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## George Gerbner; led Annenberg

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George Gerbner, 86, formerly of Ardmore, dean emeritus of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, who researched the cultural impact of television for more than 30 years, died of cancer Dec. 24 at the Fountains at Logan Square, a retirement residence in Philadelphia. His wife of 59 years, Ilona Kutas Gerbner, died Dec. 8.

Among the theories about television that Dr. Gerbner developed was the "Mean World Syndrome."

"Violent programming," he wrote, "reinforces the worst fears and apprehensions and paranoia of people." Comic violence such as that in cartoons, he said, is even more lethal and desensitizes children. He advised parents to watch television with their children to help them interpret what they see.

Dr. Gerbner encouraged the public to lobby television networks to improve programming. Several of his studies showed that women, senior citizens and minorities were underrepresented on television. Given television's powerful effects, he told a reporter, it was a "new civil right" for programs to represent people fairly and equally.

"Most of the stories that are told to our children," he said in 1993, "are no longer told by their parents, by their schools, by their churches, or by their communities. They are shaped instead by a small group of conglomerates that have something to sell."

"To say you can turn off television is arrogance," he said in 1990. "People would rather stop breathing than stop storytelling."

He felt strongly about the storytelling and folklore, his daughter-in-law Kathie McDermott said, and encouraged his two sons, John and Thomas, to "tell" the story of their day when they were growing up. He continued the tradition with his grandchildren, McDermott said.

Dr. Gerbner was chosen dean of the Annenberg School for Communication in 1964 by Walter Annenberg, who had established the school five years earlier. Annenberg, a conservative Republican, was publisher of newspapers and magazines including *The Inquirer* and *TV Guide*. Dr. Gerbner, a liberal Democrat, already had gained a reputation as a media expert while on the faculty of the Institute of Communications Research at the University of Illinois for eight years.

At Annenberg, he founded the Cultural Indicators Research Project to research the influence of television. After retiring in 1989, he established the Cultural Environment Movement, an international organization to lobby for cultural policies. From 1997 to 2000, he held the Bell Atlantic Telecommunications chair at Temple University.

A native of Budapest, Hungary, Dr. Gerbner fled his homeland when the Nazis came to power and immigrated to the United States in 1939. He earned a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of California at Berkeley and wrote a consumer column for the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

During World War II, he served in the Army and in the Office of Strategic Services. He was awarded a Bronze Star for parachuting behind enemy lines and joining Yugoslavian partisans to fight the Germans. After the war, he helped arrest Nazi officials and personally arrested fascist Hungarian Prime Minister Bela Imredy, who was tried for war crimes. While in Budapest, Dr. Gerbner met his future wife, an actress who would later direct the theater lab at Penn.

After his discharge, Dr. Gerbner earned a doctorate in journalism from the University of Southern California.

In addition to his sons, he is survived by five grandchildren.

A memorial service for Dr. Gerbner will be held at the Annenberg School for Communication at a later date.

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