

## **George Gerbner, 86; Educator Researched the Influence of TV Viewing on Perceptions**

By Myrna Oliver, Times Staff Writer

George Gerbner, an educator and pioneer researcher into the influence of television violence on viewers' perceptions of the world, has died. He was 86.

Gerbner, the former dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, died Saturday at his home in Philadelphia of unspecified causes. Always interested in storytelling, the Hungarian-born Gerbner became concerned as television and motion pictures supplanted family members and friends in relaying tales both true and fictional.

By 2000, after more than three decades of study, Gerbner told National Public Radio that he had ceased to view television as a medium.

"I call it a cultural environment into which our children are born, and which tells all the stories," he said. "You know, who tells the stories of a culture really governs human behavior. 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."

He said average homes had a television set turned on at least seven hours a day, and that youngsters were learning to read by watching television commercials, developing a consumer mentality.

During his 25-year tenure as dean in the Penn communications school, which was funded by TV Guide magnate Walter Annenberg, Gerbner received numerous grants to study the portrayal of violence on television and in films and also to analyze how TV and films showcase particular professions and demographic groups.

In 1968, he founded and headed the Cultural Indicators Project to measure trends in television content and examine how television shapes Americans' concept of society.

The project's database has collected information on more than 3,000 television programs and 35,000 characters.

In the early 1990s, after leaving Penn, Gerbner founded a second organization, the Cultural Environment Movement, to work for greater diversity in media ownership, employment and representation.

Over 30 years of analysis, Gerbner said the level of violence shown on television remained relatively steady — six to eight incidents per hour, and in children's programming up to 20 to 35 incidents per hour.

"The most general and prevalent association with television viewing," he testified to a congressional subcommittee on communications in 1981, "is a heightened sense of living in a 'mean world' of violence and danger. Fearful people are more dependent, more easily manipulated and controlled, more susceptible to deceptively simple, strong, tough measures and hard-line postures.... They may accept and even welcome repression if it promises to relieve their insecurities. That is the deeper problem of violence-laden television."

Through his research, Gerbner concluded that heavy television viewers (more than four hours daily) came to consider the world as rightly belonging to "the power and money elite" depicted on

the small screen — the young, wealthy white males idealized in programming as heroic doctors and other professionals.

He warned that women, minorities and the elderly, from what they saw repeatedly on television, would come to accept inferior status and restricted opportunities as inevitable or even deserved.

Depriving people of the chance to see themselves with equal opportunities and potential, he told *The Times* in 1993, "has to be seen as an indictment of civil rights, especially in a medium that is licensed not just as a business but as a public trustee."

Television programming, he said in speeches and articles, relies on violence to demonstrate "who can get away with what against whom."

Gerbner, whose findings were regularly disputed by network executives, said that neither V-chips nor content-rating codes would prevent children from viewing the ubiquitous television violence.

The educator was editor of the *Journal of Communication* from 1974 to 1991 and chaired the editorial board of the *International Encyclopedia of Communications* for several years. He also wrote, edited and contributed to several books about communications and media.

Born in Budapest, Hungary, Gerbner had a lifelong interest in folklore and literature. He began his studies at the University of Budapest before fleeing fascist Hungary in 1939.

After arriving in Los Angeles, through the help of his brother, film director Laszlo Benedek, he studied at UCLA and then completed a journalism degree at UC Berkeley. He worked briefly for the *San Francisco Chronicle* as a writer, columnist and assistant financial editor.

Gerbner served in the U.S. Army in Europe during World War II, working with the Office of Strategic Services, parachuting behind enemy lines and earning a Bronze Star. After the war he worked as a freelance writer and publicist and taught journalism at El Camino College while earning a master's and doctorate in communications at USC.

He taught and conducted research at the Institute for Communications Research at the University of Illinois from 1956 until 1964, when he was recruited for the post at Penn. In recent years he taught at several institutions, including American, Temple and Villanova universities.

Gerbner, whose wife of 59 years, Ilona, died Dec. 8, is survived by two sons, John and Thomas, and five grandchildren.