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# A new environmental movement on communication and culture

*'The world as we know it, the symbolic environment in which we grow up and live, has been transformed forever.' The author traces this transformation from pre-industrial times, to the age of print and the industrial revolution, to the present TV culture. 'Most of the stories told to most of the children [in the West] . . . are told not by the parents, not by the schools, and not by the church, but by a small group of distant corporations.'*

*Professor Gerbner calls for a 'new environmental movement' which is concerned with cultural policies. Just as the physical environment is essential to our survival, the cultural environment is essential to the quality of that survival.*

The theme of communication, culture and community could not be more timely. These are the processes that built the world as we know it and indeed can tear it apart.

My definition of communication is interaction through messages; of culture: a system of messages that guides our interactions with one another; and of community: a process of sharing these messages. These processes built the world as we know it. But it is no longer the hand-craft product of our communities, our parents, our churches and schools. It is increasingly the product of an ever-shrinking, ever-more centralised, and ever-more sophisticated manufacturing process. It is created by industrial establishments and their cultural arms, the mass media, out for sales, for votes, and for power. Its creators are driven by a compulsion (both commercial and political) to present life in saleable packages and to censor or suppress much of what does not fit that formula.

The world as we know it, the symbolic environment in which we grow up and learn, has been transformed forever. We are just beginning to take the measure of that transformation. I cannot think of another international group that is as capable of and as receptive to addressing this issue as those attending this Congress.

I would like, in three steps, to address the issue of how we can assume some responsibility and control over the processes that built our world and govern our lives and make increasingly important contributions to determining our values. The first step is: How did we get into this predicament? The second is: What is it really like? And the third: What can we do about it?

First, how did we get into this predicament? My conception of that is divided into the three points of pre-industrial, industrial, and telecommunica-

tions age. The pre-industrial is characterised by face-to-face interaction, by ritual, by an overall community, culture and philosophy of life later on called religion. It is essentially sustained by ritual, by celebrations, by holidays, by the reiteration of the values and useful information of the tribe and the community.

It is highly centralised. We know most of what we know (or think we know) about the world through the stories we tell and for a long time these stories were told in face-to-face communities.

Then comes the industrial transformation. The first machine was the printing press. The critical precondition for all the upheavals of the industrial revolution is the industrialisation of story-telling. The meaning of the printing press is the industrialisation of story-telling. That makes us capable of putting our stories – first the Bible – into the hands of ordinary people and in effect saying: You can read it for yourselves, you don't need an interpreter.

You cannot only read it for yourself but you can take it with you, you can get off the land, go into distant continents, into ports, into cities, into factories and you can take something of your community with you: the book. You become a member of a new type of community called a public. That is a community of people who never meet and yet who share a great deal through the printed word.

This, in turn, ushers in the reformation. It permits the telling of stories from different competing and even conflicting points of view, representing competing and conflicting interests in the same society as indeed the industrial revolution creates. Interest of classes, workers vs employers, interest of different regions, different ethnic groups and indeed different religions. The possibility of cultivating each of these side by side,

preserving some of the integrity of each group and of designing at least a theory of self-governing communities of diverse orientation living more or less peacefully together is predicated on the print era.

Then comes television. It again shifts the scene into something that resembles pre-industrial religion. Television is essentially a ritual. Unlike print, unlike film, unlike all previous media, TV is used relatively non-selectively. Most people watch television by the clock not by the programme.

For the first time in the history of humankind, children are born into a home in which (at least in the United States) television is on for an average of seven hours a day. More than one-half of our homes turn it on in the morning and turn it off at night. Most of the stories told to most of the children, parents and grandparents at the

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same time are not told by the parents, not by the schools, and not by the church, but by a small group of distant corporations.

Television enriches the cultural horizons of many by abolishing provincialism. Nobody is out 'in the sticks' any more because television brings into every home pretty much the same beautiful and ugly, famous and infamous celebrities, events and stories. It presents a world which, despite all its enrichment and abolition of isolation and parochialism, is presented in saleable packages.

## The cast of the media world

My second step is to ask what kind of world is it? Who are the characters who animate this world? What is their fate? What is the association between different social types and their fate – success or failure, victory or victimisation? What are the perspectives, outlooks, key issues of life and society that are being cultivated in this world?

First, what is the cast? Who are the characters that populate this world? Here I am talking about the world of television story-telling. I make no distinction between fiction, news and documentary because I think there is no functional distinction.

What we call entertainment and too often dismiss as light and frivolous is the basic informational process of the vast majority of people who don't seek information. In that world of American television, men outnumber women three to one. In the world of news, men outnumber women six to one. So if anything, it is exaggerated, skewed not in the direction of life but in the direction of power.

What kind of world can it be if you start out with this kind of cast? It is a world packaged for sale and power.

It reproduces its best customers, white males in the prime of life. About 65% of all characters belong to that group. If you are

of fear, of greater fear and dependence on the part of those who find themselves at the short end of the stick.

### Challenge of commercial television

We have done a study of television and religion in collaboration with several groups represented at this Congress. We had many interesting findings. The one that was pertinent to this discourse is that the challenge to churches does not come so much from the television ministries, from the so-called electronic evangelists. To be sure, they minister to a fairly stable group of about 12 million Americans – who are fairly active and who tend to be conservative. But

over which we have greater influence and through which we can issue other types of messages and communicate other values without the confounding and distorting effects of being in an alien context.

As professionals concerned with our schools and education, we must work for what I call a fresh approach to the liberal arts – conceived as the liberating arts. Putting individuals in touch with great art, great science, great philosophies, and great religions of humankind, has been the traditional function and mission of liberal arts, thereby liberating the individual from a kind of unquestioning dependence on the local and often parochial environment.

But today that isolation and provincialism does not exist any more. On the contrary, we have the insistent, compelling and full everyday cultural environment of television. So we need to use the analytic and critical tools that have been developed in the liberal arts to liberate us from the kind of unwitting and unquestioning absorption of the assumptions built into the tens of thousands of little stories (some called commercials, some called programmes, some called news) that a child today sees every year from infancy on.

As citizens I think we have to realise that the challenge to the television culture is essentially a political challenge, an institutional challenge. It is a challenge to the cultural policy which has established it in the first place and which can probably only change it through political means. What I mean is a new environmental movement.

As the great movement addressed to issues of our physical environment is essential to our survival, the new environmental movement is addressed to the cultural environment, which is essential to the quality of that survival. That cultural environmental movement should unite the churches, the educational institutions, the professional organisations and all the many citizen's groups that have sprung up in many of our countries and in many of our communities.

I am trying to bring about – how soon and how long it will take I don't know – a kind of co-ordination or at least sharing of perspectives of many groups (around the world as well as in the USA) which are increasingly concerned with cultural policies. They are increasingly concerned with and wish to address the challenge of the new culture. They increasingly wish to and are willing and able to begin to assume responsibility and control over the cultures that now affect our vision of the world and of our lives. That I think is the challenge before us. ■

George Gerbner is internationally acknowledged for his work on mass media and culture, in particular the role of television in society. Since 1964 he has been Professor at the Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania, USA. He is the author of numerous articles, co-editor of several books, and co-author with Nancy Signorelli of *Violence and Terror in the Media: An Annotated Bibliography* (1988).



*George Gerbner giving his keynote speech on 'Communication and Culture'.*

young, under 18, you have about one-third of your proportionate share of the actual population. If you are over 65 you have about one-fifth of your proportionate share. And these are not only numbers, these are life chances, the allocation of precious resources. They are unequally distributed, reflecting not the census but a scale of power and conveying a set of values adjusted to that scale of power. As you go down the ladder or scale of the power hierarchy, a minority group becomes under-represented and victimised.

For every 10 persons who are written into scripts or into news to commit an act of violence, there are about 12 victims. But for every 10 women who are written into scripts to be assertive and aggressive, as men are, there are 16 who get victimised.

For every 10 non-white, non-American women who are written into such scripts there are 23 victims. This is the association of social typecasting with fate.

In our research we find that the high incidence of violence, essentially a constant demonstration of power, generates a sense of insecurity, a sense of danger, a sense of vulnerability that goes up as the social status of characters goes down. This is what maintains inequality and injustice; a sense

the greatest challenge to churches and to religion is commercial television itself.

There is an inverse relationship between television viewing and indices of religiosity. Despite its purely secular and market orientation, television, with the universal and pervasive world it presents, seems to satisfy many people's religious aspirations for knowledge and understanding. It tells about the universe and how it is governed and what its values are.

We also study the image of science and the distortions of that image, and many other subjects. These are highlights of an organically composed coherent world, highly concentrated, totally pervasive, almost monolithic, absorbing different orientations into its general mainstream, whose domination of our cultural life, our social life, our religious life, our private lives we now have to confront.

Which brings me to my third and final set of considerations. There is no greater dilemma that churches today face than how to position themselves in the new culture.

What are the things that you can say within the system of mass communications and how to issue that challenge? What are the things on which we have to depend for a context in which we can control, a context