Cultivation Theory
of George Gerbner

What are the odds that you'll be involved in some kind of violent act within the next seven days? 1 out of 10? 1 out of 100? 1 out of 1000? 1 out of 10,000? According to George Gerbner, the answer you give may have more to do with how much TV you watch than with the actual risk you face in the week to come. Gerbner, former dean of the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, claims that heavy television users develop an exaggerated belief in "a mean and scary world." The violence they see on the screen cultivates a social paranoia that resists notions of trustworthy people or safe environments.

Like Marshall McLuhan, Gerbner regards television as the dominant force in shaping modern society. But unlike McLuhan who viewed the medium as the message, Gerbner is convinced that TV's power comes from the symbolic content of the real life dramas shown hour after hour, week after week. At its root, television dominates the environment of symbols, selling most of the stories, most of the time. Gerbner claims that people now watch television as they might attend church, "except that most people watch television more religiously."

What do they see in their daily devotions? According to Gerbner—violence. During the turmoil of the late 1960s, the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence suggested that violence is as American as cherry pie. Instead of being a deviant route to power, physical force and its threat are traditional ways people gain a larger slice of the American Dream. Gerbner says that violence "is the simplest and cheapest dramatic means to demonstrate who wins in the game of life and the rules by which the game is played." Those who are immersed in the world of TV dramas learn these 'facts of life' better than occasional viewers.

Gerbner's voice is only one of many that proclaims a link between communication media and violence. Critics have publicly warned against the chaotic effects of comic books, rock music, and video games as well as television. But
the man who for many years was the editor of the Journal of Communication thinks that TV is a special case. For almost two decades he spearheaded an extensive research program that monitored the level of violence on television, classified people according to how much TV they watch, and compiled viewer perceptions of potential risk and other sociocultural attitudes. His cultivation explanation of the findings is one of the most talked about and argued over theories of mass communication.

**AN INDEX OF VIOLENCE**

Alarmed parents, teachers, and critics of television assume that the portrayal of violence has been escalating. But is the level of dramatic aggression really on the rise? Gerber and his colleagues sought to develop an objective measure which would allow TV's friends and foes to discuss the trend on the basis of fact rather than feeling. They defined dramatic violence as "the overt expression of physical force (with or without a weapon, against self or others) compelling action against one's will on pain of being hurt and/or killed or threatened to be so victimized as part of the plot." The definition rules out verbal abuse, idle threats, and pie-in-the-face slapstick. But it includes the physical abuse presented in a cartoon format. When the coyote pursuing Roadrunner is flattened by a steamroller, or Batman dispatches the Joker's henchmen with a BAM! SOCK POW!, Gerber labels the scene as violent. He also counts auto crashes and natural disasters. From an artistic point of view, these events are no accident. The screenwriter inserted the trauma for dramatic effect. Characters die or are maimed just as effectively as if they'd taken a bullet in the chest.

For over a decade, Annenberg researchers randomly selected a week during the fall season and videorecorded every prime-time (8:00 to 12:30 a.m.) network show. They also recorded programming for children on Saturday and Sunday. (8:00 to 2:00 a.m.) After counting up the incidents that fit their definition, they gauged the overall level of violence with a formula that included the ratio of programs that scripted violence, the rate of violence in the programs that did, and the percentage of characters involved in physical harm and killing. They found that the annual index is remarkably stable.

**EQUAL VIOLENCE, UNEQUAL RISK**

Gerber reports that regardless of whether the dramas are Hill Street Blues, Miami Vice, L.A. Law, or dozens of forgettable shows cancelled after a thirteen-week run, the cumulative portrayal of violence varies little from year to year. Two-thirds of prime-time programs contain actual bodily harm or threatened violence. The Cosby Show and Cheers are not typical. Dramas that include violence average five traumatic incidents per viewing hour. Almost all of the weekend children's shows major in mayhem. They average twenty cases an hour. By the time the typical TV viewer graduates from high school, he or she has observed 13,000 violent deaths.

On any given week, two-thirds of the major characters are caught up in some kind of violence. Heroes are just as involved as villains, yet there is great inequality as to age, race, and gender of those on the receiving end of physical force. Old people and children are harmed at a much greater rate than young or middle-aged adults. In the pedaling order of "victimage," blacks and Hispanics are killed or beaten more than their Caucasian counterparts. Gerber notes that it's risky to be "other than clearly white." It's also dangerous to be female. The opening "lady in distress" scene is a favorite dramatic device to galvanize the hero into action. And finally, blue-collar workers "get in the neck" more often than white-collar executives.

If insurance companies kept actuarial tables on the life expectancy of television characters, they'd discover that the chance of a poor, elderly black woman's avoiding harm for the entire hour is almost nil. The symbolic vulnerability of minority-group members is even more striking given their gross underrepresentation in TV drama. Gerber's analysis of the world of television records that 50 percent of the people are white, middle-class males. Women are outnumbered by men three to one. Although one-third of our society is made up of children and teenagers, they appear as only 10 percent of the characters on prime-time TV shows. Two-thirds of the United States labor force have blue-collar or service jobs, yet that group comprises a mere 10 percent of the players on television. Blacks and Hispanics are only occasional figures, but the majority are by far the most excluded minority. Less than 5 percent of the dramatic roles are filled by actors over the age of sixty-five.

In sum, the Annenberg logs reveal that people on the margin of American society are put into a symbolic double jeopardy. Their existence is understated, but at the same time their vulnerability to violence is overplayed. When written into the script, they are often made visible in order to be a victim. Not surprisingly, these are the very people who exhibit the most fear of violence when the TV set goes off.

**ESTABLISHING A VIEWER PROFILE**

Equipped with the sure knowledge of TV drama's violent content, Gerber and his associates gathered together surveys of viewer behavior and attitudes. Although some later researchers have tried to create saturation exposure in an experimental setting, Gerber says the nature of his cultivation hypothesis makes testing in the laboratory impossible. He believes that the effects of heavy TV viewing can be seen only after years of slow buildup. The pervasive presence of television also rules out a control group. Gerber regards everyone as a consumer. His questions merely aim at distinguishing between "light" and "heavy" users.

Most of Gerber's work establishes a self-report of two hours a day as the
upper limit of light viewing. He labels heavy viewers as those who admit an intake of four hours or more. There are more heavy viewers, but each group makes up about one-fourth of the general population. Gerbner also refers to the heavy viewer as "the television type," a more benign term than the current "couch potato" with its twin allusions to steady diets of television and potato chips.

Gerbner claims that television types don't turn on the set in order to watch Roseanne or Dream Street. They simply want to watch television per se. Light viewers are more selective, turning the set off when a favorite program is over. Gerbner’s reason for distinguishing the audience is to test whether those with heavy viewing habits regard the world as more dangerous than those with occasional or light viewing habits. Cultivation theory predicts they do.

**PILOWING THE MIND: DEEP FURROWS VERSUS ONCE OVER LIGHTLY**

Believing that violence is the backbone of TV drama and knowing that people differ in how much TV they see, Gerbner sought to discover the “cultivation differential.” That’s his term for “the difference in the percent giving the ‘television answer’ within comparable groups of light and heavy viewers.” His annual survey targeted four attitudes:

1. **Chances of Involvement with Violence.** The question at the start of the chapter addresses this issue. Those with light viewing habits predict that their weekly odds of being a victim are one out of a hundred, those with heavy viewing habits fear the risk to be one out of ten. Actual crime statistics indicate that one out of 10,000 is more realistic. Of course the prediction of those with heavy viewing habits may be due to their greater willingness to justify physical aggression. Children who are habitual TV watchers agree that it’s "almost always all right [to hit someone] if you are mad at them for a good reason."

2. **Fear of Walking Alone at Night.** Not surprisingly, more women than men are afraid of dark streets. But for both sexes, the fear of victimization correlates with time spent in front of the tube. People with heavy viewing habits tend to overestimate criminal activity, believing it to be ten times worse than it really is. In actuality, muggers on the street pose less bodily threat than injury from cars.

3. **Perceived Activity of Police.** People with heavy viewing habits believe that 5 percent of society is involved in law enforcement. Their video world is populated with police, judges, and government agents. People with light viewing habits estimate a more realistic 1 percent. Gerbner's television type assumes that police officers draw their guns almost every day which is not true.

4. **General Mistrust of People.** Those with heavy viewing habits are suspicious of other people's motives. They subscribe to statements that warn people to expect the worst: "Most people are just looking out for themselves." "In dealing with others, you can’t be too careful." "Do unto others before they do unto you.

Gerbner calls this cynical mind-set the "mean world syndrome."

The Annenberg evidence suggests that the minds of heavy TV viewers become fertile ground for sowing thoughts of danger. If cultivation of the nonstop viewer does indeed occur, what’s the mechanism that plows a furrow in their brow? Gerbner presents two explanations of how cultivation takes place— mainstreaming and resonance.

**MAINSTREAMING**

Mainstreaming is Gerbner's word to describe the process of “blurring, blending and bending” that those with heavy viewing habits undergo. He thinks that through constant exposure to the same images and labels, television types develop a commonality of outlook. Radio stations segment the audience to the point where programming for left-handed truck drivers who bowl on Friday nights is a distinct possibility. But TV producers seek to “attract the largest possible audience by celebrating the moderation of the mainstream.” Television
homogenizes its audience so that those with heavy viewing habits share the
same orientations, perspectives, and meanings with each other. We shouldn't
ask how close this collective interpretation is to the mainstream of culture. Ac-
cording to Gerbner, television is the mainstream.

He illustrates the mainstream effect by showing how television types blur
economic and political distinctions. TV glorifies the middle class, and those
with heavy viewing habits assume that label no matter what their income. But
those with light viewing habits who have blue-collar jobs accurately describe
themselves as working-class people.

In like fashion, those with heavy viewing habits position themselves as po-
litical moderates. Most characters in TV dramas frown on political extremism—
right or left. This middle-of-the-road ethic is apparently picked up by the con-
stant viewer. It's only from the ranks of sporadic TV users that Gerbner finds
people who label themselves liberal or conservative.

Social scientists have come to expect political differences between rich and
poor, blacks and whites, Catholics and Protestants, city dwellers and farmers.
Those distinctions still emerge when sporadic television viewers respond to the
survey. But Gerbner reports that traditional differences disappear among those
with heavy viewing habits. It's as if the light from the TV set washes out any
sharp features that would set them apart.

Even though those with heavy viewing habits call themselves moderates,
the Annenberg team notes that their position on social issues is decidedly con-
servative. Constant watchers consistently voice opinions in favor of low taxes,
more police protection, and stronger national defense. They are against big
government, free speech, the Equal Rights Amendment, abortion, interracial
marriage, open-house legislation, and busing to achieve integration. Gerbner labels the mix of attitudes and desires the "New
Populism" and sees its rise as evidence that those with heavy viewing habits are
sucked into the mainstream. The almost complete overlap between the New
Populism and the policies of Ronald Reagan could explain the former presi-
dent's reputation as being the "great communicator" when he went directly to
the people on television. His message was like an old friend they'd grown up
with on prime-time TV.

RESONANCE

Gerbner also explains the constant viewer's greater apprehension by the pro-
cess of "resonance." Many viewers have had at least one first-hand experience
with physical violence—armed robbery, rape, bar fight, mugging, auto crash,
military combat, or a lover’s quarrel that became vicious. The actual trauma was
bad enough. But he thinks that a repeated symbolic portrayal on the TV screen
can cause the viewer to replay the real-life experience over and over in his or
her mind: "The congruence of the television world and real-life circumstances
may 'resonate' and lead to markedly amplified cultivation patterns." Constant
viewers who have experienced physical violence get a double dose.

For three years I was a volunteer advocate in a low-income housing
project. Although I felt relatively safe walking through the project, police and
social workers told stories of shootings and stabbings. Even peace-loving resi-
dents were no strangers to violence. I can't recall ever entering an apartment
where the TV was silent. Gerbner would expect that the daily diet of symbolic
savagery would reinforce people's experience of doomsday violence, making life
even more frightening. The hesitation of most tenants to venture outside their
apartments would seem to confirm his resonance assumption.

The mainstreaming and resonance hypotheses are after-the-fact explana-
tions for Gerbner's main finding that for those who heavily watch television, the
world is a scary place. He says that most "effects" research focuses on the few
people who imitate the violence they see on TV.

But it is just as important to look at the large majority of people who become
more fearful, insecure, and dependent on authority, and who may grow up de-
manding protection and even welcoming repression in the name of security.25

CRITIQUE: TV'S CULTIVATION OF FEAR—A
WEAK RELATIONSHIP

For most observers, Gerbner's claim that the dramatic content of television cre-
ates a fearful climate makes sense. How could the habitual viewer watch so
much violence without its having a lasting effect? Yet cultivation theory has
drawn fierce criticism from its detractors. Over the last decade the communi-
cation journals have been filled with the sometimes bitter charges and counter-
charges of critics and supporters.

The controversy begins with the relatively weak relationship that Gerbner
and his colleagues have been able to establish between heavy viewing and fear
of violence. Although more often than not the two go together, the overlap isn't
great enough to be able to predict the presence of heavy fear from the knowl-
edge of heavy viewing. The linkage is loose.

Some opponents claim that the correlation is so slight that it should be
discounted and the theory abandoned. A few suggest that the small positive re-
relationship exists only because the Annenberg group mishandled the data. For
example, University of Chicago sociologist Paul Hirsch charges that Gerbner
conveniently glossed over the fact that nonviewers were actually among the
most fearful people in his sample. Conversely, cultivation advocates believe
that the results would be more impressive if Gerbner had controlled for factors
other than time spent in front of the TV.
University of Wisconsin researchers Robert Hawkins (journalism and mass communication) and Suzanne Pingree (women's studies) note that not all prime-time programming is drama. They found a cultivation effect with crime adventures, game shows, and cartoons, but not with comedy, news, documentaries, sports, or variety shows.

Researchers who take a "uses and gratifications" approach believe that viewer motivation makes a difference. Gerbner assumes that those with heavy viewing habits watch TV "more by the clock than the program," but he never made an effort to separate those people who are ritualistic in their behavior from those who watch with a purpose. Cable television gives even those with heavy viewing habits a chance to be selective.

Although cultivation theory claims to predict who will experience fear of victimization, Gerbner only measures the perceived probability that violence will occur. Purdue mass communication researchers Glenn Sparks and Robert Ogle remind us that our feeling of fear depends on (1) how awful the event would be if it happened, (2) how well we think we'd cope if it did, and (3) the odds we think it will. Since the Annenberg group ignores the first two factors, they really only gauge the likelihood of victimization. By lumping together all types of programs, neglecting viewer motivation, and failing to accurately measure fear, Gerbner makes it almost impossible to establish a strong relationship between viewing TV drama and fear.

Even if Gerbner established that television types are always anxious, we couldn't be certain that it is TV which cultivates that fear. Correlation doesn't prove causality. Perhaps people who are already scared watch television to escape their fears rather than the other way around. Indiana University media researcher Dolf Zillmann thinks that the cognitive dissonance principle of selective exposure (see Chapter 18) explains Gerbner's data better than the idea of cultivation. He notes that television drama "almost always features the triumph of justice." He's suggesting that fearful people like symbolic violence, but its portrayal seems to be necessary for the good guys to win and the bad guys to lose.

There's also the possibility that both Gerbner and Zillmann are wrong. Perhaps neither fear nor heavy viewing is the cause of the other, but each is caused by a common third factor that Gerbner didn't even measure. That prospect led University of Toronto researchers Anthony Doob and Glenn Macdonald to canvas four of their city's neighborhoods that had varying rates of crime. The researchers assumed that "people who watch a lot of television may have a greater fear of being victims of violent crime because, in fact, they live in more violent neighborhoods." (You're not paranoid if they really are out to get you.) When the effect of neighborhood was removed, the effect of television was reduced to almost nothing. Only in the most risky district did a viewer's fear increase in proportion to the number of programs watched. Gerbner maintains that this one exception illustrates his resonance principle in action, but the study severely undermines the cultivation hypothesis.

Students of mass communication are left with a popular, yet questionable theory of media influence. The intuitive logic of a connection between television and fear is strong. The research supporting it is mixed. And any notion of direct cause-and-effect is weak. Gerbner's claim that "ritualistic exposure to television's repetitive force" cultivates "pervasive fear and mistrust" is something like fine TV drama. It's worth watching as long as we realize it may contain an element of fiction.

A SECOND LOOK


