

Television and its Viewers

Cultivation Theory and Research

James Shanahan and Michael Morgan



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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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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.

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

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

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 –

and industry – fire (see Klapper, 1960). Public concern about dramatic, direct effects notwithstanding, cultivation thus emerged from a historical period in which the prevailing intellectual view was that media had at most only minimal effects, that any effects were likely only to echo “pre-existing dispositions,” and that they could more profitably be explained by such factors as selective exposure and selective attention.

The Development of Cultivation Theory

In the course of events, the roots of cultivation theory have at times been obscured by legitimate methodological disagreements as well as by sometimes acrimonious and hyper-technical debates. Within all this, researchers have often lost sight of Gerbner’s original theoretical premises. Gerbner’s original conception of cultivation was nothing less than an attempt to alter the nature of the conventional academic discourse about the social and cultural implications of mass communication. The goal was to develop an approach to mass communication using terms different from those of the then-dominant paradigm of persuasion and propaganda research and to escape the scientism and positivism of the “effects” tradition. This required dispensing with traditional formal aesthetic categories along with conventional concerns about style, artistic quality, high culture vs. low culture, and selective exposure, as well as idiosyncratic judgments, interpretations and readings. It was not that he denied the existence or importance of these concerns and phenomena, but rather that he sought to go beyond them, to address issues that could not be explained in or limited by such terms. Furthermore, it required a reworking of the traditional tactics that had been used to assess communication “effect.”

Gerbner’s early writings (1958) attempted to develop models of the communication process that distinguished it from purely persuasive exchanges and from concerns with prediction, control and change. Rather than seeing communication research as a way to achieve a specific practical aim (e.g., selling soap, selling a candidate, improving public health or raising environmental awareness), he saw it as a *basic cultural inquiry*. Above and beyond its communicative “power,” he argued that any message is a socially and historically determined expression of concrete physical and social relationships. Messages imply propositions, assumptions and points of view which are understandable only in terms of the social relationships and contexts in which they are produced. Yet, they also reconstitute those relationships and contexts. They thus function recursively, sustaining and giving meaning to the structures and practices that produce them. This is far different from earlier attempts to

discover scientific “laws” explaining the persuasive properties of messages, sources, channels or receivers.

Communication to Gerbner is “interaction through messages,” a distinctly human (and humanizing) process which both creates and is driven by the symbolic environment which constitutes culture. The symbolic environment reveals social and institutional dynamics, and because it expresses social patterns it also cultivates them. This, then, is the original meaning of “cultivation” – the process within which interaction through messages shapes and sustains the terms on which the messages are premised.

A note here about the use of the term, and the metaphor, of cultivation. The very notion of “cultivation” builds on the assumption that the major impacts of television materialize by means of the way it exposes people to the same images and metaphors over and over again. Moreover, the cultivation metaphor is best understood as providing a way to talk about “influence” without talking about “effects.” That is, cultivation means that deeply held cultural perspectives and assumptions will not be efficiently nurtured (or gradually – even glacially – shifted) as a result of a single one-shot message blast, much as an unwatered or unweeded crop will do poorly. Learning from the advertising field, which teaches that repetition sells, the cultivation metaphor was adopted as providing the quickest way to convey how researchers felt about the chicken-egg question of causality. As we will describe more fully below, at some level, the messages were seen as having some causal impacts, but only when seen from the broadest possible macro perspective.

Also, we should note that water metaphors have been common in the cultivation literature. “Mainstreams,” “currents,” “flows” and other water-terms have been used to suggest the ubiquitous and cumulative influence that cultivation researchers attribute to cultural messages. We will see throughout that cultivation researchers often conceive of television as kind of cultural river, in which everyone to some degree is carried along.

Thus, cultivation is an agro-aquatic metaphor for the function of television in the construction and maintenance of cultural meaning, and for the way culture works generally. Within this metaphor, the *production* of messages then takes on special significance, since the resulting social patterns imply cultural and political power – namely, the right to create the messages which cultivate collective consciousness. But this is a two-part process: *the right to produce messages stems from social power, while social power is accrued through the right to produce messages.* This too confounds simplistic notions of “causality,” and is a significant reason why some of the “causal” critiques of cultivation tend to miss the point. With mass

communication we have the mass production of messages, the cultural manifestation of the industrial revolution. If not television, another medium could have accomplished this function (although television is perhaps ideally suited to it). Given the social functions of messages, the mass production of messages and of the symbolic environment represents a profound transformation in social relationships, in power, and in the cultural process of story-telling.

If cultivation in form resembles water, its substance is stories. Above all, cultivation is a theory of narrative's role in culture. Humans uniquely live in a world experienced and conducted through story-telling, in its many modes and forms. Much of what we know, or think we know, we have never personally experienced; we "know" about many things based on the stories we hear and the stories we tell. "Story-telling fits human reality to the social order" (Gerbner, 1986).

Whereas most message-effects research had assumed that human communication was composed mostly of exchanges of "information," cultivation preferred to see humans as mostly engaging in story-telling transactions (Fisher, 1984). Gerbner often quotes Scottish patriot Andrew Fletcher's observation that "If a man were permitted to make all the ballads, he need not care who should make the laws of a nation." Such a romantic notion is not easily testable, but that makes it no less compelling. The stories of a culture reflect and cultivate its most basic and fundamental assumptions, ideologies and values. Story-telling occupies a crucial role in human existence; from the start, Gerbner's theory development stemmed from the observation that story-telling is being increasingly monopolized by a small and shrinking group of global conglomerates whose attention does not normally extend beyond the bottom-line and quarterly reports to stockholders. Mass communication institutions have progressed toward greater speed of, control over and profit from the mass reception of cultural stories in the form of entertainment messages.

It is in the context of an unprecedented centralization of message-producing resources that cultivation carries on its work. Disquiet over the commercialization and mass-production of stories sharpens the critical edge to cultivation research. In earlier times, the stories of a culture were told face-to-face by members of a community, parents, teachers or the clergy. Although we do not mean to imply that this was some sort of narrative "golden age" without today's problems of violence, inequality and fear, we do argue that the special characteristics of television, harnessing mass distribution of messages to a commercial purpose, are historically unique. Today, television tells most of the stories to most of the people, most of the time. The cultural process of story-telling is now in the hands

of global commercial interests, who are largely unknown, unchosen and unelected, and who have little incentive to be interested in the content of their stories beyond their ability to attract specific, well-defined, profitable audiences, with a minimum of public objections. Thus, the symbolic world we are inhabiting and (re)creating is designed according to the specifications of marketing strategies, as opposed to public service, education, democratic negotiation, or other potential and available driving principles.

Gerbner has noted that in order to fit the marketing and commercial needs of this world, television tells (at least) three different kinds of stories. There are stories about how things *work*, in which the invisible dynamics of human life are illuminated. These stories are called “fiction,” and they build a fantasy that informs the story we call reality. There are also stories about how things *are*; today, we mostly call them “news,” and they tend to confirm the visions, rules, priorities and goals of a particular society. And finally, there are stories of value and choice, of what to *do*. These have been called sermons, or instruction, or law; today they are called “commercials.” Together, all three kinds of stories, organically related, constitute mediated culture; they are expressed and enacted through mythology, religion, legends, education, art, science, laws, fairy tales and politics – and all of these, increasingly, are packaged and disseminated by television.

Thus, cultivation sees television as an increasingly unitizing cultural force, bringing together previously disparate narrative sectors into the same arena, tending to absorb what used to be the “public sphere.” But this absorption process is not “persuasion,” because it does not occur in a specifiable time interval, nor as a result of exposure to a particular message. The impacts on those who consume messages and stories are not linear, mechanical or hypodermic. Because this is a dialectical process (Gerbner, 1958), the “effects” of messages are relatively indirect.

Uncovering aggregate and implicit patterns in mass-produced messages “will not necessarily tell us what people think or do. But they will tell us what most people think or do something *about* and in *common*” (Gerbner, 1970; emphasis in original). This argument has some affinity to the notion of agenda-setting (McCombs, 1994), but it is cast on a deeper and more fundamental level. It is not so much the specific, day-to-day agenda of public issue salience which culture (and cultural media) sets as it is the more hidden and pervasive boundary conditions for social discourse, wherein the cultural ground-rules for what exists, what is important, what is right and so on, are repeated (and ritualistically consumed) so often that they become invisible.

Therefore, “Cultivation is what a culture does,” because “culture is the

basic medium in which humans live and learn” (Gerbner, 1990, p. 249). Culture is a “system of stories and other artifacts – increasingly mass-produced – that mediates between existence and consciousness of existence, and thereby contributes to both” (p. 251). Since messages reflect social relationships, mass-produced messages bear the assumptions of the organizations (though not necessarily of the individuals) that produce them. As our most pervasive and widely shared story-teller, television is perfectly poised to play a crucial role in the cultivation of common and specific images, beliefs, values and ideologies.

Cultivation as a Theory of Social Control

Cultivation research is more than an abstract examination of an interesting question. Rather, we see cultivation as a “critical” theory of communication, insofar as it subjects the institution of television and mass communication to an investigation which can show the dimensions of important problems and even suggest ways to fix them. While cultivation does not look like the average critical theory (at least in communication, most critical studies tend toward interpretive and abstract examinations of social processes), cultivation passes the entrance exam for critical social science research (Lent, 1995; Morgan, 1995).

Above, we suggested that traditional mass communication researchers were often motivated by their unstated political agenda. But of course, we too are motivated by an ideo-political agenda, the nature of which is fundamental to understanding cultivation. In this section, we explore some assumptions that underpin the research, in order to help the reader place our activities in a historical and intellectual context. While the standard view is that ideology “pollutes” social science research, it has never been the purpose of cultivation to provide factually “pure” observations without critical comment (something we assume is impossible anyway). Thus, we examine some propositions which we think undergird the conduct of cultivation as a critical form of research.

If cultivation is a critical theory, it is a theory of media’s role in social control. That is, it examines how media are used in social systems to build consensus (if not agreement) on positions through shared terms of discourse and assumptions about priorities and values. We argue that the system works so as to benefit social elites. These elites are not a mysterious cabal enmeshed in pernicious conspiracies; they are simply the “haves” of global, industrialized society who enjoy its benefits disproportionately. In this section we advance some simple propositions that specify how cultivation contributes to processes of social control, through which these elite groups tend to retain their power and privileges.

First (P1), we assume that *institutions of mass communication are owned by social, cultural and primarily economic elites*. Cultivation researchers are most concerned with the aspects of a media system in which ownership and access are limited and tightly controlled. Cultivation researchers have analogized television to institutions such as preindustrial religion. It has not typically been an aim of cultivation researchers to “prove” this assumption with empirical data; this assertion can be taken as true *prima facie*. Still, many separate types of evidence are relevant here, especially the well-known analyses of economic concentration of the mass media (e.g., Bagdikian, 1997), as well as the mega-mergers of the 1990s, in which a smaller and smaller number of larger and larger media organizations coalesce before our eyes. Also important are analyses that show how government policy has favored commercial interests over public interests (Barnouw, 1978; McChesney, 1993) and analyses of institutional practice that show how those employed within the media are guided by institutional norms (Altheide, 1985).

It is important to note that “elites” are not necessarily individuals, though specific individuals often behave in ways to accomplish the goals of elite institutions. (Many well-intentioned and sincere media professionals find themselves “trapped” in the media system which requires them to behave in certain ways.) For our purposes, “elites” can be seen both as dominant institutions and, in a lesser sense, the individuals who play roles within institutional rule structures. “Institutional process analysis,” which is a component of Cultural Indicators, has as its goal the explication of institutional media performance.

Second (P2), *social and economic elites codify messages in their media which serve elite aims*. This proposition is also assumed by cultivation researchers, not generally directly nor empirically tested. Cultural Indicators researchers have not directly attempted to measure whether the messages of television are in agreement with measured ideological positions of message producers. Again, though, critical mass communication research helps out. There is a body of both television criticism and critical media theory that has documented the relationships between messages and ideology (see Stevenson, 1995, for a good review of these critical approaches, also Dahlgren, 1995). The work of those in cultural studies is also very relevant (Lewis, 1991). Congruent with critical research, cultivation tends to assume this link particularly by virtue of the evidence which is gathered with respect to the third proposition (discussed below).

This second proposition can be controversial, particularly for those who see the American media culture moving in a more democratic, diversified and demographically segmented direction. In particular, for

those who see the media as controlled by market forces and protected by the First Amendment, it can be maddeningly perverse to suggest that social elites somehow use the media for their own purposes. To be clear: we are not asserting that there is a conspiracy of trilateral-commission one-worlders somehow getting their message through to a duped public. Rather, we would simply suggest that dominant cultural institutions, clearly serving economic elites, are *systemically* structured so as to most often favor the viewpoints and information that would help those economic elites in the long run.

Thus, the fact that television programs sometimes criticize corporations and the business community would not count as a disproof of proposition 2 (though there are many examples of how multinational corporate ownership of key media outlets has stifled debate on any number of issues). Of course, in specific programs there are always opportunities for nonelite and countercultural viewpoints to get through.

(P3) *The tendency for media messages to conform to elite needs and desires can be revealed through empirical study.* Messages, while varying on the surface, tend to reveal patterns and systems when empirically evaluated. Gerbner has noted that analysis of television's message systems (content) provides clues to cultivation. Cultivation analysis must therefore be grounded in real data about over-arching content patterns, shared by large groups over long periods of time.

(P4) *Audience members, whether or not they are seeking to fulfill individual needs, participate in a social process in which they hear and internalize messages of social elites.* This is the key proposition for cultivation as a theory of social control. Note that we do not say that audiences are "persuaded" by social elites. That would imply an active and intentional program of persuasion, along with a passive and defenseless reaction by audiences. What we suggest here is merely that audiences frequently "get" messages from message systems that have been structured to reflect the interests of social elites. Any "absorption" of meaning from that process is different than straight persuasion.

Cultivation assumes that massive attention to television results in a slow, steady and cumulative internalization of aspects of those messages, especially the aspects with ideological import. Why do viewers internalize messages? An economic argument comes first. Viewers participate in "exchange" relationships with their television programs: they accept the terms of an economic system preferred and perpetuated by economic elites, which are the same elites which control media structures (Jhally and Livant, 1986). While this need not prove an ideological effect, we can at least accept that viewers' viewership is on the terms of social elites. The time and attention of viewers is required to make the system work,

otherwise advertising becomes ineffective. Thus, viewer attention is a precondition for the overall economic health and purposiveness of the system. This may also have the effect of commoditizing the relationship as some would suggest, but at the very least it guarantees a fair hearing for the viewpoints and aims of social elites.

This proposition does not necessarily imply that aims of social elites will be universally accepted by viewers (see next proposition), but it does suggest that social elites have an excellent resource with which to color public discussion of social, political, and economic issues. Thus, cultivation argues that an important outcome of our media system is that social elites can play a disproportionate role in determining the “boundaries” of social discourse. This tilts the field in favor of social elites, and predisposes toward an eventual outcome of social control.

(P5) *Audience members more “committed” to media will have belief structures more consonant with those desired by social elites.* This proposition is the one most directly tested by cultivation analysis: viewership (i.e., exposure to television) is related to belief structures, under the assumption that more time spent with an elite-dominated media system reflects: (1) a willingness to accept the propositions within those media as useful, and (2) a tendency to accept propositions within those media as, in some sense, factual or credible or normal. This proposition means that the internalization processes hypothesized in proposition 4 will serve social elites. This derives not from changing anyone’s mind about anything, but from the cultivation of stable and consistent patterns of meaning and resistance to change.

This, as a kind of final capstone proposition, is directly susceptible to empirical analysis, and so has been the key focus of Cultural Indicators research and especially cultivation. This is what most students of mass communication see as “the” proposition of cultivation. But if we approach this proposition without knowledge of the preceding arguments, it may well seem that cultivation is indeed a rather vacuous social science approach – not very sophisticated at that – for discussing the complex social issue of elite control.

At this point, it is evident that the superstructure of cultivation is built on a foundation of assumptions and beliefs which guide the inquiry. This, of course, is true of all social science, though not all social scientists always make their beliefs explicit in this way. In any case, these considerations and propositions show that cultivation is certainly not a value-free exercise in abstract empiricism. If one denies the validity of any one of our propositions, one opens a route to criticize cultivation theory. And we accept that.

Of course, to be critical of television as an institution does not imply a

mysterious conspiracy against social progress (although sometimes one wonders), nor do we see television as the most powerful force for social control that has ever been devised. Our propositions imply systemic forms of control. In some ways, we argue that television creates “propaganda without propagandists,” a system wherein no particular individual or entity can be found responsible for the effects of messages. Such a system, ineffable as it may be, is perhaps more effective than the more sinister government-controlled propaganda systems, because audiences are not generally under the impression that control processes are taking place.

Now, in the rest of this book, we will look at the cultivation research process in depth. Chapter 2 provides a detailed description of how the research is done. We detail the assumptions and procedures associated with cultivation research over the years. Then Chapter 3 looks at the early cultivation work based on these methods. We describe the landmark studies, some of which attracted a great deal of attention in the media and political arena.

As the early work drew a great deal of attention, it also drew a great deal of criticism. Chapter 4 looks at these critiques. We go over in detail the debates of the early 1980s and provide responses to most of the issues raised. Chapter 5 looks at later cultivation research, with a particular focus on theoretical developments related to the issue of “mainstreaming.” Mainstreaming was one of the main responses to the early criticisms.

Chapter 6 is a meta-analysis of over twenty years of cultivation research, summarizing published cultivation work since 1976. Chapter 7 continues the meta-analysis, and looks at what large data sources such as the General Social Survey have to say about cultivation. The purpose of these two chapters is to assess the consistency of cultivation research over the years and to answer the basic question: “Are people’s beliefs related to television viewing?”

In Chapter 8 we look at the issue of “how” cultivation works. This has been a vexing question over the years, dealing with psychological questions related to how people remember and process television messages. We try to provide some answers about interesting new research directions. In Chapter 9 we look at how the new media technologies may influence cultivation. Finally, in Chapter 10 we provide a summary, looking at the overall question, with some answers about the broader social and cultural questions raised throughout the book.