The Concept of Cultivation:

A Historical Analysis

Angela M. Cirucci

Temple University
Communication can no longer be thought of as merely a one-on-one, face-to-face, simple process. Humans are constantly communicating—giving and receiving information—in various new ways. How people communicate and get their information is, of course, important. Studies about each new media technology are pertinent. Yet, the content of all these media messages is of great importance also. It is obvious that the content of communication has always affected how humans view the world and live their lives, but now more than ever it is important to realize that with each new media technology the influences are drastically changing.

George Gerbner realized that these new messages that are now corporately manufactured are a far cry from those messages that were once “handcrafted, homemade, and community inspired” (Gerbner, 1998, p. 175). Gerbner began his Cultivation Research to explore how these kinds of messages were affecting the United States and the world (Gerbner, 1998).

According to Gerbner, our culture is now the result of corporations and their marketing departments. Industries release the messages they want to communicate through mass media. This then creates a mainstreaming effect, or striving toward one common consciousness. Before the industrial revolution, communication of this kind was unthinkable; the ability to write was considered holy. With the industrial revolution, books could be mass-produced, and before long much of the population could read mass-produced books, newspapers, magazines, etc. “Most of our assumptions about human development and political plurality and choice are rooted in the print era” (Gerbner, 1998, p. 177). As print media became more widespread, people could publish their beliefs about the world. Family stories and value-systems were written down. Because these new technologies could capture cultures and beliefs, people could uproot from their small communities for new opportunities but still carry with them their ideas of common
consciousness. People no longer needed to stay in one place to stay within their culture (Gerbner, 1998).

With the onset of the electronic revolution, telecommunications became the new channel to convey mass media. The introduction of television completely altered the once print-based culture created by the industrial revolution. Unlike print, television does not lead people to leave their homes and transform their lives, it actually causes people to stay in their homes, and feel as though they are being shipped to somewhere new. In the time Gerbner was doing his research, television was considered “the source of the most broadly-shared images and messages in history” (Gerbner, 1998, p. 177). Even though television introduces more channels, Gerbner believed that the variety of content does not increase. The content of television only assimilates the already prevailing messages in today’s culture (Gerbner, 1998).

Gerbner argued that television is possibly the first obsession since preindustrial religion to have followers that take on such a daily, ritualistic need. Just as religion once did, television repeats the same patterns (such as “facts” and relationships) that in turn define human reality. People who are seemingly diverse in every other aspect share one similarity—their need for television exposure. Through Gerbner’s Cultivation Research, he attempted to prove that this need causes the cultivation of “shared conceptions of reality” (Gerbner, 1998, p. 178). Gerbner argued that because television offers so few choices, it is only logical that the once very diverse communities viewing television will eventually have cultivated beliefs about their reality that are stable and common (Gerbner, 1998).

Although applicable to the current explosion of mass media, Gerbner’s ideas are not new. Thoughts of the media affecting people and the disposition of humans to naturally imitate were written about and studied long before Gerbner’s time. The strands of media effects and imitation
can be traced back to at least the 4th century BC and Plato. In Plato’s “The Republic” Socrates is concerned with art and poetry. He compares a poet to an artist. Artists do not paint reality, but only an image of it. Plato explained that if anyone were to say that the picture an artist paints is the real thing, they are surely telling a lie. This goes also for poets who are not writing for the good of the gods or for the good of the state. Plato sites Homer as his example. Homer is much like an artist because his writings only portray one image of reality and are concerned with parts of the soul that are inferior. “He awakens and nourishes and strengthens the feelings and impairs the reason” (Plato, 1871/1999, pp. 393-394).

Plato believed that those who read poetry and went to the theatre had feelings brought out in them that otherwise would not emerge. He claimed that audience members would do things that they would have normally thought to be unthinkable. He sites laughing at jests as an example. Normally, people would not laugh at them because it was considered unreasonable. Yet, after jests are put on the stage or written about in a poem, people find it suddenly acceptable to laugh at them. Plato claimed that people unconsciously betray themselves and this does not just apply to laughter. It can be seen with all feelings ranging from pain to pleasure, from desire to pity. Plato warned that we should never take art or poetry of this nature as truth. Doing so would be unsafe (Plato).

Aristotle also commented on how speeches and the theater affect people. Like speeches, he said, theater’s purpose is to evoke certain emotions, a process he referred to as catharsis (κάθαρσις). Before Aristotle, no one else had written down the thoughts that viewing actions on a stage could lead to the process of catharsis in a nonmedical, emotional sense. When going to the theater, people can experience certain emotions and feel fulfilled without actually have to act out the emotions at hand. This may cause people to not act out something that could have had
bad consequences because seeing the emotions acted out on stage relieves any emotional pressures that would have otherwise made them act out those emotions themselves (Aristotle, 1895/1898).

Horace also touched on the influences of theater and poems, but he was mostly concerned with children. He wrote on how childrens’ souls are impressionable. He thought that poems and the theater are filled with negative ideas. Therefore, he was worried about what would happen to the children when they are exposed to these ideas (Horace, 1892).

In the year 200 AD, Tertullian also had much to say about the circus and the theater affecting people. Although Tertullian took on a very religious stance, he still had similar thoughts about the dangers in the circus and the theater changing how people view reality. He explained that as soon as people enter the arena they are “already under strong emotion, already tumultuous, already passion-blind, already agitated about their bets” (Tertullian, n.d., p. 158). He claimed that it is clear, just by how the audience members speak to each other, that they are changed. They act as though what they are seeing on the stage is reality (Tertullian).

In 1872, Nietzsche, in his “The Birth of Tragedy,” described the theater and its impact on society. He argued that in Greek drama the audiences were shown how to act through the choruses that were a part of every theatrical performance. The chorus people act as first hand spectators. They, in a sense, are present to show the audience the emotions they too should be expressing and therefore the realities that they should be creating. Although at one time audience members were supposed to realize that the show in front of them was just a portrayal, the chorus acting as the “ideal” audience made the real audience think differently. Audiences were being directed to view what was on the stage as reality (Nietzsche, 2009).
These early thinkers all realized one crucial element that all humans, and many other animals, possess—imitation. The idea that humans imitate what they experience, apply it to their own lives, and slowly begin to let it shape their own reality is certainly not a new idea, but one that constantly remains relevant. By the late 1920s, Pavlov was testing the ideas of conditioned effects that many of the early thinkers saw in the theater and other art. By experimenting on dogs in his lab, Pavlov demonstrated that by ringing a bell and then giving a dog food, he could begin to change the dog’s view of reality. Soon, the dog learned that if there was a bell there must be food. He had essentially changed the dog’s culture. Pavlov proved this by showing that after some time, the dog would salivate when it heard the bell, even when no food was present (Pavlov, 1927/1960). In 1940 Warden, Fjeld and Koch also were conducting imitation studies but with monkeys. They found similar results (Warden et al.).

With more and more research showing that humans do, in fact, imitate what they are shown, many communication scholars concerned themselves with how mass media affect people and cause people to imitate what they consume. As seen in the earliest writings of Plato, the arts were at the center of many debates because it seemed that these media purposely want to draw out certain emotions and be viewed as real. In Horkheimer and Adorno’s 1944 “Dialectic of Enlightenment,” they took it on step further and claimed that art and life can no longer be differentiated. Horkheimer et al. argued that it began with people attending movie theaters. People would go to the movies and then leave believing that the world they walked out into was a continuation of the film they had just viewed. The makers of movies use this as their inspiration. The producers of movies make it absolutely necessary to give people viewing their film the illusion that their world is a direct carry-over of what they view on the movie screen. Horkheimer et al. argued that as time goes by, producers not only get better at this feat, but in so
doing also start sculpting people to be frightfully similar. “The culture industry as a whole has molded men as a type unfailingly reproduced in every product” (Horkheimer et al, p. 127).

Horkheimer et al. argued that individuality was killed by mass media. Culture has simply been destroyed. Because all men have been replicated, there is no true culture anymore because all men have been molded to be similar. People begin to experience emotions based on what they see on the screen rather than what they are truly experiencing in their own realities. They argued that people tend to always act out whatever the hidden agendas of the media industry are. These agendas and actions are learned through mass media. Horkheimer et al. used Orson Welles as an example of the kinds of stereotypes mass media carry. He may do things that are outside of the norm, yet they are still shown to the masses because they are “calculated mutations which serve all the more strongly to confirm the validity of the system” (Horkheimer et al., p. 129).

In 1950 Leo Lowenthal similarly studied how popular culture was affecting its audiences. He claimed that people use this new kind of culture to escape or distract themselves from their own realities. In doing so they are not only being entertained, but also vicariously living through the realities portrayed. Lowenthal applied these ideas to the notion of repetitive media. Men have come to feel so empty on the inside that they need these constant, “manipulated productions of reality” (Lowenthal, 1950, p. 326) to help them feel positive and triumphant like those who are entertaining them (Lowenthal).

Lowenthal believed that the main issue with research in mass media, television for example, was that it refuses to touch on meaning. “The problem is whether, and to what extent, modern social science is equipped to deal with modern social culture [italic added for emphasis] (Lowenthal, p. 328). Lowenthal believed that because researchers rely on strictly empirical data,
actual human values are never questioned. The data is never put into the context of morals or history. Lowenthal argued that the natural sciences have replaced any kind of human sciences. At one time religion may have reigned but now science is king. Because of this, manipulation is the only answer. Popular culture is forced into segmented and inauthentic social categories. Lowenthal stated that even though it is questionable how much of the media (radio, movies, papers, books, magazines, etc.) actually reflects real life, they all have become models for how people live their lives. In other words, what people are reading and viewing affects how they view, and live in, their own realities even if the media is not reflecting what reality actually consists of (Lowenthal).

In 1954, Franklin Fearing contributed his thoughts in “Social impact of the mass media and communication.” He makes it clear that, not only is it not the actual technology itself he is concerned with, he also feels that the word “effects” is too narrow, and prefers to speak of the media’s “impact” (Fearing, 1954, p. 166). Regarding impact, Fearing found it important to understand that the technology of mass media allows one source, possibly one person, to reach a huge audience. In turn, this one person can socially control huge numbers of people. “The political and social symbols of a society, the images of its leaders . . . may be transmitted to millions of persons simultaneously, not neutrally . . . but always in a directed context” (Fearing, pp, 166-167). Fearing sited four incidences as proof that the mass media can have significant affects on society and culture. On example he sited is the 1938 “War of the worlds” broadcast. The show, much like a reality show of our time, acted as a news story that was covering a Martian landing. During and after this broadcast, millions of people were frightened and disturbed. Some people telephoned family to say their last goodbyes thinking the end was near (Fearing).
Fearing argued that man uses symbols that are socially created to understand his reality. Yet, with dramas, plays, films, radio, television, etc., new sources are creating and outputting social symbols that are in turn also being used to create value systems. He cited a Werner and Henry study from 1948 and a Herzog study from 1941 that both demonstrated that women who listen to daytime radio shows learn how to problem solve through the soap opera. In many other instances, Fearing found that the media receiver, or interpreter as he calls him, finds socially useful information in mass media and applies it to his value system. “... The mass media are the conveyors of culture...” (Fearing, p. 183). Fearing made a very broad claim that is not largely seen before his time. He explained that the effects or impacts vary largely depending on many factors—who the interpreter is, how he is receiving the message, what his value-system is, and the situation he is in. That is, Fearing rejected the idea of “the masses” and claimed that every interpreter is different and therefore cannot be classified them into one, huge, acting group. Also, Fearing noted that these impacts may or may not have direct behaviors aligned with them (Fearing).

As people became more engrossed in mass media and its portrayed reality, which was becoming their own, many were so affected that they believed they had relationships with people in the media. This phenomenon is known as a para-social relationship. Horton and Wohl studied how the mass media created para-social interaction. Because mass media now had the ability to give the mirage of a face-to-face relationship, viewers felt they knew them just as much as they knew someone in their own circle of friends. Horton et al. claimed that television has actually proven more dangerous than theater. In the theater, an actor may take on a role, and for a while the line between what is real and what is not may be blurred because the actor has suddenly taken on a new persona. Yet, when the performance is complete, the actor takes a bow and steps
out of his portrayed persona and returns to his true reality. In television this does not happen, for two reasons. The first is that on dramas, sitcoms, etc., we do not see the end of the show. That is, we do not see the actor step out of character and bow to the audience, thanking them for watching is performance. The second, and the more dangerous of the two, is that for television there has been a new persona created. This new celebrity is one who never really takes on a role of fantasy. Announcers, newscasters, quiz show hosts, etc. exist only for the purpose of a para-social relationship with their viewers (Horton & Wohl, 1963).

Just as we have seen in many of the other works, this new kind of celebrity becomes so influential because of his repetitive nature. He does not only appear on a regular basis, but his appearance becomes depended upon. Not only do these kinds of personalities mingle with the other actors on stage in a very intimate way, they also are shown walking into the live audience and bonding with them. The live audience is present for similar reasons as the chorus was present in ancient theatrics. The audience at home can not only see how they should be responding, they can also feel as though they are an extension of the live audience and in turn feel as though the personality is walking through their living room, chatting with them. When the stage and audience’s lines are blurred, so are the lines of reality and fantasy (Horton, et al.).

Horton et al. also argued that audiences are coached to learn certain attitudes. The celebrities’ “people” preach that the celebrity “should have ‘heart,’ should be ‘sincere,’ [and] his performance should be ‘real’ and ‘warm’” (Horton et al., p. 554). While this image is built around the celebrities, the audience is coached to respond by loyally supporting his show or helping him reach his goals. The programs’ prime purposes are to get their viewers to believe that what they are watching is reality, and change and plan their own realities and cultures
accordingly. They do so by drawing out certain beliefs and emotions that were not previously present (Horton et al.).

Obviously, the content of the mass media has now been shown to be of importance. Around this same time, Gerbner was writing about how to study mass communication, taking into consideration this importance of content. He believed that because content is important in communication, it should also be a primary area of study. In the media, Gerbner argued that the content portrayed is part of a system of social control. Biases that are built into mass media are only verifying the domination of knowledge held by the groups in power. He labeled Lasswell’s process of “who says what to whom, how, and with what effect” (Gerbner, 1958, p. 92) as too limited for the kind of research needed about mass media. Gerbner introduced a new ten-part model that he believed more accurately captures all that can go on during the process of communication. This model is: (I) someone (II) perceives an event (III) and reacts (IV) in a situation (V) through some means (VI) to make available materials (VII) in some form (VIII) and context (IX) conveying content (X) and with some consequence (Gerbner, 1958, pp. 93-94). It is important to note that Gerbner’s model not only recognizes that media will cause people to find meaning and react to their own reality, but also, that the meaning gained and the reaction caused may not be that of which the producer originally intended (Gerbner, 1958).

Similar to the study on para-social relationships, Leopold Bellak published “Personality Structure in a Changing World,” where he claimed that instead of people having relationships with individuals on the screen, they are having relationships with the actual objects they receive mass media from. He claimed that humans are having more “object-relations” (Bellak, 1963, p. 416). By this he means that people are having more relationships with their televisions or radios than with real people. “Friendship in the old sense is said to be much rarer” (Bellak, p. 416). He
claimed that the biggest part of American culture in his time was the how the media affected people. Man lost his true identity and therefore social structures are slowly falling apart (Bellak).

As it became more and more clear that mass media’s content must have some kind of impact on its consumers, many scholars worried about the effects it must be having on children. In 1963, Bandura, Ross and Ross completed their “Imitation of Film-Mediated Aggressive Models.” In previous experiments, children had imitated aggressive behavior while still around the model they had learned from. A study that same year was then completed that showed children would still commit aggressive acts when they were apart from the model that they had learned from. To take this one step further, Bandura et al. wanted to see how children reacted when their stimuli was not a live model to imitate, but a film. They found that “exposure to humans on film portraying aggression was the most influential in eliciting and shaping aggressive behavior” (Bandura et al., p. 7). Aggressive behavior was also acted out after the children watched cartoon violence. Furthermore, the children did not simply act violently after viewing the films; they imitated the behaviors they have seen on the screen. This shows that mass media is an essential source of social actions (Bandura et al.)

By this time, a new process to accurately study the effects that the content of mass media has was needed. In 1969, Gerbner wrote about his Cultural Indicators project which would help to pinpoint terms that could be studied in the media and then help to explain the changing culture. Gerbner explained that people do not necessarily take part in their culture as much as they used to. Instead, they gain their views on life from sometimes-false representations. Large corporations control increasingly more of the messages received through the mass media. Perspectives of the world and the values people held changed from smaller, private perspectives,
to broad, public perspectives. The mass media do this by selecting certain images to portray what they find important or profitable. These are the images that are then cultivated and this “cultivation of shared terms provides the basis for public interaction” (Gerbner, 1969, p. 139).

This new “public-making” ability (Gerbner, 1969, p. 140) allows the mass media to essentially create new collective thought across all borders including culture, time and space. Cultural Indicators are the terms that mass media use to cultivate new, broad ideas about values, morals, beliefs, relationships, etc. The idea that some things consumed through the mass media are fact and others are fiction does not matter. Gerbner believed that both play an equal part in cultivating people. All messages transmitted are organized in a manner that suggests what is of utmost importance culturally. Cultural Indicators can be found by looking at mass media messages asking four questions: What is? (attention), What is important? (emphasis), What is right? (tendency) and What is related to what? (structure) (Gerbner, 1969, pp. 145-146). Gerbner believed that asking these questions in a research design would help to find the Cultural Indicators that do not necessarily cause some kind of direct affect on an audience, but slowly cultivate their views of the world and their culture (Gerbner, 1969).

As we have seen, throughout history it has been difficult to pinpoint the characteristics of those who are exposed to mass media whether it is the theater or television. Sometimes a group is best described by first finding out more about their opposite. Just as in a scientific experiment where the experimental group is compared to the control group, scholars over time have studied those that are not exposed to the media. One such example was in 1959 with Westley and Mobius’ paper “A closer look at the non-television household.” They found a highly significant difference in households’ heads of the family. If the head of the family was educated beyond college, they were most likely to not have a television (Westley & Mobius). In
1964, Westley and Severin found that the higher the education of each group, the fewer non-readers of newspapers in the group. For example, out of 96 professionals, only 4.2 percent were non-readers (Westley & Severin).

In 1977, Jackson-Beeck published “The nonviewers: Who are they?” She, like Westley and Mobius, looked at characteristics of non-television viewers to see if they could help define those who actually did view. A nonviewer was considered as anyone who viewed less than thirty minutes of television daily. She found that nonviewers are less religious than viewers and nonviewers have better paying jobs. No nonviewer was unemployed. She also found that nonviewers have higher educational backgrounds (Jackson-Beeck). These viewer vs. nonviewer studies ultimately help scholars pinpoint some of the factors that possibly contribute to people’s different media usage and therefore their perceptions of reality.

By the early 1980’s, Gerbner’s ideas of cultivation were widespread and being applied to many studies. A 1982 article, “Television’s influence on social reality,” claimed that television has considerable influence over how people view their social reality by bring together different studies that used much of Gerbner’s ideas. It did not matter which kind of social reality was studied, they all showed some kind of link to television. It covered a plethora of genres including, but not limited to, violence, family, sex roles, values, images of doctors, etc. This paper used a multitude of studies to prove one point—television not only affects us, but also constructs the realities we live in (Hawkins & Pingree, 1982).

By 1998, Gerbner had fully developed his new communication theory—Cultivation Theory. There are many differences between reality and what happens on television. This is important because people begin to view reality as what they see on television. When Gerbner studied those who viewed television heavily, they were the most prone to answering questions
about reality with descriptions that actually described television reality. Images about the real world cultivated through television images can be seen in many aspects of reality. Gerbner found significant discrepancies in views of violence, images of women and thoughts of marriage and work. Gerbner also saw significant differences in politics. Gerbner argued that television aims to bother as few people as possible, so therefore they try to always show “balanced” perspectives when it comes to politics. Because of this, those who view television most frequently are more likely to say they are moderate, rather than identify as liberal or conservative (Gerbner, 1998).

One of Gerbner’s most popular studies is that of violence cultivation and the “mean world syndrome” (Gerbner, 1998, p. 185). The heavier the viewer of television, the more violent they think their reality is. These viewers feel they need to be protected more than the lighter viewers. They also trust fewer people (Gerbner, 1998).

Gerbner commented on cultivation studies in countries other than America also. In Australia, students who viewed American television were more likely to believe that their realities were more violent. In England, mainstreaming was found to be similar to what is in America. In general, countries whose media portrays images in a less repetitive manner, and in a less homogeneous manner, see less predictability of cultivation (Gerbner, 1998).

Numerous studies have been done using Gerbner’s Cultivation Theory. It has been applied to local news programs where it was found that the more a viewer is watching the local news for entertainment; the more he will think reality is unsafe. Yet, those who are actually concentrating on the news and wanting to learn something from it are less likely to have “mean world” ideas cultivated (Perse, 1990). Cultivation Theory has also been applied to viewing with the use of a VCR. It was found that heavy viewers tend to use their VCRs to watch the same
kinds of shows they would normally watch, thus further repeating the same images and cultivating their thoughts of the world (Dobrow, 1990). Pornography was another area studied using ideas from Cultivation Theory. It was found that pornography’s main impact was cultivating the already withstanding ideas of sex-based discrimination (Preston, 1990).

While this paper has highlighted the many strong points of cultivation theory, there are also some weak points. Much of what Aristotle wrote in regards to catharsis can be applied to Cultivation Theory. Some would argue that images viewed through television do not affect people negatively, but rather allow people to release emotions that were bothering them. This vicarious release can be seen as a good thing because the person will now not act out an emotion that could have proven bad. For example, if a boy is mad at his friend and has the urge to shoot his friend, he may first see a boy shoot his friend on television. At first, the very act of watching this image may prove cathartic. But also, the boy may see the negative consequences of shooting a friend, and therefore no longer feel the urge to complete this violent act.

Television has been widely covered by ideas of Cultivation Theory, but with the many technological advances we have seen since Gerbner first started his research, much more can be done. The internet is a significant source of new areas to research cultivation effects. I am most interested in how social media cultivates the lives of those who use it at varying degrees, specifically in regards to Facebook usage. Using Gerbner’s Cultivation Theory and Cultural Indicators, I would like to research how the use of Facebook changes people’s views of reality. I intend to create a survey to distribute to Facebook users. This study will, naturally, be on a small scale, but it is a starting point that will hopefully lead to a bigger study if significant results are discovered.
Works Cited


Tertullian. (n.d.). *The shows or de spectaculis.* (S. Thelwall, Trans.). Received from http://books.google.com

