Examining Cultivation Theory and Its Effect on Public Relations

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Abstract

This paper discusses cultivation theory which was introduced by George Gerbner in 1967. It explains the attitudes and beliefs of the general public formed by the mass media. Application of the theory in the public relations profession is also discussed through the portrayal of a company in the mass media setting and a warped sense of the world due to heavy television exposure.
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Introduction

Television exposure can affect one’s beliefs and attitudes about the world. This is particularly relevant when one is exposed to repeated violence on television. Cultivation theory explains how individuals’ television habits can form their attitudes. George Gerbner introduced cultivation theory in 1967, and it is an area of communication research that studies the relationships between television exposure and one’s attitudes and beliefs about the world (Shanahan, 2009). As a result, mainstreaming, resonance, and Mean World Syndrome were introduced. This paper explains cultivation theory and impact of mass media on how people view reality, specifically exposure to violence on television.

Description of the Theory

Cultivation results were first introduced in 1976 by George Gerbner and Larry Gross. In addition to presenting results showing relatively high levels of televised violence on the major networks, Gerbner and Gross showed that heavy television viewers, those who watched more than 5 hours of television per day, were more likely to overestimate the proportion of people involved in law enforcement and were more likely to say that others can’t be trusted and to overestimate their own chances of being a victim of violence (Shanahan, 2009). These findings coined the term mean world syndrome, in which heavy viewers are more likely to see the world as a scary, mean, violent, and dangerous place (Shanaha, 2009).

To understand the effects of television exposure and the viewer’s perception of the world, George Gerbner started The Cultural Indicators project (Shanahan, 2009). “Before cultivation theory was developed, most studies of media effects looked at whether individual messages or programs could produce some kind of change in audience attitudes or behaviors, typically in an
experimental context” (Morgan, 2009, p. 226). The studies looked for immediate effects following exposure to a single stimulus (Morgan, 2009). Cultivation theory differs from this because it views television as a coherent system of messages and questions if the system as a whole promotes a long-term change rather than an immediate one in the individual (Morgan, 2009).

Early cultivation theory research had a main focus with the issue of violence. At that time current research on television violence explored whether violent portrayals make viewers more aggressive, Gerbner and his colleagues tested the hypothesis heavy exposure to television cultivates exaggerated beliefs about the amount of violence in society (Morgan, 2009). Heavy exposure was considered five or more hours of television watching a day (Morgan, 2009). After the initial research the study was expanded to investigate other topics such as sex roles, images of aging, political orientations, environmental attitudes, images of science, health, religion, minorities, and occupations (Morgan, 2009).

Gerbner’s research found those who watch more television overestimate their chances of being involved in violence and express a heightened sense of danger. This creates a feeling of insecurity, apprehension, and mistrust when out in the real world (Morgan, 2009). “Above and beyond the effects of background factors, heavy viewers express a greater sense of apprehension and victimization than do light viewers in the same groups, and their images of crime more closely match television portrayals” (Morgan, 2009, p. 226). Due to these factors, television viewing became associated with a tendency toward conservatism (Shanahan, 2009). “For instance, several studies showed that heavy viewers were more likely to favor keeping women in “traditional” sex roles, which was not surprising given that women were outnumbered by men on television and often shown in traditional roles such as housewife, secretary, or nurse” (Shanahan,
Cultivation theory was also shown to garner less tolerance for groups that were not shown very much, such as gays and minorities (Shanahan, 2009).

Cultivation is not a linear, unidirectional, mechanical "effect" in the sense of a stimulus-response model but part of a continual, dynamic, ongoing process of interaction among messages and contexts (Morgan, 2009). The effects of television viewing relate to groups in different ways and individuals’ life situations and worldviews differ. “A wide variety of sociodemographic and individual factors produce sharp variations in cultivation patterns” (Morgan, 2009, p. 226).

Cultivation theory has been viewed as highly controversial due to its provocative approach. Hundreds of cultivation theories have been published since Gerbner’s and replications with children and adolescents have been carried out in over a dozen other countries, including Argentina, Australia, China, the Netherlands, South Korea, Sweden, Taiwan, and others (Morgan, 2009). These studies have failed to support cultivation theory.

One criticism against cultivation theory used statistical techniques to show that cultivation relationships would disappear if researchers controlled other important variables (Shanahan, 2009). Most cases showed cultivation relationships were reduced or limited when controls were applied. At the time of this criticism, Gerbner was reanalyzing data to specify where and when cultivation relationships would be stronger (Shanahan, 2009). The idea of mainstreaming emerged from this. Mainstreaming is the phenomenon in which groups that would otherwise differ on opinions and beliefs about issues become more similar to one another when they view television heavily (Shanahan, 2009). The idea is that television’s message system draws its heavy viewers closer to a mainstream position (Shanahan, 2009). Gerbner came to the conclusion that mainstreaming worked towards blurring views and ideology toward a
somewhat conservative mainstream that would be favored by the corporate-controlled media system (Shanahan, 2009).

Resonance is the combination of everyday reality and television providing double amount that resonates with the individual, which in turn amplifies cultivation (Shanahan, 2009, p.254). It was also a criticism against cultivation theory. The idea the criticism was based off of was that cultivation might really be an artifact of the fact that people living in high-crime areas might watch more television; thus, cultivation would be a spurious artifact of this three-way relationship (Shanahan, 2009). “In response to these criticisms, Gerbner and his colleagues found that fear of crime was actually enhanced by television viewing in the high-crime areas, a phenomenon they termed resonance” (Shanahan, 2009, p. 254). This term was meant to denote a phenomenon in which the lived experience of the individual would be confirmed in the television world, which resulted in higher cultivation relationships for those individuals (Shanahan, 2009).

Cultivation theory has begun to evolve in recent years. When Gerbner began investigating cultivation, there were three dominant television networks; now there are numerous cable channels available. Other sources of information exist that compete with television such as videogames, the Internet, and DVDs (Shanahan, 2009). Some people argue this could be an end for cultivation theory, however Gerbner argued the media world was still a corporate-controlled entity and that media industries would find ways to dominate the world of storytelling and connect it to advertising (Shanahan, 2009). Researchers are beginning to question whether exposure to specific genres of television produces cultivation effects. Others are looking at long-term questions, such as whether cultivation is a theory of social stasis, or how cultivation deals with social changes (Shanahan, 2009). Data sets exist from over 40 years ago, so researchers are beginning to speculate about television’s role in the processes of social change.
Application in Public Relations

The importance of a receiver’s attitudes and beliefs towards the world around them are something to consider in a campaign. Identifying the attitudes and beliefs of the receiver are essential when creating a message for a campaign; public relations campaign worker needs to understand the audience’s views and relate them to a successful campaign (Howard, 2014). Cultivation theory can have a negative effect on a business’s image. For example, if a company is associated with a negative image, the public will no longer associate said company with a good reputation or products (Howard, 2014). This results in a negative association with that company as a whole.

An example of a company affected by cultivation theory is BP. Before the oil spill in 2010, BP had a relatively clean image. A marketing campaign that summed up BP as “Beyond Petroleum” suggested the company was environmentally friendly (Howard, 2014). This slogan suggested alternative energy sources such as solar and wind. The general public viewed the company overall as environmentally friendly and conscious of the environment. In 2010, the Deepwater Horizon debacle became the worst oil spill in U.S. history and the public started to have a negative association with BP (Howard, 2014). Exposure to negative press regarding BP lead the public to have negative associations with the company, thus cultivation theory happens in the public relations world.

According to Reber and Chang (2003), this same principle is illustrated by the fact news coverage of violent crimes is more prevalent than coverage of other non-violent crimes despite the fact that violent crimes account for a much smaller percentage of crime than do non-violent crimes. This is also cultivated by television shows that depict violence. This is a result of mean
world syndrome, in which heavy viewers are more likely to see the world as a scary, mean, violent, and dangerous place (Shanahan, 2009). Heavy exposure to these situations leads the viewer to believe that they will face these same situations one day. For example, a person who watches a lot of *Law and Order: SVU* may believe that rape and murder will happen to them when they leave their house because that is what they see on the television show. This leads to warped attitudes and beliefs about the world.

**Conclusion**

Overall, cultivation theory affects the attitudes and beliefs that an individual has about the world. Gerbner found that exposure to the mass media can warp one’s perception of what is real in the world, and that can affect attitudes of the general public. This is displayed through mainstreaming, resonance, and mean world syndrome. Once cultivation theory is understood, one can determine what the public’s attitudes and beliefs may be. Any communicator, including public relations campaigners, can help maintain their company image to avoid any negative connotation. By understanding how the mass media affects attitudes and beliefs, a company can accomplish its goals and maintain a positive image.
References


