

# Media & Values

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## Television As Religion

By George Gerbner

A noted communications researcher proposes that television does for society today what religious ritual did for our prehistoric ancestors.



### Importance of storytelling

Storytelling is the great process that makes us recognizably human. A story is an attempt to make the invisible visible -- it has to do with relationships, with intellections. We have to have some device to make them visible, dramatic, revealing and embodied in human beings whose characteristics we know and whose actions we can understand. We live our lives in terms of stories we tell.

What are these stories? How do we weave them into the very complicated, uniquely human structure called culture?

Basically there are three kinds of stories:

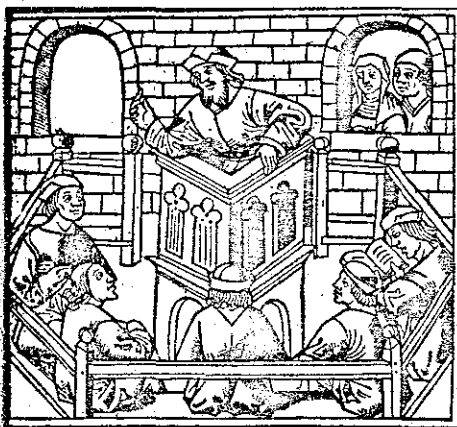
There are stories essentially about *how things work*. Storytelling that makes the inner dynamics of life visible are typically called fiction and drama, sometimes mythology. There is no other way to tell the truth about how things work except to construct the facts of the case so as to lead to the natural development of the underlying message and significance of how things really work.

Into that context will fit the second kind of story -- a story about *what things are*. It is a kind of factual story: the legend of yesterday or the news of today. It has no meaning by itself. It only has a meaning as we fit it into an immensely complex structure about the meaning of it all.

A third kind of story is a *story of action*. It's really a story of value and choice, which are the prerequisites for action. If this is how things work and this is what things are, we then contemplate a complex of choices, and do something. A story like this presents a desirable goal within a lifestyle. It can be an instruction or a sermon, but mostly it is a commercial -- a

who can get away with what against whom. On television, there is an incident of violence on the average of five times an hour.

It is also a world in which a few professions (doctors, lawyers, entertainers, law-enforcers and lawbreakers) far outnumber all other working people put together. It is a mean and dangerous world and we find that those who watch more television are more insecure and apprehensive. They demand more protection. They are more likely to even approve of, if not welcome, repression, if it comes in the name of security. This is a dangerous syndrome we call the "mean world syndrome". It is



potentially highly volatile, both politically and morally.

### What role for religion?

Looking at all this, what position can Church and Religion consider taking since television viewing seems to satisfy some aspirations and some needs that people have from time to time found in religion? Will religious activity enrich TV? (Use some of its appeals but use it better.) Improve TV? (Reform it from within.) Challenge it? (Provide an antidote.) Liberate it? (Take it as a whole and remove people from its influence.) Or abolish it? (Decide it is incurable.)

Our sense of powerlessness about television is devastating and mystifying. To accept it is to accept disfranchisement. Television is a hidden curriculum for all people financed by a hidden taxation without representation, paid by everyone regardless of whether they use the service or

not. You pay when you wash, not when you watch. Every time you buy a bar of soap a fraction of that price is a tax levy. The total tax amounts to between \$55-65 per household a year depending upon the market in which you live.

What then should be the terms of the engagement? The fact that

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there is an engagement is clear. It has to do with very basic conceptions of life and very basic dynamics of our society. The more explicit we make the engagement, the more we can help resolve it.

Bringing this to consciousness is the number one task of education today, which is no longer in the business of dispensing knowledge. (Pupils today learn most of their information from television before the teacher, and they bring it to school. If the teacher is not up on it, the teacher loses authority that may be left to him or her.)

It is very important, I believe, for traditional religions to address explicitly and specifically the issue of television as a cultural mechanism. Taking a position, or some combination of positions, already is an important step toward being in control of our own world, of our own perspective. Whether it is Television Awareness Training or critical viewing, whether it is something you call 'Let's Play a Game' (pulling out the hidden message from even a dull program, and discussing it) -- they are huge steps forward.

Above all, turning the set off is not liberation, but an illusion. You can turn the set off, but you still live in a world in which vast numbers of people don't turn it off. If you don't get it through the "box" you get it through them. The TV personality Jack Paar used to say,

"I'm not a religious man, but I believe in Walter Cronkite."

So, for very logical reasons of enlightened self-interest, churches are forced, whether they like it or not, to take the leadership -- both for survival and for a new role in a changed cultural situation. The schools -- and other institutions of society that have a stake in the great storytelling process -- will inevitably have to follow. MGV

*This article was edited by Shirley Koritnik, SCL, from a recent talk by George Gerbner, Dean of the Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania, and editor of The Journal of Communications.*

