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0521582962 - Television and its Viewers: Cultivation Theory and Research

James Shanahan and Michael Morgan

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Television and its Viewers Cultivation Theory and Research

Television and its Viewers reviews “cultivation” research, which investigates the relationship between exposure to television and beliefs about the world. James Shanahan and Michael Morgan, both distinguished researchers in this field, scrutinize cultivation through detailed theoretical and historical explication, critical assessments of methodology, and a comprehensive “meta-analysis” of twenty years of empirical results. They present a sweeping historical view of television as a technology and as an institution. Shanahan and Morgan’s study looks forward as well as back, to the development of cultivation research in a new media environment. They argue that cultivation theory offers a unique and valuable perspective on the role of television in twentieth-century social life. *Television and its Viewers*, the first book-length study of its type, will be of interest to students and scholars in communication, sociology, political science and psychology and contains an introduction by the seminal figure in this field, George Gerbner.

JAMES SHANAHAN is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication at Cornell University. He has published widely on the effects of television. His books include *Democracy Tango* (with Michael Morgan) and *Nature Stories* (with Katherine McComas).

MICHAEL MORGAN is Professor and Chair of the Department of Communication, University of Massachusetts/Amherst. He is the author or editor of numerous books and articles, including *Mainstream(s) and Margins* (with Susan Leggett) and *Cultivation Analysis* (with Nancy Signorielli).

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PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK <http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk>
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA <http://www.cup.org>
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

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First published 1999

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in Plantin 10/12 pt in QuarkXPress™ [SE]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Shanahan, James.

Television and its viewers: Cultivation theory and research

/ James Shanahan and Michael Morgan.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0 521 58296 2. – ISBN 0 521 58755 7 (pbk.)

1. Television broadcasting – Social aspects. I. Morgan, Michael.

PN1992.6.S417 1999

302.23'45–dc21 98–48327 CIP

ISBN 0 521 58296 2 hardback

ISBN 0 521 58755 7 paperback

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[More information](#)

Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	<i>page</i>	vi
<i>List of tables</i>		viii
<i>Foreword by George Gerbner</i>		ix
1	Origins	1
2	Methods of Cultivation: Assumptions and Rationale	20
3	Methods of Cultivation and Early Empirical Work	42
4	Criticisms	59
5	Advancements in Cultivation Research	81
6	The Bigger Picture	107
7	Mediation, Mainstreaming, and Social Change	138
8	How does Cultivation “Work,” Anyway?	172
9	Cultivation and the New Media	198
10	Test Pattern	220
	Methodological Appendix	238
	<i>References</i>	251

Cambridge University Press

0521582962 - Television and its Viewers: Cultivation Theory and Research

James Shanahan and Michael Morgan

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Figures

2.1	Percentage of light and heavy viewers giving “TV answer” to question about chances of being involved in violence	27
5.1	Mainstreaming among income groups for question “fear of crime is a very serious personal problem”	88
5.2	Mainstreaming among race groups for question “fear of crime is a very serious personal problem”	89
5.3	Mainstreaming among ideological subgroups for question “Communism is the worst form of government”	91
6.1	Cultivation differentials expressed as percentage differences	111
6.2	Cultivation relationships in dataset, measured using r	113
6.3	Cultivation relationships in dataset, measured using partial r	113
6.4	Cultivation relationships in dataset, measured using γ	114
6.5	Funnel plot	122
6.6	Error bar diagram, showing average cultivation effect sizes for various dependent variables	127
6.7	Error bar diagram, showing average cultivation effect sizes for males and females	129
6.8	Error bar diagram, showing average cultivation effect sizes for various data subgroups	130
7.1	Intervening variable model	138
7.2	Antecedent variable model	139
7.3	Spuriousness model	139
7.4	Interaction model	140
7.5	Schematic example of mainstreaming	141
7.6	Uniform cultivation toward “average” position	142
7.7	Schematic example of mainstreaming toward conservative position	143
7.8	Mainstreaming toward cultural center of gravity	143
7.9	Mainstreaming, with both groups mainstreamed toward more conservative view	144
7.10	Examples of mainstreaming by ideology	151
7.11	Regional variation in cultivation among liberals (“approval” of homosexuality)	153

Cambridge University Press

0521582962 - Television and its Viewers: Cultivation Theory and Research

James Shanahan and Michael Morgan

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

List of figures	vii
7.12 Percentage expressing fear in their neighborhood	157
7.13 Responses to GSS sexism question	163
7.14 Growth in support for traditional female sex-roles	167
7.15 Attitudinal distance between heavy and light viewers	168
7.16 Percentage of viewers designating themselves as moderate	169
9.1 VCR penetration in US households	203
9.2 Growth in US cable households	205
9.3 Share of various media for personal leisure time	215
10.1 Gerbner's diversity index	224

Cambridge University Press

0521582962 - Television and its Viewers: Cultivation Theory and Research

James Shanahan and Michael Morgan

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Tables

4.1	Fear of crime findings	65
4.2	Viewing patterns of “non-viewers”	79
6.1	Summary of findings	116
6.2	Summary statistics for meta-analysis	125
6.3	Impact of control variables on cultivation results	134
7.1	Correlations between television exposure and dependent variables	148
7.2	Associations between television exposure, in subgroups defined by political self-identification	149
7.3	Regression equation: relationships between television exposure and support for women in non-traditional roles	165

Cambridge University Press

0521582962 - Television and its Viewers: Cultivation Theory and Research

James Shanahan and Michael Morgan

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Foreword by George Gerbner What Do We Know?

Most of what we know, or think we know, we have never personally experienced. We live in a world erected by the stories we hear and see and tell. Unlocking incredible riches through imagery and words, conjuring up the unseen through art, creating towering works of imagination and fact through science, poetry, song, tales, reports and laws – that is the magic of human life. Through that magic we live in a world much wider than the threats and gratifications of the immediate physical environment, which is the world of other species.

Stories socialize us into roles of gender, age, class, vocation and lifestyle, and offer models of conformity or targets for rebellion. They weave the seamless web of the cultural environment that cultivates most of what we think, what we do, and how we conduct our affairs. The story-telling process was once more hand-crafted, home-made, community-inspired. Now it is mostly mass-produced and profit-driven. It is the end result of a complex manufacturing and marketing process. It both defines and then addresses the public interest. This situation calls for a new diagnosis and a new prescription.

The stories that animate our cultural environment have three distinct but related functions. These functions are (1) to reveal how things work; (2) to describe what things are; and (3) to tell us what to do about them. Stories of the first kind, revealing how things work, illuminate the all-important but invisible relationships and hidden dynamics of life. Fairy tales, novels, plays, comics, cartoons, and other forms of creative imagination and imagery are the basic building blocks of human understanding. They demonstrate complex causality by presenting imaginary action in total situations, coming to some conclusion that has a moral purpose and a social function. You do not have to believe the “facts” of Little Red Riding Hood to grasp the notion that big bad “wolves” victimize old women and trick little girls – a lesson in gender roles, fear, and power. Stories of this kind build, from infancy on, the fantasy we call reality. I do not suggest that the revelations are false, which they may or may not be, but that they are synthetic, selective, often mythical, and always socially constructed.

Cambridge University Press

0521582962 - Television and its Viewers: Cultivation Theory and Research

James Shanahan and Michael Morgan

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x Foreword

Stories of the second kind depict what things are. They are the presumably factual accounts, the chronicles of the past and the news of today. Stories of what things are may confirm or deny some conception of how things work. Their high “facticity” (i.e. correspondence to actual events presumed to exist independently of the story) gives them special status in political theory and often in law. They give emphasis and credibility to selected parts of each society’s fantasies of reality. They convey information about finance, weddings, crime, lotteries, terrorists and so on. They alert us to certain interests, threats, opportunities and challenges.

Stories of the third kind tell us what to do. These are stories of value and choice. They present things, behaviors or styles of life as desirable (or undesirable), propose ways to obtain (or avoid) them, and the price to be paid for attainment (or failure). They are instructions, laws, regulations, cautionary tales, commands, slogans, sermons and exhortations. Today most of them are called commercials; they are the advertising messages and images we see and hear every day. Stories of the third kind clinch the lessons of the first two and turn them into action. They typically present an objective to be sought or to be avoided, and offer a product, service, candidate, institution or action purported to help attain or avoid it.

Ideally, the three kinds of stories check and balance each other. In a commercially driven culture, however, stories of the third kind pay for most of the first two. That creates a coherent cultural environment whose overall function is to provide a hospitable and effective context for stories that sell. With the coming of the electronic age, that cultural environment is increasingly monopolized, homogenized and globalized. We must then look at the historic course of our journey to see what this new age means for us and for the public interest.

For the longest time in human history, stories were told only face to face. A community was defined by the rituals, mythologies and imageries held in common. All useful knowledge was encapsulated in aphorisms and legends, proverbs and tales, incantations and ceremonies. Writing was rare and holy, forbidden for slaves. Laboriously inscribed manuscripts conferred sacred power to their interpreters, the priests and ministers. As a sixteenth-century scribe put it:

Those who observe the codices, those who recite them. Those who noisily turn the pages of illustrated manuscripts. Those who have possession of the black and red ink and that which is pictured; they lead us, they guide us, they tell us the way.

State and church ruled in a symbiotic relationship of mutual dependence and tension. State, composed of feudal nobles, was the economic, military and political order; church its cultural arm. The industrial revolution changed all that. One of the first machines stamping out standardized artifacts was the printing press. Its product, the book, was a

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0521582962 - Television and its Viewers: Cultivation Theory and Research

James Shanahan and Michael Morgan

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

prerequisite for all the other upheavals to come. Printing begins the industrialization of story-telling, arguably the most profound transformation in the humanization process. The book could be given to all who could read, requiring education and creating a new literate class of people. Readers could now interpret the book (at first the Bible) for themselves, breaking the monopoly of priestly interpreters and ushering in the Reformation. When the printing press was hooked up to the steam engine the industrialization of story-telling shifted into high gear. Rapid publication and mass transport created a new form of consciousness: modern mass publics. Publics are loose aggregations of people who share some common consciousness of how things work, what things are, and what ought to be done – but never meet face-to-face. That was never before possible.

Stories could now be sent – often smuggled – across hitherto impenetrable or closely guarded boundaries of time, space and status. The book lifts people from their traditional moorings as the industrial revolution uproots them from their local communities and cultures. They can now get off the land and go to work in far-away ports, factories and continents, and have with them a packet of common consciousness – the book or journal, and later the motion picture (silent at first) – wherever they go.

Publics, created by such publication, are necessary for the formation of individual and group identities in the new urban environment, as the different classes and regional, religious and ethnic groups try to maintain some sense of distinct integrity and also to live together with some degree of cooperation with other groups. Publics are the basic units of self-government. They make it possible to elect or select representatives to an assembly trying to reconcile diverse interests. The maintenance and integrity of multiple publics make self-government feasible for large, complex and diverse national communities. People engage in long and costly struggles to be free to create and share stories that fit the reality of competing and often conflicting values and interests. Most of our assumptions about human development and political plurality and choice are rooted in the print era.

The second great transformation, the electronic revolution, ushers in the telecommunications era. Its mainstream, television, is superimposed upon and reorganizes print-based culture. Unlike the industrial revolution, the new upheaval does not uproot people from their homes but transports them in their homes. It re-tribalizes modern society. It challenges and changes the role of both church and education in the new culture. For the first time in human history, children are born into homes where mass-produced stories can reach them on the average more than seven hours a day. Most waking hours, and often dreams, are filled with these stories. The stories do not come from their families, schools,

Cambridge University Press

0521582962 - Television and its Viewers: Cultivation Theory and Research

James Shanahan and Michael Morgan

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xii Foreword

churches, neighborhoods, and often not even from their native countries, or from anyone with anything relevant to tell. They come from small groups of distant conglomerates with something to sell.

The cultural environment in which we live becomes the byproduct of marketing. The new symbiotic relationship of state and television replaces the historic nexus of state and church. The “state” itself is the twin institution of elected public government and selected private corporate government. Media, its cultural arm, is dominated by the private establishment, despite its use of the public airways.

Giant industries discharge their messages into the mainstream of common consciousness. Channels proliferate and new technologies pervade home and office while mergers and bottom-line pressures shrink creative alternatives and reduce diversity of content. These changes may appear to be broadening local, parochial horizons, but they also mean a homogenization of outlooks and limitation of alternatives. For media professionals, the changes mean fewer opportunities and greater compulsions to present life in saleable packages. Creative artists, scientists and humanists can still explore and enlighten and occasionally even challenge, but, increasingly, their stories must fit marketing strategies and priorities.

Viewing commercials is “work” performed by audiences in exchange for “free” news and entertainment. In fact, we pay dearly through a surcharge added to the price of every advertised product that goes to subsidize commercial media, and through allowing advertising expenditures to be a tax-deductible business expense. These give-aways of public moneys for private purposes further erode the diversity of the cultural mainstream. Broadcasting is the most concentrated, homogenized and globalized medium. The top US 100 advertisers pay for two-thirds of all network television. Four networks, allied to giant transnational corporations – our private “Ministry of Culture” – control the bulk of production and distribution, and shape the cultural mainstream. Other interests, diverse ideologies, minority views, and the potential of any challenge to dominant perspectives, lose ground with every merger.

Formula-driven assembly-line produced programs increasingly dominate the airways. The formulas themselves reflect the structure of power that produces them and function to preserve and enhance that structure of power. It is fair to say that such nearly total control of the cultural mainstream and the consequent marginalization of political alternatives to a two-party system consisting of the “ins” and the “outs” who are otherwise more alike than different makes a mockery of any claim of a democracy.

The condition of the physical environment may determine how long our species survives. The cultural environment affects the quality of survival and its governance. We need to begin the long process of diversify-

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0521582962 - Television and its Viewers: Cultivation Theory and Research

James Shanahan and Michael Morgan

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Foreword

xiii

ing, pacifying, democratizing and humanizing the story-telling process that shapes the mainstream of the cultural environment in which we live and into which our children are born.

Shanahan and Morgan review and analyze research conceived and conducted as a not-too-early warning system of the dangerous condition of the cultural environment. They begin that task by presenting a sweeping historical view of television as a technology and an institution. They make it clear that “The Age of Television” may be remembered in the history books as that one in which we governed ourselves through the medium. It was (and is) an era of governance through distraction.

This is an age when stories of a President’s sexual activities preempt information about the greatest (and still growing) inequalities in the Western world; about the polarization of society into the few “haves” and the many “have-nots”; about corporations making record profits while playing the globalization game and firing workers to raise their stock prices. Throwing people and families on the societal scrapheap while corporate profits are out of sight – that should be news to fit the airways, a public resource. But in a consumer-oriented broadcasting system the poor and disenfranchised have no place except when involved with crime, drugs, violence. This provokes a backlash of the good consumer class that sees more jails and executions as the way to address the “urban crisis.” So the cycle of repressive governance continues.

It is more than a cultural perversion to license the airways, and to assign all the other channels that cable and the new technologies make possible, to marketers who preempt them for buying audiences for celebrity worship, sex scandals, public show trials and the like. It is one of the greatest give-aways of public resources in history.

Shanahan and Morgan give a thorough and lively explanation of the process that makes all that possible. They relate the history, theory and methodology of the research that reveals the making of our contemporary mythology. They describe the debates surrounding those revelations. And they examine the consequences of living in a cultural environment created by the market-driven mythology.

I am flattered and privileged to have been given the opportunity to write a preface to a work about research with which I have been so closely associated, and rather shamelessly (but proudly) commend it to your attention.

GEORGE GERBNER

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