

Cultivation

George Gerbner has shown that the scary, violent world of television drama is more real to the public than the actual world. As the Internet cuts into TV watching time, what will happen to his scary-world hypothesis and the cultivation effects of entertainment media. (Sue A. Greer and John Hood)

Cultivation in the Digital Age (or Are those magic bullets coming from that shotgun?)

February 1, 2008

By SUE A. GREER

Quick! What's the murder capital of the US?

In the 1970s and 1980s, George Gerbner gave us evidence that television drama could influence our collective world view, particularly with regard to violence. Critics of his scary-world hypothesis noted that effects were **limited** and **weak**. But Gerbner countered that media messages, particularly those conveyed through drama, aren't a magic bullet. Rather, they produce a gradual, cumulative effect on our perceptions.

So what about the past two decades? Messages now come from various and divergent sources. And just as a shotgun seldom delivers its deadly load to the bulls eye (Dick Cheney's friends are grateful for this), media messages also scatter about their targets. How will we prove causality?

Recent advances in TV & cable technology (e.g., HD, DVR, on-demand) will likely enable TV to hold onto its top spot as the preferred entertainment medium, but that could change if the teenage and young adult audience fails to settle into the viewing patterns of their predecessors. The theory of relative constancy holds that their use of TV will fall as Internet use for entertainment increases. I know mine has. But assuming that viewing levels for violent content on TV are unchanged for those still watching, a new study might then find **limited** and **weak** effects ... but **for fewer people**. In fact, researchers may find it easier to isolate effects without the noise of audience variability. But it also means there will be fewer people in our community to affect TV-born perceptions in their interactions with others.

Speaking of noise ... With all of the entertainment media available, should we expect to see TV effects diluted by other sources? Or perhaps even reinforced? It's difficult to imagine right now an Internet impact on scary world perceptions without a mass-oriented drama equivalent of *CSI*, *Law & Order*, etc. on the Web. But assuming convergence that ensures delivery of identical content over both TV and the Web, might we see differences among those who choose a medium that broadens the viewing experience with features such as complementary content and instantaneous discussion by viewing peers? Will we find significant differences among dependent users of TV versus the Internet, and where will those who toggle between the two media fall?

Hint: The New York Times estimated that two percent of residents of this violent city were murdered over a 12-year span.

If we step away from our focus on drama and violence, can we find other cultivation effects of TV that are reinforced, enhanced or mitigated by Web content? For example, perceptions of:

- Ethnic & racial minorities, women, gays & lesbians, etc.
- Poverty versus wealth
- Political or religious beliefs & values

And finally, how will our perceptions be impacted by the glut of choices for content? In the early years of cultivation research, most cable channels were recycling major network content, which broadened and lengthened exposure to common content. They continue to recycle (*Have you had your Law & Order marathon this month?*), but increasingly offer original content. That undoubtedly adds more variability to our measures.

And speaking of glut of choices ... Jana Frederick-Collins, my classmate at UNC, posited the “spiral of bias,” an hypothesis that broad availability of content – whether news or entertainment – would lead us eventually to choose those sources more in line with our present beliefs. The consequence, she said, would be a developing perception that “most people think like us.” Are we seeing that already? If so, it’s going to become increasingly difficult to attribute perceptions to media.

If you guessed Cabot Cove, Maine, consider yourself cultivated. And if you’re ever offered the chance to meet Jessica Fletcher, run like the wind.

Time to Cultivate New Theories

January 30, 2008

By JOHN HOOD

I have two sons, aged 10 and 7. They watch very little television. It's not that I'm particularly strict with their TV time, or that the apples just haven't fallen far from the tree – indeed, I remember watching quite a lot of TV when I was their age. Except for *American Idol* and various show on the Disney Channel, however, little of today's television fare interests my boys. They're not alone. Many of their friends watch little television, as well. They're playing games, surfing, swapping music files, and interacting online.

The national data show this is not a trend limited to Southern Wake County households of preteen boys headed by geeky dads. In many households, television watching is going down as they get high-speed Internet connections and start ramping up their time online. The time Americans do spend in front of the TV is increasingly devoted to watching cable and satellite channels, pay per view, and DVDs rather than network fare with broad audiences. The overwhelming majority of households now have access to these television alternatives.[1] Access to broadband continues to differ according to race and household income, but access is increasing for all groups.[2] Gaps between males and females persist in the use of computers, video games, and broadband, but many of these gaps aren't yawning. For example, a third of teenage girls who spent time online are blogging, but so are a fifth of teenage boys. Males of all ages are more likely to play video games than females are, but the latter now make up nearly 40 percent of video gamers, and mothers are about as likely as fathers to play video games with their children. Overall, about a third of all parents do so.[3]

Even before the widespread adoption of the Internet began in the mid-1990s, there were powerful challenges to George Gerbner's original cultivation theory of how mass-media consumption, particularly heavy television viewing, shaped public perceptions of their world.[4] Careful studies of the complex relationship between media use and public sentiments, studies that tried to identify and adjust for the many other causal factors that might be at work, often discovered that when cultivation effects were present, they were relatively small.[5] In 1986, Gerbner and his colleagues admitted that the measurable effects were small but still argued for their importance.[6] In the subsequent decade, however, the proliferation of new television channels and VCRs fractured the market for video entertainment, calling further into question the usefulness of a theory formed when the three broadcast networks were dominant and viewers had fewer ways to assert their independence and pursue their viewing preferences. And that was before YouTube and its cousins came along to kick the legs out from under the proposition, held by Gerbner and other critics of his day, that all-powerful corporations controlled the production and distribution of video content, an editorial power to which viewers had little choice but to submit.

The advent of online communities, and the particularly pronounced supplanting of television by computers and the web among young people, will require scholars to continue to refine and revise their communication theories. Online networking and gaming, for example, are highly interactive activities,

easy distinguished from simply watching a TV channel. As to the content of video and computer games, the popular impression that gore, sex, and criminality dominate the medium is simply uninformed. Of the top 10 bestselling video-games series in history, only two – *Final Fantasy* and *Grand Theft Auto* – could be construed as fitting the stereotype. More typical are cartoonish action-adventure games such as *Mario Brothers* (200 million sold) and *Pokemon* (164 million), entirely non-violent games such as *The Sims* (90 million) and *Tetris* (70 million), and sports games such as *FIFA* (65 million) and *Madden's NFL* (60 million).[7] Nor should the apparent resemblance of, say, combat-based online role-playing games and violent TV programming be mistaken as evidence that the two are likely to have similar effects on average consumers. Much of the time gamers spend online is devoted to social interaction, building teams, training new players, trading in markets, reading background material, and building or experiencing player-created content. The experience is markedly different from what children did a generation ago, sitting passively in front of a television watching cartoon characters slug each other or action heroes performing impossible feats of gratuitous violence.

None of which is meant to suggest that there are not cultivation effects in computer and online media. There may well be, and certainly some of the games, chat rooms, and commerce available online appear to present their users, both adults and children, with disturbing images and dangerous temptations. Indeed, there is some evidence for the proposition that when individuals actively consume media, rather than passively watching a TV show, they may be more likely to learn from the experience (for good or ill, I suppose).[8] Still, it's a whole new world – certainly a media environment very different from the one most of us grew up in – and its exploration should be fascinating.

Notes

[1] "Online Papers Modestly Increase Newspaper Readership," Biannual News Consumption Survey, Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, July 30, 2006, <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?PageID=1064>.

[2] John Horrigan, "A Typology of Information and Communication Technology Users," Pew Internet and American Life Project, May 6, 2007, http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/213/report_display.asp.

[3] Dan Hewitt, "New Study Shows Thirty-Five Percent of American Parents Play Video Games," News Release, Entertainment Software Association (Peter D. Hart Associates survey), January 26, 2006, http://www.theesa.com/archives/2006/01/new_study_shows.php.

[4] Scott Stossel, "The Man Who Counts The Killings," *The Atlantic Monthly*, May 1997, <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/97may/gerbner.htm>.

[5] See, for example, Paul Hirsch, "The 'Scary World' of the Nonviewer and Other Anomalies: A Reanalysis of Gerbner et al.'s Findings on Cultivation Analysis," *Communication Research*, 7, 1980, pp. 403-456; Michael Hughes, "The Fruits of Cultivation Analysis: A Reexamination of Some Effects of Television Watching," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 44, 1980, pp. 287-302; and W. James Potter, *On Media Violence*, New York: Sage Publications, 1999.

[6] George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan, & Nancy Signorielli, "Living With Television: The Dynamics of the Cultivation Process," in Jennings Bryant & Dolf Zillmann, editors, *Perspectives on Media Effects*, Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 1986, Chapter 2: pp. 17-40.

[7] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_best-selling_video_game_franchises.

[8] Lisa Schroeder, "Cultivation and the Elaboration Likelihood Model: A Test of the Learning and Construction and Availability Heuristic Models," *Communications Studies*, September 2005.