

GEORGE GERBNER

"THE NEW MEDIA ENVIRONMENT"

In the last few years, we have begun to see the earth from a different perspective -- the perspective of the satellite. As I look at our earth on those pictures, which I'm sure all of you have seen, I look at the cloud cover and the haze over much of it, and begin to recognize a kind of physical pollution of the environment. But I tend to see our world in terms of another environment even more important to our humanity. That is the symbolic environment in which we live, which makes us what we are.

We reflect on things and we interact with one another through symbols. These symbols, in a very real sense, determine the type of humanity that we will acquire. Like microbes grow in cultures, types of humanity grow and develop and are cultivated along different cultural and sub-cultural ways.

When there is a transformation in the making of this symbolic environment, when there is a major change in the kind of symbol systems that we discharge into the mainstream of common public consciousness, there is a change in the process of humanization. Of course, we've been engulfed in precisely that change in the humanization process over the past 250, 200, 100, 50 and very much the past 25 years -- the time that the School of Public Communication was developed along with other schools of communications, in response to the challenge of this change.

Communication has not only been a field of diverse activity, but also intellectual domain. As an emerging discipline, it has developed in response to the changes in the symbolic environment, historic changes in the process of humanization that have been taking place and have been accelerating and still show no sign of levelling off.

Basically, in its most elementary sense, the changes that I am talking about are the changes of the industrial revolution in the field of culture. In the field of commodity production, the industrial

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revolution transformed the quality of life and made it possible for many more people to produce more and share more. The book was the first product of the industrial revolution. It mechanized the word, industrialized symbols, and preceded the rise of factories. The mass production of symbols, the industrial revolution in the sphere of culture, has changed the way we produce symbols. The way we share them has created a common basis for human interaction through symbols, a common basis that now has transcended all previous boundaries. Print with its selectivity, with its requirement of the transmission of some kind of material product, could still cultivate a much more highly differentiated sense of community. Broadcasting cuts across all of these previous boundaries: class, region, educational level, and, in the future, even countries. We have transformed the basis of humanization. We have transformed the ways in which we establish some sense of identity, some sharing of collective meaning and a collective sense of strength or of weakness. Among people who never have and never will be able to meet fact to face.

This is an historically unprecedented step: the rise of new modern mass publics, which are loose aggregations of people who have nothing in common but their messages. They may be totally different in every other way except for having messages in common. (That doesn't mean agreeing with all those messages.) Having messages in common means having a basis for interaction through sharing the issues and definitions and the agendas of life, that these message systems, common message systems, cultivate. These changes in message systems lead to the rise of not only the nation state, but to the rise of a totally new collective life, a system of government, with which we are still experimenting. They also lead to a new process of humanization in which the creation of this symbolic environment, symbolic climate, symbolic culture, in which we live does not happen spontaneously out of tribal or folk need. It is not subject to the local revisions and modifications of face to face discourse. The process is inherently centralized. It's collective whether the collectivity that produces it consists of a private corporate collectivity or a public governmental collectivity.-- as you know in different societies the arrangements are made in many different ways. Therefore, the way in which we structure the policies that produce the message systems will cut across all previous boundaries.

With television, practically the entire nation has its messages in common. They may be the only thing experienced in common, and they have much to do with the corporate structure of the industry, or the corporate structure of the government ministry, or the corporate structure of whatever organization produced it. They are a result of essentially much more highly rationalized and planned procedures than the spontaneous production and use of cultural products have ever been before. This fact suggests that these powerful channels must be subjected to unprecedented public scrutiny.

Most of our reserach is devoted to building the basis for public scrutiny of the way in which we organize our cultural life, our mental life, our social life. There is no area of public decision making in which important, significant and far-reaching decisions and policies are based on as little systematic, cumulative, comparative, periodically reported information, as in the field of common culture. No policy can be intelligently discussed until there is some basis in knowledge, some basis in systematic, ongoing, cumulative and comparative studies that will be able to sustain judgment of policy.

In the analysis we call Cultural Indicators, we have concentrated mostly on

television drama, but we are also interested and have conducted some studies and expect to do more in the press and in other areas. Essentially, we consider television, and particularly television drama, a key area of this new symbolic environment. Television has reorganized our total cultural structure. Although television is not responsible for everything, it is responsible for reorganizing so much of our cultural life that it has become a symbol for almost everything. One can discuss most of our cultural activities in terms of television which now encompasses much there is in our culture; the best and the worst.

Television is comparable in terms of its massive contribution, to the symbolic environment. Television is not really an inheritor of the elite culture of the past. Those who look to television to do that are profoundly mistaken. Television is a new religion. It is comparable to the social functions of the religions that came before it. It encompasses the total cultural perspective. It has its rituals, it has its myths, it has its cults, it has its sects. I look at it as one would look at religions. These rituals can be seen in television drama and in news. Television drama is highly repetitive, highly formula-ridden, highly ritualistic. The mythical function is performed by what we call news -- I don't mean that news is invented but that it is so highly selective that it might as well be invented. When you can provide two or three versions of the world each day, all of them true, all of them quite different, then it really doesn't make very much difference whether you invent or you select. You can have what you want anyway.

Now myths, the mythic function, is very crucial. Myths are not false, myths work, they are functional. They are highly selective fact, information, in a meaningful social context. We recognize Greek mythology, Nordic mythology and so on as a kind of legendary or exaggerated look at their own society. The news picture is what I call the mythic picture whose primary function is to give some verisimilitude, some credibility to the ritual. We find in our studies a high degree of corollation between what goes in diction and drama, and what goes in news. There are trends, there are fads, there are fashions, and when something become hot in the news before too long you will find it in fiction and drama, and vice versa. The cults are a kind of combination of the two clustered around particular types of actions and particular types of practices. The sects are of course the different brand names, different conglomerations and corporate entities that have some slightly varied points of view, all within the overall pattern I called the new religion.

What kinds of things happen in this symbolic world as seen through the eyes of television drama are not too different from what you see and read in the news. So we look at this world, look at its demography and look at its geography, look at its actions and practices, what happens to whom, and what kind of people are portrayed in what kind of role. One can say that more of our people live in the symbolic world of television than they live in the world of work, school, sleep, home in the sense of active, symbolic interaction. The actual amount of time put into living in the television world is immense. It dominates our use of what is ironically called leisure time, because watching television is not leisure, watching is the enculturation process that every culture has to do. Which of course is nice if you can persuade people that what they have to learn anyway they should learn with pleasure and voluntarily.

So we look at the world as one might look at a census taker or an observer -- an investigator in the real world -- and then ask the question, to what extent does living in this symbolic world form or shape or cultivate people's conceptions

of social reality? To what extent does living in this symbolic world influence the facts, the issues, the definitions, the assumptions we make about the world?

The most critical question of life is what will be the agenda of assumption, what is it that is worth fighting about, what is highest on the agenda and what is lowest on the agenda? The next question is: how is each issue going to be presented? What facets, what factors, what elements of each issue, of each situation, of each value, of each practice, in life that is portrayed in fiction, drama and news will be emphasized? How is it going to be presented, and therefore how is it going to be defined?

So, the first thing is, what is it we are going to be talking about? Second is, how are we going to define these items. Once you decide these two questions, I contend that most of the decisions are made. In most cases, what you are going to talk about and how you are going to present it over a long period of time will determine how most people will deal with these issues.

So, let us look at this symbolic environment of television, what we find in it, what we find about people living in it more than others--the heavy viewers versus the light and non-viewers. What do they think about certain aspects of social reality? How is this symbolic world cast?

One thing about the symbolic world that distinguishes it from the real world is that everything in it is on purpose. There is nothing accidental in it, and accidents are on purpose too; therefore, everything in it reveals a purpose.

If you look at it systematically rather than at the individual decisions, you will see a pattern that is a corporate pattern. By corporate I mean essentially a collective organization whose pattern is translated into the symbols that provide our environment.

Through the world of prime-time network television drama which we have now studied for 6 consecutive years, we are beginning to discern not only patterns, but trends concerning the nature of that world and its population. Any society seems free to those who run it. Freedom means the availability of a large number of choices and of the opportunity to implement them with impunity. And so, the casting of the symbolic work in terms of fiction and of drama demonstrates and cultivates certain notions about who are the dominant individuals and what is the meaning of freedom. They who are present, and present in the largest numbers are the freest to pursue the greatest variety of values, goals and occupations.

When I refer to fiction and drama, in a sense I am referring to the style that all cultures have found the most effective for cultivating their notion of reality: the reality of values, the reality of goals, and aims and purposes in that society. In order to be able to write a story, to be able to demonstrate a particular lesson such as a lesson of a value or a sense of morality, of rightness and wrongness (which is what all stories do), you must be free to select or to invent the facts and to construct the story in a way that is most suitable to the demonstration of that value. This is the function of fiction. So, in looking at fiction and drama, we are not looking at just fantasy, we are looking at fantasy for a social purpose. The social purpose of fantasy is to enable us to construct and to construe the "facts" of life in a way that will

communicate and demonstrate the reality of underlying purposes.

In the media environment, two-thirds of all characters are male, white, middle-class, unmarried, and in the prime of life. They exemplify the very expression of power in our society. Being kind of free wheeling, living in a loose social context, they can do anything. They can go on a safari anytime. You know it is hard to go to a safari with a baby strapped to your back. If you are free of that kind of responsibility or of any other human obligation, then you are free to be engaged in the greatest variety of roles. If you are uninhibited by any obligation of any human kind of dependence, then you are free to be as anti-social, and as anti-human as you want to be in order to be able to pursue your purposes, which is, of course, precisely what most of these characters do. Seven out of ten of these typical male characters are involved in some kind of violence because violence (and I will try to illustrate this in a minute) is a kind of demonstration of power, of the power structure of society.

Violence is not just an emotion; violence is an act. The difference between emotion and act is that act is motion as interpreted by human beings in a symbolic context. And the symbolic context in which we interpret and use violence has a great deal to do with who does what to whom under what circumstances, and perhaps what is likely to be the outcome to a number of characters. So it becomes a lesson. Every act of violence in which human beings are involved is a lesson in hierarchy, is a lesson in power, and that lesson is to be demonstrated by the people who are the freest to engage in it.

Being a woman has several handicaps. First of all, males in the world of television, in the symbolic world (and in news this is even moreso), outnumber females about four to one. And the reason is that females are not so easily castable in a great variety of roles; they are specialized. They are specialized to sex and family, and unless the genre that you are dealing with has a large amount of romantic and family involvement it is very difficult to cast a female in it. If there is a bank president or a gangster in the story and you make it a female, under present conventions of story telling, you have to spend the rest of the story explaining why that is so. You can't go on to any other messages otherwise people will simply say they don't believe it. Characters are much more stereotyped and conventional in our entertainment than in life because underneath it we understand that our entertainment has a serious social purpose. I define entertainment as a celebration of conventional morality. It is too widely saleable, therefore, it has to be conventional. It is a celebration of what we consider to be soothing, relaxing, enjoyable, right, moral, outstanding. For many, many thousands of years these rituals were associated with religion. We have continued this pattern in a secular manner but we are still fulfilling the same functions of ritual under the heading of entertainment.

Let's return to our discussion of women. The specialty of women limits them to relatively few roles, but it gives them a much more humane kind of role to play. On the other hand, if and when women are involved in violence they are much more likely to be the victims than men. They thereby serve another powerful social function. That is the cultivation of a very high level of fear and a very uneven sense of fear. That is what teaches some people how to be victims, that their calculus of risks in life is different from the calculus of other people. It is the culture that teaches women to be afraid, prepares them

for the role of victims. This is a very powerful lesson, and you find it demonstrated every night. Once a fear grips you, there is nothing to argue about, because the illustrations and demonstrations of the justification are always in ample supply.

Every society has to teach its norms. The best way that we have found to teach our norms is by continuous demonstration of their violation and of the consequences of violation. This is why we are fascinated with crime. This is why large cultural industries, both press and fiction, exist on the selection and packaging of morality stories that go under the heading of crime. Two-thirds of the identifiable occupations on television drama are specialists in crime, either as law enforcement officers or as criminals. Of course, the two lead a symbiotic existence. One can't exist without the other.

Let me shift to another area which we have studied because of the recent concern about it---drugs. I think that the drug culture, the basis for the drug culture, is not a minority cult, it's a majority culture. It's going to be very difficult to fundamentally change it. I think we are just going to have to accept it unless the basis for its cultivation changes, and the basis for its cultivation is the very widespread value or notion that one of the most important things in life is instant gratification--"buy now, pay later," "try it, you'll like it!" Unless you instantly get some benefit from it, it's really not worth the price. This need for instant gratification is the context of so much of our symbolic culture, the commercial, which is itself highly value orienting and functional.

The lesson of the high value that we place on instant gratification--the almost miraculous results that we expect from it--is the large base of the iceberg of which drug use is just the tip. As long as you have this large base, I don't think you will be able to do anything about the tip except to use it as another demonstration for the people who otherwise are more likely to be victimized, or more likely to not be able to get away with their transgressions. This is where the lesson of violence comes in. The women, and also the old, are very much more likely to be victimized than the young, the black much more than the white. You go right down the social hierarchy and if you look at it systematically it works out in an almost uncanny way.

Well, drug use can and has been, and may even be used in the future, as another instrument of control in which people with unequal chances will be simply demonstrating that what some people can get away with others can't. We find that of all the super heroes in comic books have attained their super hero status through the ingestion or injection of some kind of chemical substance. There is nothing new about this. The five "p's," I call them: potent potions for pleasure, power, and profit. They've long fascinated mankind in all kinds of legendary ways.

One out of every five superheroes attains some kind of omniscience, eternal life, or ultra-intelligence through some kind of a chemical injection. These are the heroes of the comic books that we have studied. The givers (and hence the pushers) in comic books are seen as a kind of evil intelligence behind all this. They are most likely to be scientists in popular culture. This is the kind of social function they fulfill and cultivate.

I think the symbolic image of the scientist cultivates suspicion and mistrust of the independent intellect. I've never seen a mad scientist work for the establishment. A mad scientist almost by definition works for himself; he figures out his noble but totally unrealistic ideas in his own basement laboratory. He is not under any kind of responsible corporate control which is exactly why he is dangerous. He is dangerous because he is a scientist and therefore, potentially, he has power. We look at the image of the scientist and find that when they have power--when their intellect or intelligence is independent of what is generally considered to be some kind of responsible social restraint--therefore, are mad. Madness in that sense has a functional social value. It shows that an irrational individual powerful act in a society is social madness. It doesn't quite go hand in hand with our cultivation of individualistic intelligence, but no society likes or trusts the individual intelligence with any power and probably for a very good reason: it is essentially irresponsible.

When we find, in our studies of media imagery, someone who represents a kind of intellectuality but has little recourse to the power that we attribute to science, we have a somewhat different image--the teacher. I have studied this image for ten years. The teacher represents a noble but impractical image. He has really no power to implement the grandiose ideas for which teachers and schools are supported. He has no power because we don't give him any power. We don't give him any power because we really, as a society, have no intention of fulfilling the promise of our schools. The historic promise of our schools is not just the spread of enlightenment, by the reform of society. Immigrants, people in lower or limited circumstances, have always looked to education as the way of creating greater opportunities. We often say if we want to achieve something, educate people for it. For the last 150 years we have supported public schools on the basis that this is a kind of painless way to perfect society. We could never afford to fulfill that promise. We undercut it by keeping the dream in a state of perpetual bankruptcy and by portraying their major symbol. The teacher, as often imbued with noble intentions which can absorb all the hopes and aspirations of our citizens but really, when it comes right down to it, is ineffective because he doesn't have the power.

We can afford anything we want to afford. There are some things we say we cannot afford because we cannot afford to afford them. Why? Because they might fulfill their promise and this is too dangerous. If those who wish the school---or the media---to reform society will think for a moment: no society trains its citizens for some other society. That is not why school and the media are supported. For social change you have to tackle the structure of society itself, not one of its instrumental institutions.

Both the media and the schools are essentially performing vital maintenance functions. They provide the symbolic supports for our society in ways which we have only just begun to scrutinize. They produce the dreams that heal and the dreams that hurt. I think it is time to begin to find the difference.