CULTIVATION ANALYSIS

New Directions in Media Effects Research

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Epilogue:

Advancing on the Path of Righteousness (Maybe)

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Research rarely advances in a straight line. As I reflect on the journey cultivation analysis has taken so far, and suggest some guideposts for "advances" on its path, I must confess that I have also learned from the "deviations."

Cultivation is what a culture does. That is not simple causation, though culture is the basic medium in which humans live and learn. Cultivation rarely brings change except between generations and regions or among styles of life of which it is more or less a part. Cultivation is not the sole (or even frequent) determinant of specific actions, although it may tip a delicate balance, mark the mainstream of common consciousness, and signal a sea change in the cultural environment. Strictly speaking, cultivation means the specific independent (though not isolated) contribution that a particularly consistent and compelling symbolic stream makes to the complex process of socialization and enculturation.

Leading up to that special meaning, and to some desiderata for its study, I recall the original impetus and continuing concerns that gave rise to the development, definitions, and distinctions of the concept of cultivation. They stemmed from dissatisfaction with the narrowly conceived tactical emphasis of post–World War II communications research, incapable of addressing broader problems of culture. They

continued with a concern over developments that challenged conceptions of democracy in communications. The two merged in long-term research under many different auspices but shared a common interest in addressing broader problems relevant to general acculturation and public policy.

The path of that research, I argue, should follow certain specific directions and touch on certain specific considerations. Other chapters in this volume may imply or demonstrate different conclusions. That internal dialogue cannot help but add the right note to this volume: "Advances" refers to the hypotheses we are advancing and not to final destinations. Nevertheless, in research, as in life, good hypotheses, euphemistically called theories, are the only testable guides to action and, therefore, more reliable than certainties. I believe in magic. Unlocking incredible riches through music and dance, conjuring up visions of the unseen through art, creating worlds of imagination and fact through poetry, songs, and stories – that is the essential magic of human life.

Storytelling is my shorthand for that magic. It is what makes humans out of members of the species Homo sapiens. We are the only creatures I know of who live in a world much wider than the threats and gratifications of the immediate environment. It is a world erected through the stories we tell. These are stories called art, science, religion, law, statecraft, and many other things that have been excessively differentiated as if they all had totally different functions. They add up to a historically evolving, organically interrelated, seamless symbolic web called culture.

I was struck with (and have often quoted) the statement attributed to Scottish patriot Andrew Fletcher who said that if he were permitted to write all the ballads, he need not care who makes the laws of a nation. Ballads, songs, tales, gestures, and images make up the unique design of the human environment. All animals "behave" but only humans *act* in a world of towering symbolic constructions.

Culture is a system of messages and images that regulates and reproduces social relations. It introduces us into roles of gender, age, class, vocation; gives us models of conformity and targets for rebellion; provides the range of personalities, temperaments, mentalities said to be our "characteristics"; helps us rise to selfless acts of courage and sacrifice; and makes us accept (and perpetrate) repression and slaughter of unknown people assigned to the appropriate categories of barbarians and enemies.

Culture is a symbolic organization that cultivates our conceptions of existence, priorities, values, and relationships. We derive from it notions of what is; what is important; what is good, bad, or endowed with other qualities; and what is related to what. Its stories tell us how things work, what things are, and what we can or should do about them. Culture provides the overall framework in which we imagine what we do not encounter directly, and interpret what we do encounter directly. It is the context in which experience becomes consciousness. Culture, then, is a system of stories and other artifacts – increasingly mass-produced – that mediates between existence and consciousness of existence, and thereby contributes to both.

The decisive transformation in the quality of human life was the industrial revolution. That was – and is – largely a cultural transformation. Printing begins the industrialization of storytelling. It makes possible the formation of the literate, press-based publics thought to be necessary for self-government. Freedom of expression and of selection is the key requirement for government reasonably representative of competing and conflicting interests. Democratic theory is thus based on the freedom of choice that print and other selectively used media make possible. That may be one reason why liberal and even some radical scholars cling to traditional notions of selective use and exposure even when new developments in telecommunications erode these processes and short-circuit conventional theories of democracy – and of research.

The mass production of messages exposes large and diverse groups to distant sources of stories produced to the specifications of industrial organizations for commodity and political markets. I wrote in 1958 that in the "quest for the *system* behind the facts and forms of mass communication, the media analyst regards content as expressive of social relationships and institutional dynamics, and as formative of social patterns." And: ". . . mass media content bears the imprint of concrete circumstances of its creation. This includes such things as the external outlook and internal dynamics of the producing industry; its relationship to competitors; its control over resources, facilities of production and distribution, the position of its decision makers in the industrial structure; their relationships to audiences, markets, advertising sponsors."

The analysis of mass-produced message systems then has three main objectives. First it yields clues about the outlook and de facto policies of social systems and industrial organizations in the cultural field. It scans the record of industrial behavior in culture. Second, it investigates

that record as a system expressive of human potentials, social relations, and values. Neglecting full analysis of that system ("content analysis"), as behaviorally oriented communications researchers often do, limiting their search to measurable consequences of their uses ("effects"), ignores the richest revelations of what a particular culture considers important, relevant, and right, simply because it is not easily observed in action. The third objective, however, is to set the stage for eliciting action indicative of such consequences as can be observed. This objective is based on the belief that implicit in large and aggregated systems of messages are assumptions, contexts, and points of view indicative of cultural contributions to much of what we think and do. That is the task of cultivation analysis.

Trying to distinguish the study of communications as a basic cultural inquiry apart from the dominant research paradigm of persuasion and other forms of tactical manipulation, I stressed in 1966

> the limitations the primarily tactical approach imposes on theory. Some of these limitations are inherent in approaching communications from a point of view which, as an historical phenomenon, is itself rooted in the manipulative pressures of modern society. A recent formulation . . . characteristically defined the study of communications as "the study of ways of arranging stimuli to produce desired responses by the organism." This conception not only fails to define communication but defines it out of existence. It blurs the distinction between communication and other types of social interaction. The researcher might as well study pushing, pulling, shoving, or feeding, or any tactics intending to "produce desired responses." It becomes irrelevant whether or not the transaction involves communication. What really happens as a consequence of "arranging stimuli" is also secondary. The basic question is: did the tactic "produce desired responses," or did it not? . . . Another theoretical difficulty is that the approach can, at best, yield a long and unwieldy list of "do's and don'ts" which must then be related to an almost infinite range of situations and objectives . . .
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> Underlying the confusion of the study of communications with that of assorted tactics has been the excessive concern with usually short-term, private, and personal effects, conceived as behavior change—such as the adoption of a new practice, the gaining of a vote, the sale of a new product. This preoccupation has obscured not only the concept of communication as a special type of social interaction, but also the meaning of effect. Equating effect with change tended to inhibit investigation of the massive historical and structural continuities between communications, the nature and composition of message systems, and corresponding systems of social relations. What could be observed, and was indeed seized upon as something surprising and significant, was the complexity and difficulty of *changing* certain ideas and behavior patterns amidst generally unchanging social-cultural conditions . . .
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> An image (or behavior pattern) must be sustained to exist at all. Once a pattern is established and sustained, it affects messages and tactics as much as (or more than) the other way around. Specific attitude or behavior change may be the *least* significant indicator of effect unless it is part of a general transformation of the message-production and image-cultivation process and is, therefore, supported and reinforced by changing circumstances of life. . . . The history and dynamics of continuities, as well as of change, in the reciprocal relationships between social structures, message systems, and image structures *are* the "effects" of communication.

From that distinction between change as a measure of communications effect and the broad historic continuities that stable cultural currents cultivate came a recognition of television's unique characteristics in contemporary America. Twenty years of research on these characteristics led to the formulation, refinements, and extensions of cultivation analysis, as illustrated by the chapters in this book.

Publication of initial results, and debates concerning methodology, discussed in Chapter 1, resulted in both proliferation and confusion. Both have continued to the present day, prompting me to develop these cautionary notes. Perhaps somewhat dogmatically, but more to advance than to limit debate, I offer the points that follow. They suggest for the path of our "advances" six general considerations:

1. Television is a unique medium requiring a special approach to study.
2. Television messages form a coherent system, the mainstream of our culture.
3. Those message systems (content) provide clues to cultivation.
4. Cultivation analysis focuses on television's contributions over time to the thinking and actions of large and otherwise heterogenous social aggregates.
5. New technologies extend rather than deflect the reach of television's messages.
6. Cultivation analysis focuses on pervasive stabilizing and homogenizing consequences.

Television is a Unique Medium Requiring a Special Approach to Study

Television is the only medium that enters the home for over 7 hours a day and provides the environment of symbols into which children are born. Literacy, mobility, prior tastes, and predispositions are less relevant than they are for other media.

Other media are introduced when some values, tastes, and habits have already been acquired in the home, and after parents and other family members have played the role of principal storytellers about life and the world. However, with television the process is reversed. It is the child who is "inserted" at birth into a television environment. Television competes, usually successfully, with all other storytellers. The extent and depth of the child's immersion in the world of television depends on the style of life of the family much more than on persons or programs.

Viewers watch by the clock. Despite the proliferation of VCRs and increased cable penetration, they watch whatever is offered to them. The size of audiences available for broadcasters to sell to advertisers is determined by the time of the day, the week, the season. Programs compete for socially marginal (though financially crucial) advantage in relatively stable markets. Demographic shifts, industrial consolidation, and new advertising outlets may erode old market contours (e.g., the major networks) but those are also marginal changes of little or no consequence for content (as opposed to channel) selection. Selectivity is necessarily reduced, especially compared to other media. Our studies have shown that the mix of programs and the relative coherence of the television world, including cable and even most video cassettes, is such that the average to heavy viewer (about 3 consecutive prime-time hours or more per day) cannot escape repetitive exposure to the same thematic and dramatic program elements day after day. There has not been a medium or institution like this since preindustrial religion.

Before television, "predispositions" resulted from the learning of tastes and values in the home and school, and led to selective exposure to media. But early childhood exposure to television can influence, and continuous cultivation maintain, the formation of those predispositions. This makes the usual research considerations of selectivity, "before-and-after" exposure, "intervening variables," and predispositions themselves, along with all other factors influencing communication effects, less relevant than they are for other media.

Unlike other media, television is in the home and readily accessible when the child arrives; there is no before exposure condition. The theory of cultivation thus applies to television but not necessarily to other media that do not have television's unique characteristics of early and repetitive exposure, simultaneous and pervasive involvement of total communities (providing a common basis for communication and interaction), and the relatively nonselective exposure to thematically and dramatically coherent, stable, and widely shared message systems. Other media may present some similar and complementary messages, but if their systems of messages do not fit these criteria, they are unlikely to cultivate prevalent conceptions in the same universal way.

Television Messages Form a Coherent System, the Mainstream of Our Culture

Cultivation as a cultural process relates to coherent frameworks of knowledge and to underlying general concepts revealed in responses to certain questions, rather than to isolated facts or beliefs. These general perspectives are cultivated by exposure to the total and organically related world of television rather than exposure to individual programs and selections. Whatever ripple effects or confirming (or disconfirming) tendencies discrete programs and program "preferences" may have, it would be difficult to reliably attribute them to the programs and selections that presumably gave rise to them. Heavier viewers watch more of the general mix of programming than light viewers, regardless of their preferences. Except for rare and freakish viewing patterns, those who watch 3 or more hours of prime time (i.e, the majority of regular viewers) see much of the same mix of basic dramatic ingredients whether they say they prefer comedy, crime, or news. That is why a measure of total viewing rather than particular favorites or selections is the most efficient for purposes of cultivation analysis.

Even to the extent that viewers feel that they are being selective in favoring or avoiding certain types of programs, the thematic and dramatic elements making up different types and genres of programs are often quite similar. In cultivation analysis we should ignore plot configurations and formal variety as—while perhaps aesthetically and morally satisfying—concealing by their surface novelty the underlying uniformity of the basic "building blocks" of the television world: thematic structure, interaction patterns, social typing, and fate (success-

failure, violence-victimization, etc.) meted out to the different social types. These over-arching elements expose large communities over long periods of time to a coherent structure of conceptions about life and the world. The investigation of this structure is the principal aim of cultivation analysis.

The coherence and stability of the symbolic structure of the television world is not due to the lack of creativity and talent producing it. It is an expression of the coherence and stability of the commercial and sociopolitical constraints on the industry. "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion . . . or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press. . . ." states the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. But commercial broadcasting rests on laws making advertising a tax-deductible business expense, thus both establishing the functional equivalent of state religion and surrendering the press to the plutocracy of market concentrations.

The broadcasting-advertising industries depend on the profitable marketing of commodities and the existence of enabling and protective legislation. The only abridgment they fight is of their freedom of unrestricted marketing. Despite much lip-service about First Amendment rights, a proposal to tax advertising in a state brings threats of a blackout depriving its people of that sacred right. The need to sustain favorable and preempt or counter any other form of legislation and pressure, and to serve the largest markets at the least cost in a competitive environment, makes program production conform to exacting specifications underlying its surface novelty. Many of these specifications were embodied in the television codes. Many more are pragmatically derived. Our annual monitoring has found striking stability and similarity among networks and across genres in the dramatic "building blocks" of thematic and action structure, demographic characterizations, and the associations of different social types with different outcomes of power vs. vulnerability, and so on.

Steady repetitive exposure to these structural components tends to cultivate stable images of society and the self. Some of these images may be held in common and some may vary among subgroups of the viewing population. For example, the relative vulnerability of minority groups as portrayed on television, compared to the relatively powerful portrayal of the dominant groups, may cultivate greater insecurity and dependence among the former. Such socialization into a power structure is more likely to stem from the coherent and interrelated symbolic

structure to which most viewers are constantly exposed than from any specific programs, idiosyncratic viewing, or selective habits. The existence of this coherent, mainstream system of messages is thus the basic "medium" of cultivation. It can best be measured by total amounts of exposure to the prevalent interrelated program mix rather than partial exposure to presumed preferences and selections.

Analysis of Television's Message Systems Provides Clues to Cultivation

Survey questions used in cultivation analysis should reflect the over-arching content configurations embedded in television's message systems presented to large groups of viewers over long periods of time, usually since infancy. Helter-skelter and exploratory questioning may be useful for a variety of theoretical and serendipitous purposes but do not test cultivation theory. The use of such data, or the comparison of responses of those who claim to prefer or view this and that type of programming, instead of measures of total viewing, is likely to yield confusing, contradictory, and misleading results.

Lines of questioning derived mainly from "real world" considerations, probing the cultivating characteristics of "informative" (i.e., realistic) styles, and interpreting content information fairly literally (sometimes called *first-order cultivation*) can lead to fruitful and interesting results. But I believe that equally important are the symbolic transformations (sometimes called *second-order cultivation*—a term that can be misleading) that exhibit the special power of symbolic life over and above verisimilitude. That is the special characteristic of terms of discourse to shift from specific cases to general classes and to be understood symbolically rather than literally. For example, in the television world, men outnumber women at least three to one. Taken literally, this would suggest that heavy viewers would underestimate the number or proportion of women in the world, which is not the case. Relative underrepresentation in the fairly rigidly structured symbolic world, however, is not only a question of numbers. It translates into differential "quotas" of life chances, ranges of activity, stereotyped portrayals, and levels of occupations. Questions dealing with these symbolic transformations of numerical deviations from statistical norms tap dimensions most relevant to cultivation.

Cultivation Analysis Focuses on Television's Contributions Over Time to the Thinking and Actions of Large and Otherwise Heterogeneous Social Aggregates

Cultivation is a process driven by the common symbolic ritual engaging large communities over long periods of time. Other media uses and life circumstances interact with that process but do not counter or cancel the major thrust of its independent role in cultivating frameworks of knowledge. For example, our research has found that heavy viewers from different subgroups tend to share the television mainstream conception of science as a somewhat odd, risky, and ambivalent occupation. Those who also read science magazines have a generally more positive view of science. But the heavy viewers among them still share the relatively hostile mainstream conception. (This "convergence" of heavy viewers toward the dominant television image is what we call *mainstreaming.*)

Cultivation is usually revealed in such comparisons and correlations between those who watch more or less television within otherwise relatively homogeneous and comparable groups. The comparisons are with respect to patterns of responses elicited by questions relating to the most frequent common symbolic configurations of the television world. Largely irrelevant or confounding are surveys based on partial viewing, specialized groups such as college students, degrees of attention or intensity of viewing, beliefs about the presumed "reality" of the portrayals, reports about likes and dislikes or program preferences, and other mostly speculative qualities of viewing. Symbolic functions do not typically conform to received notions about long-term aggregate consequences of exposure. Not keenly or even consciously attended to background information may be more easily assimilated than the foreground. Fantastic stories from fairy tales to cartoons clearly demonstrate how things work behind the facade of appearances. Macho adventures and family comedies of prime time also convey a sense of reality (or at least realism) despite implausible plots and may be projected onto real life as much as factual and literally believable accounts of what things actually are. The crucial role of drama and fiction in socialization (and thus cultivation) may largely depend on the unique ability of contrived accounts to illuminate the otherwise invisible dynamics of human and social relationships. Accounts limited to events and facts believed to be real, and not just realistic, may become intelligible only in light of a tacit understanding of fictional dynamics. That is why controversies about and censorship of fiction have been historically so prominent and important in social control by cultural means.

However, emphasis on symbolic functions for large and enduring social aggregates does not necessarily imply across-the-board uniformity of the cultivation process. Again, the amount of viewing is an integral part of the style of life of the home and family. Therefore, factors other than programming or personal preference typically determine the amount of television watched. These factors must be controlled in the analysis before the responses of light and heavy viewers can be compared and related to the message systems of television.

When other controllable factors are kept constant, and total amount of viewing compared within fairly homogeneous subgroups of large and representative population samples, the results often reveal complex patterns. Clearly, conceptions of life cultivated by television relate as much to the demographic and social characteristics of large subgroups of viewers as to the characteristics of the message systems to which they are all exposed. The same portrayals are likely to cultivate different but interrelated sets of responses among viewers differentially related to images of life, including their own lives, regularly presented on television.

Researchers finding "no significant difference" between total populations of light and heavy viewers, with or without multiple controls, have at times failed to examine subgroups within those populations. Such subgroups have been shown to have different and even contrasting responses to the television questions, with heavier viewers of the different subgroups sharing a greater commonality of meanings than light viewers (mainstreaming).

Conversely, substantial light-heavy viewer differences can be spurious if other social and life-style factors to which they may be attributed are not held constant. Other chapters in this volume detail the varieties of cultivation. Here I only want to stress the importance of aggregate and appropriate measures related to the symbolic functions of television message systems, uncluttered by extraneous probes and theories (possibly interesting for other purposes) as tests of *cultivation.*

New Technologies Extend Rather Than Deflect the Reach of Television's Messages

Cable systems, new independent stations, time shifting, and video through VCRs, give viewers more control over program delivery. They may displace magazine reading and movie going. There is no evidence that they substitute for, rather than simply add to, overall television exposure. On the contrary, the evidence indicates that although new technologies and channels present alternative ways of delivering programs, movies, and commercials, and thus may cut into network revenues, they do not substantially alter audience exposure to *network-type* programs. In fact, they may extend such exposure into time periods that had been devoted to more diverse activities.

The most popular cable and video programs are even more sharply targeted at the most exploitable appeals than television can be. Networks must present some balance; they cannot repeat the same programs too often. Cable, VCR, and videocassette users can and do watch their favorite programs as often as they wish, and that is more often than they get it from the networks. Installing fancy new boutiques in the same old cafeteria, repackaging the same food supplied by the same old wholesalers, does not change the substance of what is consumed. New delivery techniques, none of which produces much new or original fare, provide the appearance of greater and more attractive choices but in fact promote greater concentration on fewer "block-busters" and other "best-sellers."

Always touted as the dawning of new freedoms, new technologies typically penetrate new markets and eventually concentrate money, power, and choices. To that extent, they may intensify rather than dilute the central thrust of the cultivation process.

Cultivation Analysis Focuses on Pervasive Stabilizing and Homogenizing Consequences

Culture is the symbolic process that cultivates enduring conceptual and behavior patterns essential to human socialization. A central, cohesive, and pervasive cultural mainstream, which is what I believe television to be, is likely to cultivate relatively compact and cohesive conceptual and behavior patterns. That means that television's independent contribution to such patterns is most likely to be in the direction of homogeneity within otherwise different and diverse social groups, eroding traditional social and other distinctions. Again, this does not mean sudden change or bland uniformity. It means that large and otherwise comparable groups of regular television viewers from different walks of life share a stable commonality of meanings compared to the lighter viewers in the same groups, and the commonality reflects their exposure to the television mainstream, eroding other traditional group differences.

The patterns of exposure reflect the structure and constraints of a relatively stable society. Therefore, the building blocks of the symbolic world (rather than its shifting plots and surface novelties) are most likely to cultivate stable and lasting conceptions of social reality. These conceptions may well be more rigid than reality itself. The findings of cultivation analysis show not only a tendency toward homogeneity and conventionality but also the inclination to resist and reject such change as may be occurring in other aspects of life and culture.

I have characterized these dynamics as the 3B's: cultivation implies the *blurring* of traditional distinctions, the *blending* of conceptions into television's cultural mainstream, and the *bending* of the mainstream to the institutional interests of the medium and its sponsors. Blurring, blending, and bending into increasingly massive, global, and comprehensive total cultural arms of the transnational social order is what I see as television's fundamental challenge to democratic theory and practice.

The historical circumstances in which we find ourselves have taken the magic of human life – living in a universe erected by culture – out of the hands of families and small communities. What has been a richly diverse hand-crafted process has become – for better or worse, or both – a complex manufacturing and mass-distribution enterprise. This has abolished much of the provincialism and parochialism, as well as some of the elitism, of the pretelevision era. It has enriched parochial cultural horizons. It also gave increasingly massive industrial conglomerates the right to conjure up much of what we think about, know, and do in common.

The First Amendment to the Constitution has been used to protect practical monopoly control over that process. It now shields what is a virtual establishment of the functional equivalent of religion, forbidden by the same amendment. Better understanding of that process, its dynamics, and long-range social policy implications, will make it at

least accessible to rational public discussion. Advances in cultivation analysis can help move us toward that goal.

Most other civilized countries have already addressed crucial issues of democratic culture in the television age and are experimenting with various responses to its paradoxes and dilemmas. Comparative study across cultures, our next task, and better understanding of the cultivation process under different sociocultural circumstances, will help liberate us from an unwitting acceptance of our present and largely invisible but binding set of controls.

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