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The Symbolic Context of Action and Communication

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These words are not just ink on paper. They are symbols that evoke meaning. They can be scratches on sand, sound vibrations in air, light on my terminal, and still have essentially the same meaning. Their meaning comes from the symbolic context of mind and culture in which they are embedded and through which all human meaning emerges.

These assumptions are implicit in most contributions to this book. What remains to be done is to explicate them and place them—appropriately to our theme—in their broadest context. The immediately preceding chapters provide a good springboard for such an effort. Shotter (Chapter 11) describes the formative functions of language. He notes that we see the world through our accounts of it. As I will put it: We are the stories we tell. Meyrowitz (Chapter 12) carries the idea of transaction with the symbolic environment into the electronic age. He offers an alternative to the study of media content alone as the basis for inferences about ideas and behavior, and integrates such factors as coding and distributional characteristics, selectivity of use, space and time, and social context into his approach to media study.

This chapter draws in part on earlier versions of the following works: Gerbner (1985a, 1985b) and Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli (1985).

My attempt to build on these notions will begin with some further comments about communicative action, continue with an historical view of story telling, and conclude with a design for the contextual approach to the study of mass media, based on our research.

Acting Human

Action is behavior interpreted in symbolic contexts. Our language loads the word with special significance. "A piece of the action" used to mean cutting in a partner on your bet. Now it's the sex "act" or violence or some other usually male-oriented demonstration of winning women or glory or money (or all). The "scene of the action" can be Wall Street, a horse race, a bar, or a ring. When a general sends his men "into action," we know they are not picking flowers. The Buick ad used to sell "a car that's loaded with action"—presumably not just automotive. An "activist" is not just a lively person. Your choice of food in the cafeteria is "consumer behavior." Your attempt to change the cafeteria is "consumer action."

Action reflects not only consciousness of wholes rather than parts but also the capacity to create alternatives rather than only react to them. If that capacity is impaired, the ability to act human is also diminished. Fractured concepts of "information" and "behavior" tend to do that. Anything that fragments and distracts attention from symbolic processes and structures, instead of using them as the framework for studying the human relevance of communication, is likely to reduce the capacity to act. Our contextualist project begins, therefore, with sketching the development of that capacity.

Communication is interaction through messages. Messages are formally coded symbolic or representational patterns of some shared significance in a symbolic context called culture. Culture itself may be conceived as a system of messages through which we define and regulate social relationships. Information-directed behavior occurs in many forms of life but—transformed as communication—plays its most distinctive part in building human lives and communities.

The simplest organisms take energy from their immediate surroundings. They need little information except what is contained in a fixed hereditary code. When the local source of life-giving energy dries up, they perish. Higher organisms use specialized senses to receive, and brains to store, information. They can reach out, search a wider

area, pick up signals from a distance, accumulate impressions over time, relate to each other, assume different roles, and engage in behavior based on some sharing of learned significance. But of all forms of life we know, only humans act primarily through the manipulation of complex symbol systems. Messages and images, rather than the threats and gratifications of the moment, animate human thought and imagination. The far away and long ago plunges us into action as often as the immediate environment. Even the satisfaction of the most basic need for food, love, and shelter are, for humans, elaborate and compelling symbolic experiences. Show me one other animal that paints pictures, plays chess, conducts an orchestra, or recites the Bible and I will concede that information-processing behavior is on a continuum with human communication. Until then, however, I will consider communication to have taken a different evolutionary route and role.

The last million years ended an era of many times that long during which a relatively mild climate covered long stretches of land from the Arctic Circle through what is now the Sahara Desert to the Antarctic. Arboreal existence in lush forests freed the forward limbs of some groups of mammals from having to carry the burden of the body and shaped them into strong, sure delicate instruments. A subsequent descent to the ground further enabled the forearm to explore, create, and manipulate. Much of human evolution is compressed in the word "comprehend": It stems from the expression "grasp with the forehand." Exceptionally deft manipulation required an exceptionally large and complex control system—the brain. The ability to grasp with the hand and with the mind literally developed "hand-in-hand."

The last million years robbed pre-humans of their "paradise." Invasions of glaciers, great floods, and geologic convulsions scattered the roving bands into all parts of the globe. The featherless and furless but warm-blooded hominoids were hard-pressed to develop their unique resources of collaboration and community through communication.

Only the hominoid brain could regulate the body, respond to changes in the immediate surroundings, and still retain the capacity and stability to hold a complex image long enough to reflect on it. This ability to integrate symbolic structures into frameworks of knowledge and to make them available in novel combinations was the prerequisite for human consciousness and communication. In its broadest "humanizing" sense, communication, then, is a

source and extension of imagination in forms that can be learned and shared. It is the production, perception, and grasp of messages bearing human notions of what is, what is important, what is right, and what is related to what.

The Paleolithic hunters who survived the last glaciation appear to have succeeded in building the symbolic foundations for culture: the naming of things, visual representation, coherent organization of messages; and the ability to instruct, celebrate, reflect upon, and pass on accumulated lore and imagery.

Even the most primitive people known have languages; create shapes, forms, and images for symbolic and representational uses; perform elaborate rituals; observe intricate kinship systems; confront the world through entertaining fantasies and myths; and conduct the affairs of the tribe or society through communication. Recorded and widely transported systems of communication now enable us to bridge vast reaches of space, time, and status and to cultivate values of collective survival—or to plunge into spasms of distinctively human mass destruction.

Having set the stage, it is time now to bring on the act and to tell our story. Indeed, I can find no more "telling" word than story to distinguish human action from all others. More than any other, Homo sapiens is the story-telling animal. Unlike any other, Homo sapiens lives in a world erected, experienced, and conducted largely through many forms and modes of story telling.

So let us, for the moment, suspend our customary classification of genres, types, modes of information, entertainment, education, or whatever specialized communications are called. These classifications are recent historical inventions that may be useful for certain purposes but not for the functional distinctions usually attributed to them. All communications cultivate the terms on which they can be understood and shared. The simple statement "this is a chair" evokes a time, place, and culture as much as the referent object itself. The act of naming or labeling takes its significance from the larger symbolic context woven mainly by the stories we tell.

Telling Stories

All animals learn from experience. Humans also learn *how to experience*. We have such consciousness of existence as we ourselves provide for in our communications. Human reason confronts realities on terms culture makes available. We are the stories we tell. From towering constructions of

mythology to factual descriptions and instructions, stories create, embody, illuminate, and embroider a selective and synthetic pattern of meaning that gives life its sense of direction and purpose. Our arts, sciences, religions, laws, and politics consist mainly of stories we tell and internalize—or impose. That process weaves the seamless web of human cultures defining the world and guiding its social relationships.

Stories are symbolic structures that tell us what things are, how they work, and what to do (or not to do) about them. Stories also relate the teller to the person to whom the tale is told. Fairy tales, funny stories, absurd stories, histories, and those accounts not commonly thought of as stories that are told in classrooms, churches, courtrooms, election and sales campaigns, business and professional meetings, during work and play and celebration in books and all other media—all relate teller and told in certain ways. A scary story tends to concentrate power in the teller; a sales pitch or plea for help in the one addressed. Whatever else they do, stories confirm authority and distribute power in specific ways. Story telling fits human reality to the social order.

For the longest time in human history, stories were told face to face, memorized as rituals and mythologies, and incorporated in religions. Laboriously inscribed manuscripts conferred sacred power to their interpreters. As a sixteenth-century Mexican source (cited by Elliott, 1984) put it:

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

The first major transformation was the industrial. The first machine was the printing press. That made possible the mass production of symbols, signs, and stories. The first manufactured product was the printed book. It broke the ritual, and with it the magic power of the oral interpreter, the priest, or others ministering by the spoken word. It paved the way for the Reformation and further transformations to come. It ushered in the era of modern mass publics: loose aggregations of people who never meet and yet share some consciousness in common. The process

by which they come to share and to become members of these far-flung aggregations, called publics, is, of course, the process of publication. Printing extends the face-to-face community. Printed stories are movable records of consciousness that can be taken—often smuggled—across hitherto impenetrable or closely guarded boundaries of time, space, language, religion, status. The book lifts people from their traditional moorings as the industrial revolution uproots them from their communities and cultures. The book can be given to all who can read (a new class) to interpret without necessary dependence on the ministrations and interpretations of their local chiefs and priests.

Meanwhile people engage in long and costly struggles—still going on—to tell stories that fit their reality to what they believe to be their own interests. The struggle is necessary for the formation of new identities and groupings as the industrial age breaks the community into conflicting classes, mixes together religious and ethnic groups, and restructures the process of humanization heretofore confined by geography and relative stability. Meyrowitz (Chapter 12 this volume) describes some characteristics of print as shaping new age-roles and other social identities in contemporary societies.

The way to achieve some control over the newly differentiating consciousness in a situation of unprecedented mobility and flux is to gain the right to select and publish stories (and thus create publics) stemming from different conceptions of relevance. Notions of individuality and of class consciousness are both rooted in the print era. Most of our assumptions about human development and governance stem from the print era.

Next comes the electronic transformation. We enter the telecommunications era. Its mainstream is television, superimposed upon and reorganizing print-based culture. Television has its own special characteristics. It is a centralized ritual that is distant, pervasive, and yet seemingly personal and face-to-face. It releases into the mainstream of common consciousness a stream of stories made to the specifications of a few marketing formulas intended for all the people. The functions of tribal mythologies have been transported to the national and global spheres.

Most viewers watch television relatively nonselectively—by the clock and not by the program. They must watch whatever is on at a particular time, and cannot choose as they do books or magazines or going to movies.

The essence of a centralized and licensed ritual like television is that it exposes far-flung and otherwise heterogeneous communities to a common system of story telling.

As our research found, and Meyrowitz also points out, this tends to blur traditional distinctions of sex, age, region, class and other interests, blend them into a more coherent conception of life, and bend them to the institutional interests of the establishment that sponsors television as its chief cultural arm. We call this "mainstreaming," a concept to which we will return. It challenges many of our print-based assumptions about democratic government, education, socialization, and even the survival value of human cultures.

The humanization of Homo sapiens starts with fairy tales and children's stories (today mostly television cartoons) depicting human situations and presenting casts of characters acting on problems and coming to resolutions. Many such stories have to be told and their significance absorbed before "facts" begin to have meaning and norms and values are integrated into one's framework of knowledge.

There are three general types of stories. (These are not necessarily distinct or mutually exclusive; they are idealized types presented here more for purposes of analysis.) The three are stories of how things work (drama and fiction, which makes the all-important but invisible relationships in life visible and understandable); stories of what things are (facts, expositions, descriptions); and stories of what to do about them (stories of choice and value, such as sermons, instructions, and commercials).

No study of behavior and society, let alone communications, can be fruitful in isolation from the context of symbol systems that define what exists, what is important, and what is right, and of stories that illuminate how things work, what things are, and what to do about them. Our research project since 1967, called Cultural Indicators, addressed the study of mass-produced symbol systems, particularly television and the conceptions it tends to cultivate, on these terms.

The Cultural Indicators approach involves a three-pronged research strategy. (For a more detailed description, see Gerbner, 1973.) The first prong, called institutional process analysis, is designed to investigate the formation of policies directing the massive flow of media messages. Because of its direct policy orientation, this research is the most difficult to fund and, therefore, the least developed. (For examples, see Gerbner 1969, 1972.) More directly relevant to our present focus are the other two prongs we call message system analysis and cultivation analysis. Both relate to—and help develop—a conception of the dynamics of the cultivation process.

In the second prong, we record week-long samples of

network television drama each year and subject these systems of messages to rigorous and detailed content analysis in order to delineate selected features of the television world. We consider these the potential lessons television cultivates, and use them as a source of questions for the cultivation analysis.

In the third prong, we examine the responses given to these questions (phrased to refer to the real world) among those with varying amounts of exposure to the world of television. (Nonviewers are too few and demographically too scattered for serious research purposes.) We want to determine whether those who spend more of their time with television are more likely to answer these questions in ways that reflect the potential lessons of the television world (give the "television answer") than are those who watch less television but are otherwise comparable (in terms of important demographic characteristics) to the heavy viewers. We have used the concept of "cultivation" to describe the contributions television viewing makes to viewer conceptions of social reality. "Cultivation differential" is the margin of difference in conceptions of reality between light and heavy viewers in the same demographic subgroups.

In the balance of this chapter I shall describe message system and cultivation analyses as the closely related and best-developed parts of the Cultural Indicators approach to contextual analysis.

Message System Analysis

Personal tastes and selective habits of cultural participation limit each of us to risky and usually faulty extrapolation about the media experiences of large and diverse populations. The very qualities that draw our attention to exciting plots and to information relevant to our own interests detract from our ability to make representative observations about the composition and structure of large message systems.

What distinguishes the analysis of public, mass-mediated message systems as a social scientific enterprise from other types of observation, commentary, or criticism is the attempt to deal comprehensively, systematically, and generally rather than specifically and selectively or ad hoc with patterns of collective cultural life. This approach makes no prior assumptions about such conventionally demarcated functions as "information" and "entertainment," or "high culture" and "low culture." Style of expression, quality of representation, artistic excellence, or the nature of

individual experience associated with selective exposure to and participation in mass-cultural activity are not relevant for this purpose. What is informative, entertaining (or both), good, bad, or indifferent by any standard are selective judgments applied to messages in a way that may be quite independent from the functions they actually perform in the context of message systems touching the collective life of a large and diverse population.

It should be stressed again that the characteristics of a message system are not necessarily the characteristics of individual units composing the system. The purpose of the study of a system *as system* is to reveal features, processes, and relationships expressed in the whole, not in its parts. Unlike most literary or dramatic criticism or, in fact, most personal cultural participation and judgment, message system analysis focuses on the record of industrial behavior and its symbolic functions in their cultural context.

Message system analysis thus investigates industrial behavior in message mass production for large and heterogeneous populations. The analysis suggests collective and common features and functions of public image formation. The scheme and methods of analysis are designed to inquire into those dimensions of mass media discourse that identify elements of *existence, importance, values,* and *relationships.* (For a description of the terms and measures of analysis, see Gerbner 1985a.)

These indicators will not tell us what individuals think or do. But they will tell us about currents in the mass-produced symbolic context in and through (and in response to) which most people think and act in common. We now turn to the mainstream of those currents, television. The question we address in this prong of the Cultural Indicators design concerns the dynamics of what we call cultivation: What perspectives and conceptions does living with television tend to cultivate in its viewers?

Television in Society

Television is a centralized system of story telling. It is part and parcel of our daily life. Its drama, commercials, news, and other programs bring a relatively coherent world of common images and messages into every home. Television cultivates from infancy the very predispositions and preferences that used to be acquired from other "primary" sources. Transcending historic barriers of literacy and mobility, television has become the primary common source

of socialization and everyday information (mostly in the form of entertainment) of an otherwise heterogeneous population. The repetitive pattern of television's mass-produced messages and images forms the mainstream of a common symbolic environment.

Many of those who now live with television have never before been part of a shared national culture. Television provides, perhaps for the first time since preindustrial religion, a daily ritual of highly compelling and informative content that forms a strong cultural link between elites and other publics. The heart of the analogy of television and religion, and the similarity of their social functions, lie in the continual repetition of patterns (myths, ideologies, "facts," relationships, and so on) that serve to define the world and legitimize the social order.

Compared to other media, television provides a relatively restricted set of choices for a virtually unrestricted variety of interests and publics. Most of its programs are by commercial necessity designed to be watched by nearly everyone in a relatively nonselective fashion. Surveys show that amount of viewing follows the style of life of the viewer and is relatively insensitive to programming. The audience is always the group available at a certain time of the day, the week, and the season, regardless of the programs. Most viewers watch by the clock and either do not know what they will watch when they turn on the set or follow established routines rather than choose each program as they would choose a book, a movie, or an article. Nielsen studies show that less than 4% of prime time viewers switch channels during programs and 7% switch during commercials. Choice is also limited by the fact that many programs designed for the same broad audience tend to be similar in their basic makeup and appeal, regardless of title.

According to the 1984 Nielsen Report, in the typical home the television set is in use for about seven hours a day, and actual viewing by persons over two years old averages over four hours a day. With that much viewing, there can be little selectivity. And the more people watch, the less selective they can and tend to be. Most regular and heavy viewers watch more of everything. Researchers who attribute findings to news viewing or to preference for action programs, and so on, overlook the fact that most of those who watch more news or action programs watch more of all types of programs, and that, in any case, many different types of programs manifest the same basic features.

Therefore, from the point of view of the cultivation of

relatively stable and common images, the pattern that counts is that of the total pattern of programming to which total communities are regularly exposed. That is the pattern of settings, casting, social typing, actions, and related outcomes that cuts across most program types and defines the world of television—a world in which many viewers live so much of their lives that they cannot avoid absorbing or dealing with its recurrent patterns, probably many times each day. These are the patterns established through message system analysis. We have used the term cultivation to describe the contributions these patterns make to viewer conceptions and behaviors. The elements of cultivation do not originate with television or appear out of a void. Layers of demographic, social, personal, and cultural contexts also determine the shape, scope, and degree of the contribution television is likely to make. Yet, the "meanings" of those contexts and factors are in themselves aspects of the cultivation process. That is, while a viewer's sex, or age, or class may make a difference, television helps define what it means, for example, to be an adolescent female member of a given social class. The interaction is a continuous process (as is cultivation) taking place at every stage, from cradle to grave.

Thus, television neither simply "creates" nor "reflects" images, opinions, and beliefs. Rather, it is an integral aspect of a dynamic process. Institutional needs and objectives influence the creation and distribution of mass-produced messages that create, fit into, exploit, and sustain the needs, values, and ideologies of mass publics. These publics, in turn, acquire distinct identities as publics partly through exposure to the ongoing flow of messages. The point is that cultivation is not conceived as a unidirectional but rather more like a gravitational process. The angle and direction of the "pull" depends on where groups of viewers and their styles of life are with reference to the center of gravity, the "mainstream" of the world of television. Each group may strain in a different direction, but all groups are affected by the same central current. Cultivation is thus part of a continual, dynamic, ongoing process of interaction among messages and contexts. This holds even though (and in a sense especially because) the hallmark of the process is either relative stability or slow change.

As successive generations grow up with television's version of the world, the former and traditional distinctions become blurred. Cultivation thus implies the steady entrenchment of mainstream orientations in most cases and the systematic but also imperceptible modification of previous

orientations in others; in other words, affirmation for the believers *and* indoctrination for deviants. That is the process we call "mainstreaming."

The observable manifestations of the process vary as a function of the environmental context and other attributes of the viewer. In order to explain these variations, however, it is necessary to describe the central components of the symbolic environment composed by television. I shall return to the concept of "mainstreaming" after a brief consideration of the values, ideology, demography, and action structure of the television mainstream itself. These findings come from our message system analysis, described above, based on annual samples of prime time television since 1976.

The World of Television

The world of prime time is animated by vivid and intimate portrayals of about 300 major dramatic characters a week, mostly stock types, and their weekly rounds of dramatic activities. Familiar and often realistic though that world may appear, it is, in fact, far from the reality of anything but consumer values and the perspective of social power. Men outnumber women at least three to one, and women are younger (but age faster) than the men they meet. Young people (under 18) comprise one-third and older people (over 65) one-fifth of their true proportion in the population. Similarly, blacks on television represent three-fourths and Hispanics one-third of their share of the U.S. population, and a disproportionate number are minor rather than major characters.

The point is *not* that culture should duplicate real-life statistics. It is rather that the direction and thrust of cultural amplification or neglect provides a clue to the treatment of social types, groups, and values, and yields suggestions for cultivation analysis. For example, the prominent and stable overrepresentation of well-off white men in the prime of life dominates prime time and indicates a relatively restrictive view of women's and minority opportunities and rights. The myth of the middle class as the all-American norm pervades the world of television. Nearly seven out of ten television characters appear in the "middle-middle" of a five-way classification system. Most of them are professionals and managers. Blue-collar and service work occupies 67% of all Americans but only 10% of television characters.

In the world of prime time, the state acts mostly to

fend off threats to law and order in a mean and dangerous world. Enforcing the law of that world takes nearly three times as many characters as the number of all blue-collar and service workers. The typical viewer of an average week's prime time programs encounters seemingly realistic and intimate (but usually false) representations of the life and work of 41 law enforcers, 23 criminals, 12 doctors, 7 lawyers, and 3 judges, but only one engineer or scientist and very few blue-collar workers. Again, nearly everybody appears to be comfortably managing on an "average" income of the mythical norm of "middle class."

But threats abound. Crime in prime time is at least ten times as rampant as in the real world. An average of five to six acts of overt physical violence per hour menace over half of all major characters. However, pain, suffering, and medical help rarely follow this mayhem. Symbolic violence demonstrates power, not therapy; it shows who can get away with what against whom. The dominant white men in the prime of life are more likely to be victimizers than victims. Conversely, old, young, and minority women, and young boys, are more likely to be victims rather than victimizers. The analysis of content data as a message system rather than as isolated incidents of violence or sex, for example, makes it possible to view these acts in context as representing social relationships and the distribution (as well as symbolic enforcement) of the structure of power according to television.

The stability and consistency of basic patterns over the years is one of their most striking (but not surprising) features. A central cultural arm of society could hardly avoid reflecting (and cultivating) some of its basic structural characteristics, as well as more specific institutional positions and interests. While television has obviously changed on many levels (e.g., there have been ebbs and flows in the popularity and distribution of various genres, new production values, visible but token minority representation, and many short-lived trends and fads), these changes are superficial. The underlying values, demography, ideology, and power relationships have manifested only minor fluctuations with virtually no significant deviations over time, despite the actual social changes that have occurred.

Modes of Cultivation Analysis

The findings of the message system analysis form the conceptual basis for survey questions asked of large and

representative groups of respondents. Different response patterns between matched groups of heavy and light viewers (if any) define the extent to which television tends to cultivate viewer conceptions. Three analytical strategies have been developed. First, analyses of the extent to which regular exposure to certain "facts" on television cultivates their acceptance as facts. Second, what are some extrapolations from those facts to more general images, assumptions, and orientations? Third, how are these "lessons" incorporated into diverse frameworks of knowledge and expectations?

Clear-cut divergencies between television "facts" and independently observable reality provide convenient tests of cultivation, that is, of whether television or the "real world" version pervades viewers' conceptions. For example, we have noted that television drama tends to underrepresent older people. While those over 65 constitute the fastest growing segment of the real-world population, heavy viewers are more likely to feel that the elderly are a "vanishing breed"—that compared to 20 years ago there are fewer of them, that they are in worse health, and that they don't live as long—all contrary to fact (Gerbner, 1980).

As another example, consider how likely television characters are to encounter violence compared to the rest of us. Well over half of all major characters on television are involved each week in some kind of violent action. While FBI statistics have clear limitations, they indicate that in any one year less than 1% of people in the United States are victims of criminal violence. Accordingly, we have found considerable support for the conclusion that heavy exposure to the world of television cultivates exaggerated perceptions of the number of people involved in violence in any given week (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980; Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, Morgan, & Jackson-Beeck, 1979), as well as numerous other inaccurate beliefs about crime and law enforcement.

In these cases, we build upon the patterns revealed through message system analysis (say, concerning age and sex roles, occupations, prevalence of certain actions, etc.) and ask viewers questions that tap what they assume to be the facts of real life with regard to these patterns.

Investigation of the cultivation process is not limited to the lessons of television "facts" compared to real-world statistics. Some of the most interesting and important topics and issues for cultivation analysis involve the symbolic transformation of patterns of content into more general assumptions and expectations. These are the second-order associations in which the television "facts" (evidently

absorbed quite regularly) become the bases for broader perspectives and thus sources of values and of ideologies. Hawkins and Pingree (1982) call this the cultivation of "value systems."

One example of this is what we have called the "mean world" syndrome. Our message data say little directly about either the selfishness or altruism of people, and there are certainly no real world statistics about the extent to which people can be trusted. Yet, we have found that one "lesson" viewers derive from exposure to the violence-saturated world of television is that in such a mean and dangerous world, most people "cannot be trusted," and that most people are "just looking out for themselves" (Gerbner et al., 1980). We have also found that the differential ratios of symbolic victimization among women and minorities on television cultivates different levels of insecurity among their real-life counterparts, a "hierarchy of fears" that confirms and tends to perpetuate their dependent status (Morgan, 1982).

Another example of extrapolated assumptions relates to the image of women. The dominant majority status of men on television does not mean that heavy viewers ignore daily experience and underestimate the number of women in society. But it does mean that most of them absorb the implicit assumptions that women have more limited abilities and interests than men. Most groups of heavy viewers—with other characteristics held constant—score higher on our "sexism scale."

Other "second-order" extrapolations from content patterns have also led to fruitful discoveries of political import. For example, we have argued that as television seeks large and heterogenous audiences, its messages are designed to disturb as few as possible. Therefore, they tend to "balance" opposing perspectives, and to steer a "middle course" along the supposedly nonideological mainstream. We have found that heavy viewers are significantly and substantially more likely to label themselves as being "moderate" rather than either "liberal" or "conservative" (see Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1982, 1984).

Finally, we have observed a complex relationship between the cultivation of general orientation or assumptions about "facts" of life and more specific personal expectations. For example, television may cultivate exaggerated notions of the prevalence of violence and risk but the level of personal expectations depends on the neighborhood of the viewers. Suburban viewers have lower, and inner city viewers higher, expectations of personal encounters with violence. Television's contribution to their expectations

differs in amount, and sometimes even in direction. (See Gerbner et al., 1980.) Different groups may hold the same assumptions about the "facts" but relate them to different situations in different ways. This brings us back to the cultivation pattern we call "mainstreaming."

Mainstreaming

As we have seen, a wide variety of factors produce systematic and theoretically meaningful variations in cultivation. We have named the most general and important of these patterns "mainstreaming." The "mainstream" can be thought of as a relative commonality of outlooks and values that exposure to recurrent content features of the television world tends to cultivate. By mainstreaming we mean the expression of that commonality by heavy viewers in those demographic groups whose light viewers hold divergent views. In other words, group differences that can be associated with other cultural, social, and political characteristics of these groups may be diminished or even absent from the responses of heavy viewers in the same groups. Groups holding divergent positions as light viewers may appear to "converge" on the television mainstream from different and even opposite directions.

For example, as I have noted, the overall amount of television viewing is significantly associated with the tendency to report that most people are just looking out for themselves, you can't be too careful in dealing with them, and people would take advantage of you if they had a chance. These items form our "Mean World Index."

The "Mean World Syndrome," as measured by scores on the Mean World Index, is strongest for respondents who have had some college education—those who are otherwise (as light viewers) the *least* likely to express interpersonal mistrust. However, as a group nonwhites score higher than whites on the Mean World Index, reflecting a relatively insecure perspective. Yet there is a slight negative association among nonwhites between television viewing and this index, suggesting that television may play an ameliorating role in their anxieties. The relationship for whites, however, is the opposite. For the majority of (white) viewers, therefore, television tends to exacerbate fears and anxieties. The two groups of heavy viewers "converge" on the mainstream.

Thus, the heavier viewers of those groups who otherwise are *least* likely to hold television-related views of suspicion and mistrust are *most* likely to be influenced

toward the relatively suspicious and mistrustful "mean world" television view. Those who are most likely to hold a view already in the mainstream show little or no cultivation difference, while those who hold views that diverge from the television view may be "brought back" to the mainstream.

Reflecting its tendency to balance divergent views and present a broadly acceptable political orientation, television also blurs traditional political differences. Significantly more heavy than light viewers of all political persuasions call themselves "moderate." Heavy viewers are less likely to say they are conservative or liberal except among Republicans where, in a typical mainstreaming pattern, there is an extremely low number of liberals among light viewers while among heavy viewers the number approaches the general level of liberals in the mainstream.

On the surface, mainstreaming appears to be a "centering" of political and other tendencies. However, a look at the actual positions taken in response to questions about specific political issues shows that the mainstream does not always mean "middle of the road." When we analyzed responses to questions about attitudes and opinions on such topics as racial segregation, homosexuality, abortion, minority rights, and other issues that have traditionally divided liberals and conservatives, we found that division mostly among those who watch little television. Among heavy viewers, liberals and conservatives take a mainstream position closer to each other. On most political issues these positions, as well as those of the moderates, lean toward the conservative stance. The tilt to the right is due in most instances to the erosion (and in some the virtual collapse) of the typical liberal opinion among self-styled, heavy-viewing liberals. We have also noted (Gerbner et al., 1982, 1984) that while the mainstream runs toward the right on political issues, it leans towards a populist stance on economic issues, as might be expected of a consumer market oriented commercial perspective to which heavy viewers are most exposed.

Mainstreaming has been found to explain differences in within-group patterns in terms of the cultivation of images of violence (Gerbner et al., 1980), conceptions of science and scientists (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1981a), health-related beliefs and practices (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1981b), sex-role stereotypes (Gerbner & Signorielli, 1979; Morgan, 1982), views of racial and sexual minorities (Gross, 1984), religion and television (Gerbner et al., 1984), as well as ways in which television relates to academic achievement (Morgan & Gross, 1982).

Our theory of cultivation, therefore, is an attempt to explain the dynamics of television in the context of symbolic action, story telling, institutional structures, message systems, and the contributions all these make to human mentalities in transaction with a variety of other social processes. It is consistent with Shotter's emphasis (Chapter 11 this volume) on the formative functions of discourse, and Meyrowitz's focus (Chapter 12 this volume) on the interactions between media content and interpreter response, although it redefines the epistemological implications of the latter. Examinations of the effects of media messages on real-life behavior, or of the extent to which media images reflect reality, do not imply a dichotomy between media and reality but, on the contrary, make media parts and shapers of reality. The cultivation of conceptions of "facts" (the first mode of cultivation) and of more general perspectives and values (second-order cultivation) shape behavior in ways that not only respond to independently ascertained facts and values but also add to them.

A principal contribution of the contextualist paradigm is its historically inspired and empirically demonstrated dynamic explanation of the broadest contexts of meaningful human action. In line with the main themes of all three chapters in this section, contextualism fills a gap in the study of language and communication by bridging many of the artificially created analytical dichotomies that impede progress in the current ferment in the field (see, e.g., the contribution of Georgoudi & Rosnow, 1985b, to the debate on that ferment). In the area of media research the contextualist approach, which I tried to illustrate with the Cultural Indicators project, offers the promise of further development in theory and methodology toward the understanding of symbolic functions in an increasingly centrally mass-produced, organically composed, and ritualistically used media environment.