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**THE ELECTRONIC STORYTELLER**

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TELEVISION & THE CULTIVATION OF VALUES

# THE ELECTRONIC STORYTELLER

*Television & the Cultivation of Values*

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

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*Featuring an interview with* **George Gerbner** Dean Emeritus, Annenberg School  
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## INTRODUCTION

*[Montage of Media Images with song “Television: The Drug of a Nation” by Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy]*

**MICHAEL MORGAN:** Television. We live with it. We watch it. It’s always there. But how often do we really think about it? Someone who has thought about television a lot is Dr. George Gerbner, Dean Emeritus of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. For over forty years George Gerbner has been working to understand how television effects us all and his research has given us new ways to think about the complex and significant role that television and its stories play in our lives.

I’m Michael Morgan from the University of Massachusetts and I’ve worked with Dr. Gerbner for twenty of those forty years. In this video Dr. Gerbner will explain some of his ideas about television and its effects. We’ll see that his ideas about television are different from what most people usually think about TV, and his ideas make a lot more sense.

Some background: When he was studying songs, and stories, and folklore in his native Hungary before World War II, Gerbner started to realize that the stories we tell, and the stories we hear have a lot to do with how we think about the world. Human beings learn how to be members of their culture through stories. Stories are one of the most important tools that societies use to socialize their members, and not just their children. Stories teach us ways of thinking about the world that stay with us for a lifetime. We’ll start out by looking at what Gerbner has to say about the different forms that storytelling has taken through history, and how that has all been changing because of television, the electronic storyteller.

## STORYTELLING & HUMANITY

**GEORGE GERBNER:** The basic difference between human beings and other animals is that we live in a world directed by the stories we tell. Most of what we know, or think we know, we have never personally experienced, but heard from stories and then tell the stories, and there are basically three kinds of stories: stories about how things *are*, stories about how things *work*, and stories about *what to do about them*. And these are woven together in many different ways through out history, but basically they confer a sense of power. They confer the ability to socialize a culture. As Andrew Fletcher, a Scottish patriot once said: "If one person we able to write the ballads of a country," meaning the stories of a country "he would not need to care who makes the laws." The ultimate shaping of human behavior is the stories that we hear and tell from infancy on. We're born into a culture in which these stories begin to develop our sense of self, and our sense of life, and the world, and society.

Now these three kinds of stories have been woven together into an invisible web called culture. I define culture as essentially stories and messages that create images that govern our conception of life and our behavior. But they have been woven together in different ways through out different historical epochs, and for the longest time they are face to face-- stories are told face to face-- and for many hundreds of thousands of years that was the only thing that was possible. Of course there was also imagery, and images reveal while words explain. Images would reveal something about nature, something about how it is governed-- how it is created. These are of course the ancient images that can be monuments like pyramids, or obelisks, or murals, or cathedrals. They're all images, and they're designed to create a sense of awe, or a sense of understanding of nature or of power.

The first big change is the printing press. The printing press begins the industrialization of storytelling. The printing process begins the process, which is still accelerating, that puts storytelling on some kind of an assembly line, and thereby is able to stamp out large quantities of, and commodities that embody stories, images, and the whole array of the human storytelling process.

The second major change is the electronic revolution. And the mainstream of the new electronic revolution is television, and it's going to be the mainstream for a long time to come. Television is the only medium that comes into the home. It's the only medium that provides an environment into which children are born. For the first time in human history, a child today is born into a cultural environment in which television is on an average more than seven hours a day. For the first time in human history, most of the stories, most of the time, to most of the children are told no longer by the parent, no longer by the school, no longer by the church, but essentially by a shrinking group of global conglomerates that really have nothing to tell them, but have a lot to sell. This is a major transformation in the way in which our children are socialized, in the

way in which most of the stories are told, in the way in which we grew up and identify ourselves.

## EFFECT VS. CULTIVATION

**MICHAEL MORGAN:** When people talk about the effects of television, they're usually thinking about some kind of change about a *before*, and an *after*. We worry that a television program might make someone become violent, or that television can change our minds about what we buy or who we vote for, but there are other ways to think about effects. Sometimes the biggest and most powerful effects might not cause any obvious change at all.

Instead of effects, Gerbner talks about cultivation, which means that without our minds, or our behavior, television tells us stories that continually shape and reinforce a particular way of seeing the world. When the same images and patterns are shown on television over, and over, and over, viewers tend to mistake the fictional world of TV for the real world. As we absorb television's images they remind us about what we should take for granted, what we believe is normal and natural. They become part of how we perceive reality. This process is called *cultivation* because the values that television emphasizes are continually nourished and sustained many hours a day for most viewers. It's not something that just happens to us at one point in time. So there's no before and after because television is there from birth.

**GEORGE GERBNER:** Effect itself originated from a kind of persuasive, market oriented, advertising, political campaign type of communication. The measure of effect is before and after, or a group in which you include the message, a group in which you don't, and you try to look at the difference, and you ask the question of "What has changed? Has my message been effective?" So effect is change oriented. Now the question is, it's easy to see how you measure change, but how do you measure no change? How do you measure stability? This leads us to the notion of cultivation as compared to and contrasted with effects.

Cultivation basically is the building and the maintenance of stable sets of images about life in society that are driven by the everyday flow of communication. In practical terms this means that I compare heavy viewers of television, people whose cultural life is essentially monopolized by television, who don't read much of the newspaper or don't read much of anything, with people who are light viewers, not because they don't like television, but because they have a much greater variety of cultural participation patterns: they read newspapers, they read magazines, they read books, they go to concerts, and when we do that indeed we find significant differences. We find that the heavy viewers see things differently from the light viewers. The heavy viewers and people whose cultural life is essentially monopolized by television absorb the television image of life and society from infancy on. They act in a world, which is created mostly by the storytelling capacity of television.

## AN EXAMPLE: VIOLENCE & MEDIA

**GEORGE GERBNER:** When people ask about violence, they say, “Does it create more violence?” The effect is supposed to be a change in increasing an imitation, and a kind of a “monkey see, monkey do” effect. Well this is really trivial. The contribution of television violence into the actual committing of violence is practically negligible, but if you look at it from a cultivation point of view you see that images of violence are really-- constitute a complicated scenario of victims and violent people, and that’s the image of victimization, the image of risk, the image of danger, the conception that if there is so much violence in the world, I am at risk, not that I am going to go down the street to be a mugger, but on the contrary, I am afraid to go down the street at night. I’m afraid of strangers.

**[Media clip]**

*Step back! Give me your purses, give them to me!*

*-- All right, calm down.*

*Stay put!*

*-- Let’s go – No, no, no, he said stay put.*

**MICHAEL MORGAN:** We do our research on cultivation by giving surveys to large groups of people. We ask them questions about how they see the world: What are your chances of being a victim of violence? Are more people murdered by strangers, or by people they know? How dangerous is it to walk in a big city at night? Can most people be trusted?

We ask people these sorts of questions, then we ask how much time they spend watching television, and we divide them into groups of light, medium, and heavy viewers. Then we compare the responses of the different groups of viewers to these questions to see what difference the amount of time they spend watching TV makes to their attitudes and beliefs. We statistically eliminate the effects of other demographic variables like age or sex, or race, or education, that also effect our beliefs to pinpoint the independent contribution of television to conceptions of reality.

We might find that 60% of the light viewers, 70% of the medium viewers, and 80% of the heavy viewers think it’s dangerous to walk alone at night. So heavy viewers are more likely than light viewers to be afraid, and heavy viewing cultivates that way of thinking about the world. As Dr. Gerbner points out, this cultivation of fear has some broader social ramifications.

**GEORGE GERBNER:** The political fallout is that is if you raise the level of insecurity in people, in a large population they are more likely to demand protection, they are more likely to accept political solutions to the problems of society like poverty, and urban decay, and the urban cultural violence, not to remedy the root causes, but simply solutions that represent more repression,

more police, more jails, longer sentences, and more executions. It's not just that we imprison more people; we imprison ourselves. We imprison ourselves because of fear that paralyzes us in our high-rise apartments. We imprison ourselves in our own suburbs. A few years ago the city of New York forbade television and motion picture crews to take location shots in the subways because every time they did it went into some kind of a dreadful scene of menace, and of danger, and of assault that was driving people away.

People who think nothing about sitting in their cars, which is probably the most dangerous thing that anyone can do on any average day, because the image and the industry, the automobile industry of course, emphasizes if not safety at least the power and the thrill of driving. That itself is a curious phenomenon that a child today sees about forty-five thousand speeding, reckless driving incidents a year on television without ever a crash.

*[TV ad: BMW] Don't let love pass you by.*

**GEORGE GERBNER:** So it is risk free. Driving is risk free, and the things that-- the kinds of behavior that are highly secure and very efficient are often represented as menacing and as dangerous, such as going into the subways.



## CASTING & FATE

**MICHAEL MORGAN:** Television doesn't only tell us stories about violence and risk. Woven into the fabric of all programs are vivid and consistent lessons about gender, age, and race. The stories of television demonstrate to us what men and women are like, or that is how this culture defines men and women and what fates may await them. We learn about how we're supposed to think about people of different ages and what it means to be old or young, and we learn, so we think, about people of different races and ethnic groups.

These patterns of casting teach us who are the aggressors and who are the victims, and we carry over these beliefs into our expectations of other people. Gerbner has been systematically tracking and analyzing television programs and characters since 1967, over three thousand programs and thirty-five thousand characters have been logged into the database. As we see next, what's most remarkable over the decades, once you get below the surface, is how little television has actually changed.

**GEORGE GERBNER:** And every viewer sees about three hundred and fifty characters a week, week in and week out. It's a very stable cast. We think that television changes all the time, but in fact stars may change, styles may change, program titles may change, plots may change, but it's not plots that we learn. We forget the plots. We learn what we will call *casting* and *fate*. The difference in casting has a profound effect not only on how we grow up and how we socialize, but how we relate to each other. For young women it has the effect of reducing-- of tending to reduce their sense of adequacy, and their sense of opportunities, potentials, and a range of activities in which they are likely to be seen as appropriate, and as adequate, and as successful.

For boys that range is much wider, but boys also learn that in order to reach that they have to be more aggressive, and their male socialization involves a very strong dose of aggression, and even of violence, whereas female socialization via television involves a strong dose of dependence and potential victimization. I think that the sense of potential victimization drives much of the family violence that we have, and much of the violence against women, which is culturally almost sanctioned. It is something-- it is a scene that is rehearsed many, many times.

## STORIES OF GENDER

**GEORGE GERBNER:** Women are not only under represented – there are three men for every woman on television – but they also age faster than men, and that means that as women age, they decline in numbers, whereas as men age they remain fairly large in numbers. You know, it is for that reason that the Screen Actors Guild has commissioned us to do a study because their female members lost jobs, and they stopped getting calls after age thirty-five, and indeed we found that as women age they lose parts. And not only do they lose parts, but they begin to be portrayed differently.

Older women are few and far between, and almost every time, they play evil stepmothers or witches. That is where witches and evil stepmothers come from, and it's like an old women's quota, and when the standard stereotypes old women, villains, and evil roles are filled, there is no more. And one of the questions we ask is "Are you-- would you be willing to vote for a well qualified female candidate for president?" And we find that heavy viewers are less likely to accept that proposition, and are more likely to say no, whereas light viewers are more likely to say yes. Television as a source of socialization, and it is a source of role definitions-- tends to cultivate a more limited, more restricted sense of variety of roles and potential women and for men.

**MICHAEL MORGAN:** Gerbner's research has found that after they reach the age of thirty-five women are unlikely to be portrayed in romantic roles, even though men on television have no such restriction as they age. Through the cultivation process the media perpetuate unequal sexual expectations for men and women of different ages, and this is reflected in the roles that actors and actresses are allowed to play.

Lets look at two famous talented actors. In her earlier career, Susan Sarandon played a wide variety of characters who encompassed all aspects of human experience. When she crossed some media age line, however...

*[Movie] I'm forty-three. I'll be forty-four in December.*

**MICHAEL MORGAN:** ...the romantic and sexual aspects of her characters disappears. And now she is mainly cast as a mother or a nun. Does the same thing happen to men? This is Sean Connery when he was younger. And this is Sean Connery in later career. Somehow being an older man does not disqualify an actor from playing a character with romantic appeal. Since older women are so rarely cast in romantic roles, it's not surprising that older men are typically shown with much younger women. And this doesn't raise any eyebrows. It seems normal, although media images make it difficult for us to imagine it the other way around. As Gerbner has put it, we'll know that we've reached gender equality when we see Sean Connery make love to a woman his own age.

## STORIES OF CLASS

**MICHAEL MORGAN:** Although many of us can recognize how television stereotypes men and women there are other images more subtle, but equally pervasive. Think about the way most people on TV live. Look at their homes, their clothes, their cars. The television world is a fantasy world of carefree economic comfort. What does this teach us about social class? And about the kind of jobs we can expect to work at?

**GEORGE GERBNER:** Television presents a very skewed occupational picture. Every week an average viewer see about twenty-five agents of law enforcement -- army, police, detectives arraigned against an army of twenty-one or so criminals. There are about twelve doctors, especially at a time when doctor shows are so popular. There are about six lawyers. There is about one scientist. So when young people think about their own occupations, they know relatively rare occupational choices than about what most people will encounter in life.

The lower one-third of our population of lower income, lower education, are represented by 1.2% of the characters. The absence, the disappearance of poor people makes it extremely difficult to connect with the very problems of our inner cities that are tearing this country apart. There is an undeclared civil war going on in our inner cities that we never see. And when we see it, we see it in terms of crime, of drugs, of violence.

**[TV: NYPD Blue]** *Where are you going? Against the wall!*

*-- I didn't do nothing...*

*I don't know how the hell you got out.*

*-- I didn't do nothing last time either.*

*Upset with our penal system Arthur? Locked up repeatedly for crimes you don't commit? At least we don't make you do much time, huh?*

**GEORGE GERBNER:** And when you have that kind of an image of a social problem the easiest way of addressing that problem makes it virtually impossible to address the most vital problems of our society, namely poverty, and the increasing polarization of people.

## STORIES OF RACE

**MICHAEL MORGAN:** The last issue we'll explore here is one of the most explosive issues in America and that's the subject of race. Television tells us stories about people of other races, and those stories are a major source of our most common cultural images about other people. African Americans have made significant strides in recent years. They now represent about 11% of the characters on television, which is close to their real world numbers. But Latinos who make up 9% of the US population represent only 1% of the characters on TV. And Asian and Native American are practically invisible. There are almost too few to count. To be invisible on television means to have less power in society. But even when a minority group is visible, even when a group has as many characters on television as they should, there can still be serious questions about the nature of their representation.

**GEORGE GERBNER:** The case of African Americans on American television is a very peculiar case. They are healthier, wealthier, they are more successful, they are more middle-class than characters in general. So, in drama and fiction they are presented as a fairly glowing image giving the impression that there is no problem, that problems have been solved, that they are very successful.

On the other hand, when African Americans appear in the news they have twice the chance of any other character to appear in connection with crime, with violence, with drugs, with all the negative and vulnerable characteristics that television characters encounter.

The bifurcated image of black people gives the impression that the black problem doesn't exist any more. It makes it difficult in terms of legislation that attacks the root causes of inner city, predominantly black poverty and unemployment, and despair in inner cities in any other way except for in the way in which it has been addressed. Considering our inner cities as an occupied area, virtual concentration camp, ringed by police, turned into a jail out of which there is no escape.

**MICHAEL MORGAN:** Gerbner's research on race points to two main implications. First, because blacks and whites on television are usually shown separately, heavy viewers tend to support segregation. They are more likely to think that blacks and whites should live in separate neighborhoods, and blacks and whites should not be allowed to get married. Second, because television exaggerates the extent to which blacks have made it in society, heavy viewers believe that racism is something that we once had, but it's now over, and that we no longer need programs such as Affirmative Action that address racial inequality.

## THE POLITICS OF STORYTELLING

**GEORGE GERBNER:** The historic struggle for power and privilege has shifted from the older arenas of struggle – military, political, educational, into the cultural arena. In terms of what some countries call the culture wars, or the media wars which really ask the question how should this culture be organized, how should it be directed, how should it be governed and guided?

In the United States this question is difficult to ask because most Americans don't recognize that cultural controls have been highly concentrated, that we have an invisible ministry of culture of essentially a handful of men who determine what a majority of the children of our country and the world will see in their everyday entertainment and their everyday information.

The new task is to try to design a media system, a cultural environmental system which will address the issue of how can we create an environment for our children – stories, roles and socializing influences in which they grow up that is more fair, that is more equitable, that is more just, and less damaging than the one we have today.

**MICHAEL MORGAN:** All these stories of television – of violence, of power, of sex, class, and age, and race, they're all intertwined. They form a coherent system of stories that we absorb over long periods of time, and they give us stable ways of looking at the world. And even if we ourselves don't watch that much, everyone else we interact with does. What Gerbner has shown is that there is something very important at stake in storytelling. The stories of television are not neutral. They're not just entertainment. They cultivate our values, our morality, and our beliefs about other people. We hope you'll think about this the next time you're watching TV.