

## Cultivating Viewers

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James Shanahan and Michael Morgan. *Television and Its Viewers: Cultivation Theory and Research*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. xiii + 267 pages. \$57.95 (cloth); \$19.95 (paper).

A book on media effects is never so timely as now, a period (if we count the last five years or so) when school violence is tragically rampant. With adolescents planning mass attacks involving the shooting, maiming, and killing of their classmates, parents, community leaders, and academicians are looking for answers. One of the first places they have turned is toward the media. For example, educators, education researchers, and academic media experts have suggested that graphic depictions of violence during television viewing, video game playing and cinematically portrayed murders have each contributed to the surge of school violence. Perhaps they are right. Although many scholars have turned to cultivation theory for insight about media effects upon behavior, Shanahan and Morgan “set the record straight” by explicating what the theory really is. They explain, “cultivation is about the implications of stable, repetitive, pervasive and virtually inescapable patterns of images and ideologies that television provides” (5). In other words, cultivation theory is a “television as a system” approach suggesting that sustained exposure to a constant set of images cultivates our perceptions of the world. It does not prove or postulate that viewers will behave in accordance with what they see on TV, but that what they see might influence their perceptions of people, events, and phenomena.

So, cultivation theory would not say that the Columbine shootings occurred because kids watched a violent program and enacted it. It would suggest, however, that kids exposed to a pattern of violent images over a long period of time probably tend to believe that that is the way the world is. How do we know that what we view as audiences of the mass media, particularly television, is directly related to perceptions we carry with us on a daily basis as human beings? Shanahan and Morgan tackle this question in their book

covered. I want to make a special point about the "elusive simplicity" argument. The authors make an early admission that cultivation theory appears to be simplistic and incontestable, yet it has spurred on much intellectual exchange. Though this comment appears forthcoming, it does not prevent the authors from defending the theory. Their stated purpose is to comprehensively, systematically, and thoroughly examine and defend cultivation theory, pointing out its assumptions, developments, weaknesses, strengths, accomplishments, and prognosis.

In this review, I will provide a brief synopsis and critique of each of the book's ten chapters followed by a discussion of the intended audience and the book's suitability for classroom, professional and personal use.

In chapter 1, called "Origins," the authors poignantly remark, "if cultivation in form resembles water, its substance is stories" (13). They further contend that stories directly comment on the social order. According to the authors, cultivation research is concerned with three types of stories, related to work, what to do, and how things are. The chapter ends by introducing five major propositions related to cultivation theory and previews the remainder of the book. This chapter is fairly concise and offers a nice segue into the book.

Again the origins of cultivation research are discussed in chapter 2, but more extensively. Chapters 2 and 3 are titled "Methods of Cultivation: Assumptions and Rationale" and "Methods of Cultivation and Early Empirical Work." Shanahan and Morgan introduce the assumptions and the operational and conceptual definitions in chapter 2, and conclusions of the first wave of cultivation research from the 1960s to the 1980s in chapter 3. It is important to mention that these chapters really set the foundation for the meta-analysis to come. They explore what Gerbner meant by heavy and light viewership and how cultivation is measured as well as the types of audiences Gerbner says there are. Furthermore, the reader gets a sense of how later research built upon initial research concerning televised violence. As the chapter titles suggest, these chapters are dense with explanations of data analyses and methodological variances with few interstices for conceptual-theoretic observation.

Chapters 4 ("Criticism") and 5 ("Advancements in Cultivation Research") provide an overview of the pinpointed limitations of cultivation research, while trying to redeem the good qualities of the theory. The chapters could have been

called limitations and strengths. They were not called this, perhaps because the authors are true believers of the merits of cultivation theory so even the limitations and vices were converted to virtues.

Chapters 6 and 7, "The Bigger Picture" and "Mediation, Mainstreaming and Social Change," are a total of sixty-five pages (about a quarter of the book), which explain the results of the authors' meta-analysis of cultivation effects found in research. I suppose it is the longest segment of the book because this is the authors' shot at demonstrating they have a valuable contribution to this area of inquiry. It is the most well written, expansive, and informative section of the book. It was almost as if the authors really wanted to do just a meta-analytic book, but decided they should define, explain, and contextualize the state of cultivation research before moving into their analysis of it. It seems obvious they enjoyed writing this section and therefore, it stands out from the rest of the book as most illuminating. These two chapters end with the understanding that television effects research varies according to the political ideology, goals, and intent of each research team. However, the authors seem ambivalent, yet optimistic that although the data trends are "slowing down," the cultivation effects of long-term television exposure do influence social change.

In chapter 8 ("How Does Cultivation Work?") and 9 ("Cultivation and the New Media"), the authors delve into the social cognition literature to determine whether psychological processing of television is influenced by carefully cultivated and massaged images, then support this approach with discussion of "new media" such as tele-computing, interactive TV programming, Cable, and VCRs. They suggest that new media facilitate gradual participation in and consumption of socially controlled television. This is perhaps the weakest section of the book, but this may not be the fault of Shanahan and Morgan. The fact is that cultivation theory is statistically driven and too seldom informed by qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, and ethnography; thus there is no easy way to talk about subconscious iterations developed through sustained viewership. How can self-report data help us understand subconscious processes? If a survey participant can report signposts of experience, then isn't it true that the "Black Box" is no longer "Black" or that the unconscious is no longer unaware of itself? Even if we examine memory

effects or stored learning literature, we are only guessing what might be in the "Black Box."

Chapter 10, entitled, "Test Pattern," is the final chapter. It is the summary of the book and a venue for making final conclusions and future outlooks. I appreciated a brilliantly constructed closing that linked the UNESCO charter, also known as the "New World Information and Communication Order," to the central themes and propositions of cultivation research. Moreover, the discussion of the V-Chip as a misinformed "band-aid" solution to negative media effects was enlightening and appropriate. I wished more of this type of analysis had been prevalent throughout the book. The only limitation I detected in the final chapter was a rather underwhelming attempt to link narrativity to social construction of reality. This was mentioned in the first chapter and not well woven throughout the book.

*Television and Its Viewers: Cultivation Theory and Research* is written in captivating form. Much of the writing is accessible to all until you get to the methods chapters, which require at least a basic understanding of statistics. So, an advanced graduate student or expert will most likely understand the arguments best. This is a scholar's book that was probably not written for lay persons and therefore does not read like a popular trade book, but then few university press books (especially Cambridge University Press) do. I think that Shanahan and Morgan's work is passionately written, meticulous, and exemplary of thorough research. Seldom do critical theory scholars associate the cultivation theory research or any quantitatively driven approach with "real" critical theory focused on liberation from oppressive regimes. These authors make that claim legitimately.

By the end of the book, I was certain that Shanahan and Morgan were successful in advancing a comprehensive meta-analysis linking cultivation theory research, cultivation effects literature, and television viewing. They accomplished that goal well. I do not feel their overview and meta-analysis was unbiased, but they were conscientious about that in the opening chapter and admitted that that might not be the case. The book is missing the full breadth of literature it mentions in the opening chapter. There is some range, but as an interculturalist, I would have loved to see more on culture-centered cultivation analyses.

*Television and Its Viewers: Cultivation Theory and Research* is a bold and challenging text that would be suitable for a graduate level course on communication, social control, and the media. It is most accessible to media researchers and critical theorists concerned with media as an institution. My hat goes off to Shanahan and Morgan for a mammoth task very well done.

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