

George Gerbner

A CRITICAL
INTRODUCTION
TO MEDIA AND
COMMUNICATION
THEORY

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PREFACE

I met George Gerbner when I began my graduate studies at the Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania in 1975, where he was the Dean (and the Professor in my very first graduate course). I received my final email from him a few months before he died in 2005. In the 30 years in between, we collaborated on dozens of research publications and reports, traveled to various exotic and not-so-exotic locales (Acapulco, Budapest, Moscow, Ohio), and exchanged thousands of memos and emails. I have written numerous articles and co-authored or edited several books based on his work, including a collection of his “selected writings” (*Against the Mainstream*, published by Peter Lang in 2002). Yet, in writing this volume, and especially in re-reading his earliest writings (and earlier drafts of those works), I feel I have gotten to know him in a way I never quite had before.

Mass media were exploding in the years following World War II, when Gerbner (almost by accident) embarked on an academic career. He was interested in all forms of mass communication, but his focus increasingly centered on television, which came to dominate family life and the home from the 1950s on. In the days he was developing his core ideas, three broadcast networks attracted over 90 percent of the viewing audience every night. There was no cable, no VCR, no DVR, no Internet, no video-on-demand, no mobile devices.

Never before had such massive and heterogeneous groups of people been exposed to the same images and messages *at the same time*, and for many hours a day. This was the media context in which he worked, and it should be kept in mind throughout this book.

Gerbner was most widely known, in the academic world and beyond, for his studies of television violence and his ideas about the “mean world syndrome”—the notion that exposure to television violence cultivates fear and mistrust among viewers, rather than stimulating aggressive behavior. He was dubbed “The Man Who Counts the Killings” by the *Atlantic Monthly* (Stossel, 1997). “No popular journalistic piece dealing with televised violence is complete unless it contains apt quotations of Gerbner” wrote Krattenmaker and Powe (1978, p. 1157). But, as I hope this book shows, his interests and contributions extend well beyond violence.

In the 1950s and 60s, Gerbner wrote in the standard and unquestioned style of his times. He used the word “man” for “human beings,” “men” for “people” and—as was the norm at the time—“Negroes” for African Americans and “Orientals” for Asians. Some of his early writing may seem strange in the 21st century, but it would be inappropriate to change anything, so all quotes from his original works are presented verbatim.

Acknowledgments

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To my good fortune, right at the time I started working on this book, the Library at the Annenberg School (now the Annenberg School for Communication) at Penn established an online archive of Gerbner’s writings and many other relevant materials. It is a treasure trove, and it was invaluable to me (go to www.asc.upenn.edu/Gerbner/).

I offer special appreciation to my friends and colleagues Larry Gross, Nancy Signorielli, and Jim Shanahan, with whom I have worked through innumerable issues related to cultivation (and Gerbner) over the years. Were it not for them, my thinking about cultivation would probably still be where it was back in 1975. And most of all, I want to thank Fanny Rothschild, who has lived with me living with Gerbner for over 35 years.