

Television and its Viewers

Cultivation Theory and Research

James Shanahan and Michael Morgan



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

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

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First published 1999

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

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

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

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Shanahan, James.

Television and its viewers: Cultivation theory and research
/ James Shanahan and Michael Morgan.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

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

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

PN1992.6.S417 1999

302.23'45–dc21 98–48327 CIP

ISBN 0 521 58296 2 hardback

ISBN 0 521 58755 7 paperback

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Foreword by George Gerbner What Do We Know?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

GEORGE GERBNER

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