delegates approved a set of founding documents. One is called "A Viewer's Declaration of Independence" and the other is "The People's Communication Charter." The latter includes a 25-item action program [primarily publishing, networking, and advertising endeavors] that was approved by the convention. Right now we're in the stage of organization-building and fund-raising, because without funds we're not going to be able to move on any of the action programs.

Is the world ready for the Cultural Environment Movement?

Many people are angry and frustrated and they don't know why. That is what the so-called culture warriors—like Pat Buchanan and Pat Robertson—are cashing in on. They're exploiting that legitimate grievance. That is why we call the CEM the liberating alternative. Alternative means alternative to those who are exploiting the same frustrations, but focusing them in a repressive direction. We want to go in a liberating direction.

For more information, contact
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In January, join invited guests and fellow readers for a weeklong discussion about the media in Café Utne (www.utne.com/cafe).