

**MEDIA EDUCATION**  
FOUNDATION  
TRANSCRIPT



Challenging media

**THE CRISIS OF THE CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT**  
MEDIA & DEMOCRACY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

# THE CRISIS OF THE CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

*Media & Democracy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

**One of Three Videos in the Series:  
George Gerbner on Media and Culture**

*Producer & Director:* **Sut Jhally**  
*Editors:* **Sut Jhally, Sanjay Talreja, & Kim Neumann**

*Featuring an interview with* **George Gerbner** Dean Emeritus, Annenberg School  
for Communications

*Hosted by* **Michael Morgan** University of Massachusetts-Amherst

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## INTRODUCTION

**MICHAEL MORGAN:** We're always hearing that we live in an information age. We hear about the information super highway, about broadband, about five hundred channels, and so on. It all sounds exciting, but we don't hear very much about the kind of information we'll be getting. Who controls it? Who does it serve? How much variety and diversity will it really give us? Even with fifty-seven *hundred* channels, will there be anything on?

Someone who has been asking these questions for over forty years is Dr. George Gerbner, Dean Emeritus of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. In this video we're going to hear some of the findings and conclusions of his research. Since 1967, Dr. Gerbner has been the director of the Cultural Indicators Project, which studies the role of television in society. The project focuses on three main questions: First, what is the nature of the industries that produce the programs that we watch? Second, what are the dominant stories that are told in these programs? And third, what are the effects and consequences of these stories on the society that watches so much television?

This video will take a close look at the first of these questions especially. Because the media shape and define the cultural environment we live in, we have to look at who are the organizations that produce the messages of media, and ask if they're taking good care of the cultural environment.

As Gerbner will show, the cultural environment as we head into the twenty-first century is in a state of crisis. It may seem difficult to believe, but this crisis poses a danger for the survival of democracy, both in the United States, and because the corporations that control the media operate globally for the rest of the world as well.

## 57 CHANNELS & NOTHING ON

**GEORGE GERBNER:** Recently there was a great deal of discussion about the so-called “information superhighway.” That discussion has abated somewhat because for one thing nobody could figure out what it was, and those who could decided that it's not so good. What information superhighway essentially indicated is the increasing concentration of conglomeration of many channels. It is true that we are told that channels proliferate. We can have fifty channels, two hundred channels, five hundred channels, but one seldom recognizes that as channels proliferate membership concentrates. That means that fewer owners own more channels in all the cable across media, conglomeration of all media cutting across all the available channels of information that can now be owned by a handful of owners.

We are told that the greater diversity of channels makes it possible to target audiences to serve the needs of minority audiences, people who have not been served before. Unfortunately this is not the way it works. Advertising-supported channels seek the largest possible audience so that there is no profit in going out for small audiences. The profit is in acquiring ownership and control of as many channels as possible and then programming pretty much the same materials through many channels still addressed at the most lucrative and most attractive consumer market. And the difference is that with many channels you have a very profitable movie for example, which is one of the great money makers in cable television, with few channels the audience might find that movie maybe once a day or once a week. With many channels they can find it every fifteen minutes so that the same material can be programmed more frequently so that when anybody talks about the multiplicity of channels ask the question 'What is being provided?' 'What is the content of those channels?' and that is what touches people's lives. It's not the channels that matter, it's the content that is delivered through those channels and that is the question. The fact of the matter is that there is no profit in diversity. Profit is in standardization, in monopolization, in globalization.

## WHO WILL CONTROL THE 500 CHANNELS?

**GEORGE GERBNER:** The discussion or debate about the so-called information superhighway is a highly selective debate and I am not even sure that we can even call it a debate at all. When the Telecommunications Act of 1996 was rushed through congress and signed by the President in January 1996 this bill changes the ground rules that create the cultural environment of every home. It makes it possible for a single company to legally control 35% of the national market. Nothing like this has ever been dreamt of or proposed before. Three companies can dominate the cultural environment of our people and much of the rest of the world. And if you take the three companies we even know what they are: Time-Warner, Viacom, and Rupert Murdoch. We have three companies with strong vested political interest that can dominate every piece of fiction, drama, and news. There are no independent players. CBS is no longer independent – it has been bought up by Westinghouse. ABC is no longer independent – it has been bought by Disney, so perhaps Disney is the fourth major player. And what we're talking about under the heading of competition is not the competition of a population of fish in the ocean; it is a competition of a few sharks that have swallowed up all the little fish.

So what we have is a shrinking of perspective at the exclusion of any equivalent challenge, at the exclusion of any plurality of basic perspectives from which to see the light in society, at the exclusion of the fundamental preconditions and requirements for any kind of democratic existence. If there's no choice then there's no point in going through the mechanics of election. There's no point in conceiving that kind of a society that provides no major alternative perspectives in the mainstream, not in the margins but in the mainstream, available for everyone for choice. There is no need to call it a democratic society.

## GLOBAL EXPANSION

**GEORGE GERBNER:** Hollywood based production dominates well over 50% of the screens of the world. That domination follows the motion picture situation in which Hollywood movies have had this kind of global domination because they are produced for the global market. They are designed for the global market. They are highly efficient, and because they are designed in that way they can be sold very cheap. We can sell an irresistible business deal to any government, or any private entrepreneur. We can say that we can sell you an hour's worth of this program for less money than it would cost you to produce one minute of your own.

When I have a chance to talk to them I say, "You're not buying cheap entertainment. You're not buying cheap news. You are mortgaging the socialization of your children and the integrity of your country and of your culture, and even the sovereignty of your country to a group of global entrepreneurs, mostly based in Hollywood and the United States who really don't care about your country or your children, who care about maximizing their profits in the global market. And you should consider the films and the television that you import as a fundamental socializing process of your children. You should consider not as cheap entertainment or news, but as a form of education."

When you are essentially working for the global market you have to consider what kind of formula will you produce, will you inject in your production system that are universally acceptable, that are universally understandable, that require little or no translation, that are essentially image driven, and of course the answer is either violence, or sex, or a combination of the two.

Of course we know that action programs, which is a code word for violence, are the most prolific and most productive, and the second most productive are programs that parade a kind of explicit sexuality. *Baywatch* is a good example. It was a great international success because of the bikini-clad sex symbols that dominated. When one sees these images that are designed to meet a global marketing formula, one really wonders what kind of a conception of and self-image does that cultivate in people all over the world? You ask yourself the kind of mentality, the kind of relationship among the sexes, and most importantly the kind of values and the kind of aspirations to which that serves as a modeling exercise.

Other examples are *Ninja Turtles*. *Ninja Turtles* has become the predecessor of some major global production efforts and the *Ninja Turtles* has been basically a celebration of the martial arts. *Power Rangers* which is a recent highly successful series representing these teenage saviors is probably the most successful global production that has ever been marketed. *Power Rangers* was playing at one point in eighty countries. Three-hundred million children saw it every night. There has never been anything like it. Training in

martial arts, in a blind obedience to the leader, and violence being the answer to the problems that threaten us, training in messages that undermine the conception of a humane partnership and of democratic existence.

## PUBLIC FUNDED TELEVISION – An Alternative

**GEORGE GERBNER:** In the United States public television developed at the suggestion of the television industry in order to relieve them of any programming that is not immediately profitable. So that it's an afterthought, it's an appendage; it's something that is essentially marketed for elite audiences. In England television started as public television. There is a whole different history and it was commercial television that came in later as a kind of upstart competitor and the audiences fairly well divided half-and-half, the viewing time was about half-and-half so that there was a major choice. In France and other countries, in which public television is fully supported, in which it is recognized as an important national service that is essential for national integrity, for cultural productivity, it is a very different system. So that public television should have the aim of providing service, diversified service, diversified entertainment, diversified casts, a sense of fairness, a model of what a democratic society is like. Public television in the United States is and has been starved for funds. It was therefore obliged to accept institutional advertising and commercial support.

*[TV ad] Major funding for NewsHour with Jim Lehrer has been provided by the Archer Daniels Midland Company. ADM: Supermarket to the world. And by New York Life, just another example of New York Life's wise investment philosophy.*

**GEORGE GERBNER:** The minute you accept commercial support you have certain inhibitions. You are not going to put on programs that dare to challenge the people who help pay your bills. So that to some extent because of financial pressures public television has become more and more irrelevant and less and less the kind of major challenge, major alternative point of view to commercial television.



## TAXATION WITHOUT REPRESENTATION – The Commercial Funding of TV

**GEORGE GERBNER:** The assumption that the way we finance our television and broadcasting and media service is somehow democratic is of course based on a fundamental misconception. It is probably the most undemocratic system that anyone can design. A commercially supported system is based on the form of double taxation without representation. On the one hand it is taxation without representation because it is paid from the levy, the additional amount that is added to the price to every advertised good that goes to the advertiser who in turn provides the basic and usually the only funding for commercial broadcasting. So it is a tax that we pay, but we are not represented in any way except as consumers, and be a consumer is a citizen activity.

There is a second, a dual way in which it is taxation without representation. It is not only that we are obliged to pay an advertising levy, which is then turned over to the producers or programs, but that advertising levy is a tax-deductible business expense. Fifteen or \$16 billion out of the public treasury that otherwise would be paid in taxes is an additional tax, a double taxation that we pay for a service that shapes all our lives, but over which we have no control and in which we have no real decision making influence. We have become so accustomed to the way of financing our cultural environment it's like a fish in the ocean that doesn't know it's swimming in salt water because it has never experienced anything else. So it's difficult for most of us, for most Americans to conceive of a different way of financing and a different way of structuring our cultural environment.

All we have to do is look around the world. In some countries like France there is a 2% tax on theatre admissions, a 3% tax on videotapes that is paid into a fund that provides loans for independent productions, which they then pay back from their success in the market. We have starved out or squeezed out independent productions almost totally. We're the only country that allows a commercial monopoly to dictate the cultural environment. There is no other democratic country that would think of that or would even believe that we're doing it.

## THE V-CHIP – The Fox Guarding the Chicken Coop

**GEORGE GERBNER:** Well the V-Chip, and I hope that when you are listening to this the whole V-Chip business has been exposed as a fraud. Because the V-Chip first of all, is a mechanism that is supposed to send out a signal, that is supposed to be somehow programmed into the sets. It will be designed to screen out undesirable content. There are several problems about his effort that makes it not even a Band-Aid; that makes it if anything a protection for the industry to say we have done what we could and it is now the viewers' responsibility. Leave us alone. We want business as usual. So it will be programmed by an industry group. This is like letting the fox guard the chicken coop.

A good example of self regulation of what I called letting the fox guard the chicken coop, is the provision in the recent bill that requires broadcasters to set aside three hours of educational programming a week in order to qualify for a license. This is not new this has been advocated before, and the last time it was advocated they came up saying well of course we have good educational programming, even more than three hours for example *The Jetsons*. The law or the rule does not define what educational programming is, so in effect it lets the industry define educational programming, which renders it meaningless and again just another assurance to the broadcaster that here is a provision that you can manage and manipulate very easily and in effect it becomes a shield of protection for business as usual.

## DEMOCRACY IN A MEDIA AGE

**GEORGE GERBNER:** It is interesting to note that in many of the new countries of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and some countries in Asia and even in Africa the key question is who is going to appoint the director of television? Is it the prime minister? Is it parliament? Is it some kind of elected council? Because in most countries the issue of who will govern the cultural decision making, the central cultural decision making of the culture is considered so important that it has to be built into the constitutions. And if you remember we were the ones who tried to build that into the constitution. That is why it is the First Amendment. That is why it was the first precondition of the framers of the American Constitution that for a democratic society government shall not dictate.

What has happened for us and what is happening all over the world is that there arose a second government, a private government, a corporate government which is now so monopolized and so centralized that it has the power that any of the governments that the framers of the American Constitution used to know. And what we now need to do is to apply the principles of press freedom, the principles of diversity of distribution of press attention to private governments daily to commercial, corporate, market driven entities, as well as to public governments that are somehow publicly accountable. Let us remember that these private governments are called private because they have made decisions privately behind closed doors because they are not accountable to the electorate at large. Therefore they are even more dangerous. They are even more powerful. They are even more highly shielded and protected by the absolute laws and constitutional provisions than public governments have ever been. Therefore that is the new challenge before us.

## DON'T AGONIZE – ORGANIZE

**GEORGE GERBNER:** The way to go is to have greater diversity. Not what I like, what you like, what anybody likes, not to replace the existing group into a new group blueprint, but to do away with blueprints and to say we need greater freedom, we need greater variety, we need a greater sense of alternative perspectives in the mainstream, we need more fairness, greater responsibility, and less damaging representation of life than we have now.

And it is response to that kind of a challenge of the culture wars that are taking us in a repressive direction that we have to consider a liberating alternative and launch a movement called the Cultural Environment Movement. The Cultural Environment Movement is a very broad coalition of over one hundred and fifty groups in some fifty-two countries including every region of every state in the United States that has very diversified settled interests and purposes and goals, but is united in one thing. They are all interested in providing a more fair, and more equitable and more balanced, and more representative, and a less damaging cultural environment for our children.

What we have to say is we have studied this situation for many years. We should continue to study it to see what changes there are, but we know that is very stable, it is resistant to change. We have to tackle it as a system, and when you have to tackle something as a system I think the good last thought that one can consider is don't just agonize –organize.