

INSTITUTIONAL FORCES AND THE MASS MEDIA

George Gerbner

My thesis is simply stated. In the many revolutions in the history of mankind, only two have completely transformed the quality of life. The first was the industrial revolution in the production of commodities. The second was the industrial revolution in the production of culture. The first revolution transformed the resource base of the physical environment. The second revolution extended that transformation into the field of symbolic environment. What did that mean? The process of communication is interaction through messages. That process is the most distinctive characteristic of our species. A member of the species homo sapiens cannot develop as a recognizable human being without living in the context of a symbolic interaction. This interaction is what I call the process of humanization.

Symbols are to the mind what air is to the lung. Thinking is inseparable from the symbolic exchange of taking in and giving out, just as lungs and breathing are inseparable from the air and the constant exchange of taking in and giving out of elements of the physical environment. When the symbolic environment changes, there is a fundamental change in the process of humanization.

The most general characteristic of the historic change is that any mass production is a collective industrial process. Therefore, the symbolic structures that are thereby created, the mass produced discharge of symbols into the symbolic environment into which human beings are born to live and grow, become dependent on the organization of the industrial order. Never before in human history has there been such a close interface between the organization of society, and particularly of the industrial order and the

organization of the everyday common consciousness of all people.

Once one begins to work on this notion one gets a very special perspective of the overall meaning and the institutional context of mass communication. The first major wave of the coming of the mass production of messages was, of course, the invention of printing. It took a long time to really produce a printing press that was much more efficient than the scribes used to do before. Nevertheless, the first wave paved the way for Reformation. Without the ability to mass produce books (i.e., Bibles) in sufficient quantities to give them to individuals, man could not conceive of the notion of individual conscience because there was no symbolic material no individual taking in and taking out that could locate the responsibilities for interpretations and thus for making moral decisions in individuals. Once interpretation and judgment could be located in ordinary individuals because they shared the symbolic power of rulers and priests, new religions, new forms of government (i.e., republican) and new philosophies of life could and did emerge.

The most recent wave in the mass production of messages, the coming of television, similarly introduces a new symbolic environment which, like the Reformation, takes on the historic functions of a new religion.

What are some of these functions? First, the compression of art, science, philosophy and every aspect of culture into an organic programming concept which is a synthetic representation of the dominant value and power structure of our society. Secondly, the system is a total system in that it encompasses the most heterogeneous public. Not only encompasses, but it creates this public. Publics, traditionally, were people who had something in common. The mass public that television has created has nothing else in

common except television. But by having television in common for an average of four to six hours a day, there is a community of feeling, of perspective, and knowledge where there had been nothing before. A new basis for interaction and for collective action has been created, and that has transformed the governing of society. Television replaced the Church in its historic relation to the State.

Finally television is also used unselectively, unlike any other medium. Other media you must go out to see or to buy, or you may ignore them. But television is universal. It is unselectively used by everyone in almost every home, including two year olds, including people who have never read before, including people who have never gone to the movies before, including people who are isolated, living in institutions, prisons, hospitals; including people who had felt that their way of life, their way of thinking, their particular cultures should be preserved, and who isolated themselves to maintain their source of religious, ethnic and other community identity. But there is no such thing anymore. No one is isolated, no one is protected, no one is immune. No parent is the chief story teller, and no school is the chief spreader of knowledge anymore. At best they can be evaluators and organizers of what is now being discharged into the mainstream of the common symbolic environment. This is why I can only compare television in its historical, institutional and social functions to religion. In fact, its audience attends to it more religiously than to any other modern religion.

The kind of influence that religions have exercised at the height of their powers is the kind of influence that I think television is exercising today, that confronts us with a whole new set of responsibilities, a whole new set of challenges and tasks. First is our responsibility as students,

and under this heading I include all educators, teachers, professors, scholars. We should think through a fresh approach to the liberal arts and to the liberating aims of the humanistic education that we used to consider important for all citizens. The new symbolic environment is not an elite but a common culture. A critical and analytical grappling rather than coming to terms with this new symbolic environment is the test of modern liberal education. That critical understanding and analysis is also the prerequisite for such measure of self government and of self direction as we can get.

What would have happened if Protestantism would have grown up as the sales arm of the publishing industry? We are in this situation today. The new religion is essentially the sales arm because of consumer industry marketing goods. And while this, of course, is useful activity, this financial base, this motivational base is limited in scope and thwarts long range and broader social aids of which the broadcasters themselves are only too well aware.

We have achieved the dreams of all emperors and popes by putting an electronic altar with a tireless and entertaining preacher in every home. But we are still to begin seriously the process of learning, exploring, and rationally deciding what to do with it.