

Cambridge University Press

0521582962 - Television and its Viewers: Cultivation Theory and Research

James Shanahan and Michael Morgan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

# 1 Origins

---

Supreme among the many available symbols of postmodern progress and alienation – more than political assassinations, microwave ovens, gene splicing, moonwalks, family breakdown, AIDS, ozone depletion, youth culture, suburban sprawl, the Cold War, feminism, the computer explosion, Watergate, ethnic conflicts, fast food, homelessness, minivans and economic globalization – the ultimate icon for the final half of the twentieth century is television. Although television predates the 1950s and will certainly survive the millennium, there is no gainsaying that for roughly fifty years the medium has permeated every corner of public and private space, shaping consciousness, defining our “reality,” drawing us together, and pulling us apart, in ways that will uniquely enshrine this historical period as The Age of Television.

Over the past five decades, television has been a perennial and vexing object of passionate debate. Upon it has been heaped immense cultural and intellectual scorn. Feared by the righteous and not-so-righteous, ridiculed by those who never fail to miss their favorite shows, television is continuously lambasted, lampooned and impugned, serving as the culture’s straw-man and whipping-boy; yet it is also consumed – assiduously, diligently, almost religiously – by most of us, and in massive doses. There is no better example of a “love-hate relationship” than that between television and contemporary society.

Parents, teachers, academics, politicians, moral guardians, social critics, those who work in the medium, and those who simply watch it without thinking much about it, have all offered a vast array of charges, counter-charges, complaints, defenses, interpretations and opinions about just what this device is and what it may be doing to us and our children. Although other media “panics” may pop up from time to time, such as those surrounding raunchy rock lyrics, horror comics, gory films, violent video games, and pornography on the Internet, television usually remains the most likely suspect, the focus of the most recurring social concern and the medium to which we are most – in the end – devoted.

Television, both as technology and institution, has changed on many

Cambridge University Press

0521582962 - Television and its Viewers: Cultivation Theory and Research

James Shanahan and Michael Morgan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 2 Television and its Viewers

levels in the past fifty years, yet the public debates it propels often sound like a broken record – but one that is going faster and faster. Each new crop of parents and teachers sings the same refrain about zombie-eyed, anemic children wasting too much time watching television, imitating the aggressive behavior of whatever super-heroes currently adorn bedsheets and lunchboxes, having no attention span in the classroom, and so on. Political pressure groups of all stripes proliferate, railing against specific portrayals or programs they find objectionable (sometimes for not being politically correct, and sometimes *for* being so), often calling for boycotts or censorship. At the same time, seemingly perennial Congressional hearings have given executives from the industry many opportunities to express their deep, heartfelt concern about the social impacts of television. Meanwhile, academic research, rarely able to influence media policy in any meaningful way, has become more specialized, arcane, complicated and increasingly divorced from the reality of people’s everyday media consumption.

Altogether, these debates, too often driven by wishful thinking, economic self-interest and moral posturing, become more disturbing and irrelevant as time passes. To a great extent, it is conveniently easier (especially for politicians) to decry the ills of television than to deal with more serious social problems, but the very real and very important problem of television risks being lost in a shrill muddle of tendentious discourse.

Some years ago, Michael Novak offered a refreshingly simple way to frame the question of how television might affect us.

If you practice the craft of writing sedulously, you begin to think and perceive differently. If you run for twenty minutes a day, your psyche is subtly transformed. If you work in an executive office, you begin to think like an executive. And if you watch six hours of television, on the average, every day . . . ? (Novak, 1986, p. 583)

Novak’s idea is that the ways in which we think about ourselves, our lives, our society, and our world should be influenced in some ways by how we occupy our time, by the roles we assume, and by the images and stories we consume. Given that we as a society spend more time watching television than doing anything else except working and sleeping (and many people watch *more* than they work), it should not be surprising if television “shapes the soul,” as the title of Novak’s article asserts.

If we assume that the messages of television have some commonality and consistency to them – that they are not just a random collection of entertainment “units” in a media universe without purpose – then we might be tempted to conclude that exposure to those messages over time should mean something. So if we spend hours a day watching television, over the weeks, months and years, we might be expected to pick up a thing

Cambridge University Press

0521582962 - Television and its Viewers: Cultivation Theory and Research

James Shanahan and Michael Morgan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

or two, and to think about life and the world in ways different from people who rarely watch television. Or, to extend this a bit further: a person who has the sort of values, beliefs, mindset, lifestyle and outlooks most congruent with the images, messages and stories of television, and who therefore would be drawn to (or choose to) spend a great deal of time watching the medium, would likely find those beliefs and outlooks to be nourished and sustained over the long run. If not, why do so many continue to watch?

This conceptualization of the role of television in our lives is the essence of George Gerbner's theory of "cultivation." This simple hypothesis – that watching a great deal of television will be associated with a tendency to hold specific and distinct conceptions of reality, conceptions that are congruent with the most consistent and pervasive images and values of the medium – may, at first glance, appear to be so thoroughly reasonable and self-evident that one may be tempted to wonder what all the fuss is about. Who could possibly argue against such a cut-and-dried assertion? Why write a book about something so obvious?

Yet, obviousness notwithstanding, cultivation theory and research have become a major arena in which questions about the "effects" of television have been debated. Indeed, although the elegant simplicity of the idea has both attracted adherents and antagonized opponents, cultivation analysis has also been an extraordinarily controversial approach to media effects and communication research, and not only within the narrow confines of the academic community. After over twenty years of intense theoretical and methodological development, testing, criticism and refinement, it turns out that cultivation is neither so simple nor so obvious. In the time-honored tradition of "good" scientific progress, the more work that is done, the more complex the questions (and the answers) become (see Signorielli and Morgan, 1990; Morgan and Shanahan, 1997).

This book takes stock of these past two decades of cultivation research. Through detailed theoretical and historical explication, critical assessments of methodology, and a comprehensive "meta-analysis" of twenty years of empirical results, we scrutinize cultivation in terms of its assumptions, its methods, its findings, its development, its conflicts, its limitations, its problems, its contributions, and its future. We do not pretend to be disinterested, neutral observers of the debates that have swirled around cultivation analysis; we are teachers and practitioners of the technique, and we embrace it sufficiently to have written this and other books and articles about it. As such, this book is an exposition and defense of the merits of cultivation theory. Nevertheless, we do attempt to be as even-handed and equitable as possible to those who have been critical of cultivation even as we endeavor to provide a thorough conceptual and empirical response to many of those criticisms. Working in this spirit of

Cambridge University Press

0521582962 - Television and its Viewers: Cultivation Theory and Research

James Shanahan and Michael Morgan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 4 Television and its Viewers

advancing the scientific debate, we propose to demonstrate that cultivation theory, though by no means flawless, offers a unique and valuable perspective on the role of television in twentieth-century social life.

**Cultivation analysis as a field of research**

Cultivation analysis is the study of television's independent contribution to viewers' conceptions of social reality. In practice, cultivation analysis typically uses survey research methods to assess the difference amount of television viewing makes (if any), other things held constant, to a broad variety of opinions, images and attitudes, across a variety of samples, types of measures, topical areas and intervening variables (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan and Signorielli, 1994). Stated most simply, as hinted above, the central hypothesis guiding cultivation research is that those who spend more time watching television are more likely to perceive the real world in ways that reflect the most common and recurrent messages of the television world, compared to people who watch less television but are otherwise comparable in terms of important demographic characteristics.

Since the first results of cultivation analysis were published over twenty years ago (Gerbner and Gross, 1976), literally hundreds of studies have explored, enhanced, questioned, critiqued, dismissed or defended the conceptual assumptions and methodological procedures of cultivation analysis (see Hawkins and Pingree, 1982; Potter, 1993; Signorielli and Morgan, 1990). Although cultivation analysis may once have been closely identified with the issue of violence, over the years researchers have looked at a broad range of topics, including sex roles, aging, political orientations, the family, environmental attitudes, science, health, religion, minorities, occupations and others. As its topical concerns have expanded, so have its international extensions: replications have been carried out in Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, England, Hungary, Israel, the Netherlands, Russia, South Korea, Sweden, Taiwan, Trinidad and elsewhere.

In 1986, Jennings Bryant noted that cultivation was one of only three topics covered in over half of "mass media and society" courses offered at US colleges and universities. He also reported that cultivation research is one of the few contributions by mass communication scholars to appear with any regularity in basic textbooks in social psychology, sociology and related disciplines. He even quipped that studies of cultivation seem "almost as ubiquitous as television itself" (1986, p. 231). The status of cultivation as a "core" theory of media effects has probably only increased since Bryant made his observations. As Newhagen and Lewenstein (1992) put it, "Despite criticism, the theory persists, perhaps because the

Cambridge University Press

0521582962 - Television and its Viewers: Cultivation Theory and Research

James Shanahan and Michael Morgan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

social implications of the idea that a mass medium can define our culture [are] too important to dismiss” (p. 49).

The findings of cultivation research have been many, varied and sometimes counter-intuitive. Cultivation has generated a great deal of theoretical colloquy, and methodological debate. Though not everyone in the field of communication agrees on the validity of cultivation findings, cultivation is arguably among the most important contributions yet made to scientific and public understanding of media effects. Nevertheless, the assumptions and procedures of cultivation analysis are sometimes misunderstood or misrepresented by other researchers and critics; one goal of this book is to set the theoretical and methodological record straight.

Much of the social debate about television focuses on specific issues, problems, controversies or programs which are current at any given time. Many of these interesting and important questions about media effects are largely irrelevant to cultivation analysis. Cultivation is *not* about how voters' feelings about a political candidate might be affected by some newscast or ad campaign. Cultivation is *not* about whether a new commercial can make people buy a new toothpaste. It is *not* about whether children (or others) become more aggressive, or have nightmares, or experience catharsis, after watching a violent program. It is *not* about how different viewers might develop conflicting interpretations of the motivation of a character on a soap opera to leave her lover, or disagree on the ultimate resolution of a complex murder mystery. It is *not* about teenagers being corrupted by sleazy talk shows or leering sex-obsessed sitcoms. It is *not* about how this season's (or this week's) new smash hit or hot star is changing the public's hair styles or career plans. It is not, really, about many of the more dramatic alleged effects of television that figure so frequently in public debate. All of these are fascinating and important questions, but they are tangential to the issues addressed by cultivation.

Cultivation *is* about the implications of stable, repetitive, pervasive and virtually inescapable patterns of images and ideologies that television (especially dramatic, fictional entertainment) provides. As we will argue more fully below, cultivation research approaches television as a *system* of messages – a system whose elements are not invariant or uniform, but complementary, organic and coherent – and inquires into the functions and consequences of those messages *as a system*, overall, *in toto* for its audiences. The focus of cultivation analysis is on the correlates and consequences of cumulative exposure to *television in general* over long periods of time.

Would watching a film of adults batting around clown dolls cause children to imitate that behavior? This is not a question for cultivation analysis, but cultivation could say something about how exposure to

Cambridge University Press

0521582962 - Television and its Viewers: Cultivation Theory and Research

James Shanahan and Michael Morgan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 6 Television and its Viewers

many thousands of violent images over time might have something to do with our perception of the likelihood of encountering violence in the world. Did *Kojak* cause Ronald Zamora to murder his elderly neighbor, as his lawyer famously argued in 1977? Again, cultivation research wouldn't tell us, but it might help us understand something about the broader social environment in which such a question could even be asked. Would seeing Jodie Foster gang-raped on a pool table in the film *The Accused* cause some viewers to imitate that crime? Again, cultivation couldn't answer that question, but it could say something about broader patterns of association between television demography, favoring male power and female victimization, and the chances for women to succeed in society. Although the consequences of the cultivation process are related to everyday current events and issues, the research does not study direct effects from messages sent and received in the short term. The point is that cultivation's role is to examine broad patterns of relationships between the social consumption of media messages and stable, aggregate belief structures among large groups of people.

### The Cultural Indicators Project

Cultivation analysis is one component of a long-term, ongoing research program called "Cultural Indicators." The concept of a cultural "indicator" was developed by George Gerbner as a complement to the more common idea of an economic or social indicator, a kind of barometer of important cultural issues (Gerbner, 1969, 1970). Gerbner conceived of Cultural Indicators as a way to add a relatively disinterested "Third Voice" to the ongoing contentious conflicts being waged between political forces and private commercial concerns over cultural policy. With less at stake over the outcomes, he argued, an independent research project could provide a more "objective" accounting of media practices, outputs and impacts, and therefore a better basis for judgment and policy (Gerbner, 1973). In the USA, Cultural Indicators research has focused mostly on the implications of growing up and living with television, since it is the country's most widely shared cultural agency and most visible disseminator of cultural symbols.

The project was developed as a three-part research framework for investigating the structure, contours, and consequences of pervasive symbol systems, premised on three global, interrelated questions:

- 1 What are the processes, pressures, and constraints that influence and underlie the production of mass media content?
- 2 What are the dominant, aggregate patterns of images, messages, facts, values and lessons expressed in media messages? and

Cambridge University Press

0521582962 - Television and its Viewers: Cultivation Theory and Research

James Shanahan and Michael Morgan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

### 3 What is the relationship between attention to these messages and audiences' conceptions of social reality?

Perhaps the most innovative and intriguing aspect of the Cultural Indicators paradigm is that the answer to any one of these questions is seen as having significant implications for the other two. Early on, Gerbner maintained that the "effects" of communication are not to be found in short-term attitude or behavior change, but in the history and dynamics of the reciprocal relationships between the structure of the institutions which produce media messages, the message systems themselves, and the image structures which are embedded within a culture.

Each of these three research questions involves a distinct conceptual framework and set of methodological procedures (Gerbner, 1973). "Institutional process analysis," the first prong, is used to investigate how media messages are selected, produced and distributed. "Message system analysis" quantifies and tracks patterns of demography, action structures, relationships, aspects of life and recurrent images in media content, in terms of the portrayal of violence, minorities, gender-roles, occupations and so on. The study of how exposure to the world of television contributes to viewers' conceptions about the real world is cultivation analysis, the third prong (and the primary focus of this book). Altogether, Cultural Indicators research sees media institutions, messages and audiences as intertwined in a complex, dynamic multi-hued tapestry.

Like many landmark efforts in the history of communication research, the Cultural Indicators project was launched as an independently funded enterprise in an applied context (Gerbner, 1969). The research began during the late 1960s, a time of national turmoil, violence and social unrest. In 1968, the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence was formed to probe the problem of violence in society, including a review of existing research on violence on television (Baker and Ball, 1969). The commission also funded one new study: a content analysis of violence in prime-time programming in the 1967–68 television season, under the direction of Gerbner at the Annenberg School for Communication, who earlier had conducted other large-scale content analyses and institutional analyses of media policies. This first step into what was to become the Cultural Indicators Project documented the frequency and nature of television violence and established a baseline for long-term monitoring of the world of television (Gerbner, 1969).

In 1969, even before the report of the Commission was released, Congress appropriated \$1 million and set up the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior to implement new, primary research on television and violence. Altogether, twenty-three projects, including Cultural Indicators, were funded.

Cambridge University Press

0521582962 - Television and its Viewers: Cultivation Theory and Research

James Shanahan and Michael Morgan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 8 Television and its Viewers

Cultural Indicators research focused primarily upon the content of prime-time and weekend-daytime network dramatic programming (Gerbner, 1972). Message system analysis has continued annually since 1967; week-long samples of US network television drama (and samples in other cooperating countries, whenever possible) are recorded and subjected to content analysis in order to delineate selected features and trends in the overall “worldview” television presents to its viewers. In the 1990s, the analysis has been extended to include the Fox network, “reality” programs and various selected cable channels.

The cultivation analysis phase of the Cultural Indicators research paradigm was first implemented with a national probability survey of adults during the early 1970s in a study funded by the National Institute of Mental Health (Gerbner and Gross, 1976). Many other agencies and foundations have supported the project over the years, including the White House Office of Telecommunications Policy, the American Medical Association, the Administration on Aging, the National Science Foundation, the Ad Hoc Committee on Religious Television Research, the W. Alton Jones Foundation, the Screen Actors’ Guild, the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, the National Cable Television Association, the US Commission on Civil Rights, the Turner Broadcasting System, the Institute for Mental Health Initiatives, the American Association for Retired Persons Women’s Initiative, the Office of Substance Abuse Prevention and the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention of the US Public Health Service, and others.

As it developed, the project has continued to explore an ever-wider range of topical areas in both message system and cultivation analyses. Cultivation research has expanded its scope in studies directed by the original investigators and in studies undertaken by many other independent investigators in the USA and around the world. In order to better understand the conceptual assumptions and methodological procedures of cultivation analysis, in the next section we step back a bit and look at the world of communication research before the birth of cultivation theory.

### Historical Context

Researchers began inquiring into the “effects” of television almost as soon as these strange and marvelous new devices started to appear in living rooms across the land in the late 1940s and 1950s. An early research strategy, logically enough, was to compare the behaviors and attitudes of people (often, children) who lived in households or communities that received television with people who lived in places that were

Cambridge University Press

0521582962 - Television and its Viewers: Cultivation Theory and Research

James Shanahan and Michael Morgan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

otherwise relatively similar except for the lack of television reception. These studies were trying to approximate a “before/after” controlled design in the real world, and they produced many valuable insights (see Schramm, Lyle and Parker, 1961; Himmelweit, Oppenheim and Vince, 1958).

Since television was spreading so rapidly, however, these kinds of studies mainly described novelty effects accompanying the adoption of the new medium; they told us little about what television means in a society when most people have grown up living with (and been baby sat by) its stories. Moreover, these studies had only a brief window of opportunity, as it soon became impossible to find households or communities (or societies) that were “relatively similar” but for the presence of television. (For what is probably the final such comparison possible in the industrialized world, see Williams, 1986).

The other major approach used in early television research was the experiment, where (for example) a group might be exposed to some sort of stimulus (say, a scene of violence) and then given some (often deceptive) opportunity to imitate that violence or otherwise behave aggressively; the response of that group would be compared to the subsequent behavior of another, control group, exposed to something innocuous or nothing at all. A vast number of studies of this type were carried out, descendants of attitude change experiments in social psychology and Albert Bandura’s early studies with film clips of people attacking Bobo dolls (1965). Ironically, although those kinds of lab studies have become seen as the quintessential studies of television and violence, the original studies had much more to do with theories of observational learning than with violence. Indeed, in most such studies, there is no need to know anything about the institution of television, or its status as a cultural object, or how people typically use it, to be able to interpret the results.

Prior to the development of cultivation analysis, then, most researchers in mass communication were interested in knowing how specific messages, channels and sources could produce *changes* in attitudes or behaviors. This was a natural outgrowth of the way mass communication research had developed from the 1920s (see Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955), fueled by public fear of the “power” of the media, along with anxious politicians, eager advertisers, crusading social engineers, and others itching to use the massive reach of the media to “get their message across” quickly and efficiently. Government, military and corporate funding sources played an important role in the decision of those working within the field to take this direction (Simpson, 1994). The goal was to determine what kinds of persuasive messages could be used most “effectively” in campaigns of various kinds – political, advertising, public health, educational, military

Cambridge University Press

0521582962 - Television and its Viewers: Cultivation Theory and Research

James Shanahan and Michael Morgan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

and so on. Therefore, early research on television's impacts had typically focused on the effects of single programs or messages, usually measured immediately after exposure in a relatively artificial context and for "subjects" (such as college sophomores) who are often not particularly representative of the larger population.

A media "effect" was defined entirely in terms of *change* – no change meant no effect. Thus, the before/after community studies, or experimental methodologies, or evaluations of specific persuasive campaigns were thought to be well-suited to detecting any "change" that might occur as a result of watching television. Also, using these methodologies in turn reinforced thinking about effects in terms of changes; as long as these were the dominant designs and models, it was difficult to think of "effects" in any other ways. The classic laboratory experiments on the attitudinal effects of persuasive communications or the ability of messages to evoke behavioral changes tend to promote thinking about communication (and television's messages) as foreign "objects" somehow inserted or injected into us, as discrete, scattered "bullets" which either hit or miss us.

Eventually, when strong experimental results from the artificial isolation of the lab were found to be not so easily replicated in various field studies or in actual campaigns attempting to change attitudes, prominent theorists argued that there was little "effect" of mass communication and it became *de rigueur* to argue that asking how media "affect" people is the wrong kind of question (even though the later violence research began to show that there were some consistent effects, replicated in the field). The failure of social science to isolate a consistent effect of media on attitudes turned researchers back to the social group (the "primary group") and eventually back to the individual as the source of all meaning. Yet, this tendency is also fraught with political implications. Indeed, the "limited effects" school had (and has) a very specific political agenda to defend, and the "bullet" or "hypodermic needle" theory it attacked – the idea that media messages affect beliefs or behaviors in mechanical, automatic, straightforward ways – was always made of straw and never seriously entertained by real live researchers. In the political world of limited effects and individually styled "uses" of mass media, little place was made for thinking about the media as social institutions with their own agendas, and less room for the notion that social control is one important aspect of what the media do. In this world, "ineffective" media prove that democratic media institutions do what they are supposed to do: entertain, inform, amuse, even annoy, but never "influence."

So, with little empirical support in the "real world" outside the lab, no wonder that the very notion of media having effects was under scholarly –