

George Gerbner Leaves the Mean World Syndrome

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CBC Arts - "You know, who tells the stories of a culture really governs human behaviour. It used to be the parent, the school, the church, the community. Now it's a handful of global conglomerates that have nothing to tell, but a great deal to sell." - George Gerbner, a pioneer researcher on the effects of television on society.

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[TV violence researcher dies](#)

CBC Arts

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George Gerbner, a pioneer researcher on the effects of television on society, has died of cancer at the age of 86.

Gerbner passed away in his Philadelphia home on Dec. 24, revealed his daughter-in-law Kathie McDermott on New Year's Eve.

Gerbner, dean of the Annenberg School for Communications at the University of Pennsylvania for 25 years, spent three decades studying television. He concluded that it's a "cultural environment" into which children are born and one that has a great deal of influence.

"You know, who tells the stories of a culture really governs human behaviour," he said. "It used to be the parent, the school, the church, the community. Now it's a handful of global conglomerates that have nothing to tell, but a great deal to sell."

Gerbner founded the Cultural Indicators Research Project in 1968, tracking changes in television content and monitoring how they affected a viewer's perceptions of the world. Its database contains information on more than 3,000 TV programs and 35,000 characters.

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His investigations discovered that people who watch a lot of TV tend to think of the world as an unforgiving and scary place ? something he called the "mean world syndrome."

Gerbner described violence on television as having a powerful effect on viewers' perceptions of the world.

"Fearful people are more dependent, more easily manipulated and controlled, more susceptible to deceptively simple, strong, tough measures and hard-line measures," said Gerbner when he testified before a congressional subcommittee in 1981.

Born in Budapest in 1919, Gerbner fled Hungary in 1939 as a fascist government took over. He landed in the U.S. and graduated from the University of California with a journalism degree. After serving in the Second World War, he worked as a researcher in communications at the University of Illinois and then accepted a teaching position at the University of Pennsylvania.

In 1990, Gerbner founded the Cultural Environment Movement, an advocacy group for greater diversity in the media.

He is survived by two sons and five grandchildren.