

CONTENTS

<i>Extended Contents</i>	viii
<i>About the Author</i>	xi
<i>Preface</i>	xii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xvi
1 Cultivation Analysis and the World of George Gerbner	1
2 School Shootings: The Mean World Syndrome	21
3 Stories of White Male Power? Understanding Trumpism	40
4 'Mainstreaming': How Media Normalise Islamophobia	56
5 Casting and Fate: It's Different for Girls; Policing Women Onscreen	73
6 Things Can Only Get Better: The Difficulties of Building a Cultural Environment Movement	87
Conclusion: The Crisis in Media Education: A Cultivation Perspective	102
<i>Bibliography</i>	114
<i>Index</i>	130





CULTIVATION ANALYSIS AND THE WORLD OF GEORGE GERBNER

KEY POINTS

- Cultivation theory helps to identify important research questions regarding the social impact of all media.
- Getting familiar with the main ideas behind the Cultural Indicators Project, the violence profiles and the mean world syndrome is the first step in appreciating how ideas about magazines, film and TV shed light on digital cultures.
- Cultivation theory is closely associated with George Gerbner. Gerbner was not the sole author of the idea. However, the story of how Gerbner came to be known as the founder of cultivation theory tells an intriguing tale about the early days of media research.
- Gerbner faced many political struggles, as he 'cultivated' cultivation. His history is significant in understanding the enduring value of cultivation theory.

INTRODUCTION

In 1964, the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication (ASC) elected a Hungarian-American scholar called George Gerbner to be their new Dean. Founded by publishing magnate Walter H. Annenberg six years before, the School aspired to set new standards in researching the role of communication in democracy. When Gerbner stood down from the position some 25 years later, he left an institution with a first-class reputation for elucidating



the cultural impact of media industries. By then, ASC owed much of its fame to the Cultural Indicators Project (CIP). The CIP was a novel approach to studying media influence. Its central thesis was that media content reflected the prevailing political, social and economic 'mood' of the times. The most famed aspect of the CIP was cultivation analysis. Cultivation analysis, conceived by an Annenberg team lead by Gerbner and Larry Gross, alongside considerable input from Michael Morgan and Nancy Signorielli, presented high-level American policy debates on media violence with a novel argument. Based on content analysis of prime-time TV programming and surveys that compared the social views of heavy and light viewers, the cultivation team argued that TV violence mattered most for its capacity to induce politically exploitable fear. This argument had the strategic effect of turning scholarly and political eyes toward the costs of entrusting global democracy to privately owned media businesses. As we survey contemporary media landscapes, where commercial social media platforms shape everything from elections and terrorism to the micro politics of dating, there's an argument that Gerbner's definition of media studies' defining challenge remains pertinent.

The idea that cultivation theory was born of challenges that still characterise the digital age is the core rationale for this book. What I intend to show is that cultivation theory's explanation for how media create realities still enlightens the provenance and significance of phenomena like aggressive political communication, frightening new forms of mediated violence, and sexism in popular culture.

In this first chapter, I set the scene for why the development of cultivation theory, under Gerbner's leadership, is relevant to understanding digital media influence. The sections that follow focus on specific aspects of cultivation theory. Each chapter takes a particular concept, explains why that concept applies to current media challenges, and then models methods for applying these established ideas to digital media case studies. To make this possible, it is first necessary to provide an overview of the main developments and ideas in this body of work. The approach I take in this task is historical. The story of how cultivation theory came into existence is a fascinating tale. Intriguingly, a research model that said harsh things about the social impact of popular culture developed via an unlikely alliance between a scholar and a media mogul. The point of telling this tale is twofold. First, understanding that George Gerbner worked alongside a media industry figure is a useful way to unpack some of the misperceptions about his work. Second, understanding the history of cultivation theory explains some of the strategic decisions that the paradigm made.

Approaching Gerbner historically means regarding him not just as the driving force behind landmark studies of media influence, but also a person who made a difference to communication research as an administrator and ideas broker. Cultivation theory was not the brainchild of Gerbner alone. Yet Gerbner is a unique lens through which we can connect the evolution of media scholarship to significant media and geopolitical changes in the mid- to late-20th century, and indeed, quirks of fate where it is possible to see how things could have gone differently in the field.

Gerbner is remembered as the ‘father’ of cultivation theory due in no small measure to his ability to nurture the institutional and interpersonal relationships that made research happen. His interactions with benefactors, university institutions, media industries (especially US TV networks) and colleagues helped to define what critical communication research is. Like today’s scholars, Gerbner worked in a society that seemed awestruck at a new deluge of media content. Also, like today’s scholars, Gerbner had to defend media studies as a scholarly affair aimed at producing socially valuable knowledge, as opposed to generations of fully trained up media professionals who could slot easily into industry roles.

Unlike most scholars of any period, Gerbner sat in a position of considerable administrative power. Staying there relied upon his capacity to negotiate direct pressure from media and political sources. These pressures intensified during crucial moments in 20th-century diplomatic history, where the connections between global media culture and the post-Cold War political order came into clear relief. When these challenges arose in the mid-1970s, Gerbner became a critical mediator between political, media and scholarly realms. The victories he won (and the battles he lost) revealed essential lessons about the inherent nature of media research, and its positioning vis-à-vis media industries. Within the academy, Gerbner was prominent in seminal conceptual and methodological debates that are worth revisiting, in light of issues raised by social media, convergence and big data. Taken together, Gerbner’s work as scholar, manager and even ‘scholarly diplomat’ builds conceptual bridges between the broadcast and digital eras.

GEORGE GERBNER AND THE CULTURAL INDICATORS PROJECT

George Gerbner matters to the history of media scholarship as one of the people who introduced the idea that media actively create social reality. His core argument was that post-war industrialised storytelling was ill-suited to the needs of socially diverse societies. His work on media violence was an

elaboration of this theme. Gerbner's interest in media realities merits noting; while Gerbner earned a reputation as 'the man who counts the killing' (Stossel, 1997), his real focus was politics and justice. While it is important to study in some detail his arguments over why media violence was such a problem, it is equally crucial to remember that the violence question was a variation on a theme, and it is the theme that matters most in applying cultivation theory today. To appreciate the current relevance of cultivation theory, one must consider the historical trajectory of Gerbner's work. This section of the chapter, therefore, explains how Gerbner came to the violence question. As will become apparent, Gerbner hoped his studies on this topic would catalyse public debate about media and democracy.

It isn't at all surprising that Gerbner would be interested in media violence and the politics of fear, given his journey into North American academia. His biography is detailed by Lent (2005), Morgan (2012) and at the Gerbner archive website at the Annenberg School for Communication (Biography, ND). Born in Hungary in 1919, Gerbner fled induction into the Axis forces in 1939, only to return to Europe via parachute as an elite special forces soldier, tasked with organising Slovenian partisans. Following the war, Gerbner entered first journalism and then education, interrogated by the California House Un-American Commission for suspected socialist sympathies along the way. Surviving this ordeal, Gerbner completed his PhD in the 1950s and moved into academia.

Interested in comparative content analysis, by the early 1960s Gerbner had noticed a distinctly gloomy air around US popular culture. The mass-produced stories that audiences turned to for escape and relief were often sinister parables. So-called confession magazines warned women who eschewed marriage risked terrible fates (Gerbner, 1958b). TV school dramas taught that teachers should quit teaching if they wanted to be happy, otherwise they were doomed to alcoholism and despair. Movies stressed only the lonely could be heroes (Gerbner, 1969). Behind the glossy façade of American popular culture lay some ominous messages; life didn't go well for the different and the difference makers.

Observing these patterns, Gerbner began to work on the idea that media content was a kind of fingerprint, a trace of the strategies and processes that American popular culture deployed to naturalise social values. Gerbner's term for these fingerprints was 'cultural indicators' (Gerbner, 1969b, 1970, 1972). Gerbner had developed the concept through content analysis and by interviewing those who made and distributed of popular content. Through these methods, Gerbner successfully identified striking anomalies in mass communication processes. Gerbner's view on the nature and causes of media power

was clearly set out in his early confession magazine studies. Gerbner noticed something peculiar about these publications. While the stories inside were lurid tales about terrible fates that befell young women who did dreadful things – like having the temerity to go on unchaperoned vacations – the covers featured demur portraits that gave little clue as to the terrors awaiting the reader inside. Speaking with industry insiders, Gerbner discovered that these covers were designed to placate store owners who were afraid that graphic pictures of suffering women would spoil the buying mood among their female clientele. In noting this quirk of the mass media system, Gerbner established an important principle. Corporate capital ran America's post-war media system. Equally, one did not have to look too hard to see consumerist ideology in popular entertainment, featuring stories that frequently twinned consumption with happiness. However, this message emerged from less-than-obvious features of complex message systems. Media were no 'conveyor belt' delivering elite ideas to audiences. Media content was a kind of puzzle; we could tell what it said, in broad terms. However, why media told some stories, and how those stories affected the political mood of a culture, frequently depended on the little-known quirks of mass production. From the start, Gerbner never believed media power had simple causes. The fact that mass media content was a product, involving many hands in long manufacturing and distribution chains, meant there could never be a straightforward explanation of its power.

By the 1960s, Gerbner believed that the pressing media research questions centred on TV storytelling. Television placed 'public storytelling' in the hands of privately owned, profit-oriented media industries. Gerbner thought this integration of culture and commerce was the historical change that created the need for media research. Gerbner did not believe commercial TV was irretrievably anti-democratic. It was more that he was committed to investigating the cultural effects of industrialised public storytelling. As he stated throughout his career, cultivation theory investigated the consequences of living in worlds where public thought depended on mass-produced stories. Media content, so the argument went, was a 'cultural indicator' of this new era, where diverse audiences listened to the same voices, more or less (Gerbner, 1969, 1973a).

The political climate in late-1960s America pushed 'cultural indicators' toward violence. President Lyndon Johnson established a Presidential Commission on the causes of violence in 1967. The commission tasked Gerbner with creating the first in a series of 'violence profiles': content analyses that counted acts of violence contained in a sample of one week's prime-time and children's Saturday morning programming. The profiles defined violence as



'the overt expression of physical force against self or other, compelling action against one's will on pain of being hurt or killed, or actually hurting or killing' (Gerbner & Gross, 1976: 184).

At the turn of the 1970s, with the benefit of three years of violence profile data behind them, Gerbner and Gross were ready to turn television and media research on their respective ears. The violence profiles didn't only count acts of violence; they also recorded who committed violence, who suffered its consequences, and reflected on how these patterns told a 'story' about social power. While there were variations in amounts of violence year-on-year, and network to network, the early profiles found a pattern that would persist into the 1990s. There was a great deal of violence on television. However, this violence had a morphology that indicated that this violence carried a social message. When TV characters were violent, they were most likely to profit or get away with it if they were white middle-class men. Women and people of colour were far more likely to be violence victims (Cultural Indicators Research Team, 1977; Gerbner, 1977, 1995; Gerbner, Gross, Jackson-Beeck, Jeffries-Fox, & Signorielli, 1978; Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, Morgan, & Jackson-Beeck, 1979; Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, & Morgan, 1980a, 1980b).

Early in the research, Gerbner offered an even-tempered account of what all this meant for American TV and society. To begin, where there had been much work on screen violence as a cause of real aggression, Gerbner suggested that the bigger question was how this violence functioned as a story about how society worked. He initially likened TV violence to pollution: an unwanted, unintended outcome of production processes on which American society had come to rely. Gerbner believed that his evidence offered the TV industry some unpalatable truths: that prime-time entertainment relied on stories that were potentially injurious to societies, because they systematically victimised some social groups. Questions to be asked of TV in the future included: how did production decisions lend themselves to stories that tended to victimise the same people over and over again and what and how did exposure to these stories affect the social perspectives of TV viewers? These were weighty policy issues. Gerbner warned that if evidence continued to show that TV violence was not just entertainment, but a de facto parable on the distribution of social power, then policymakers would have to consider how they could steer popular entertainment in a different direction (Gerbner, 1972).

Fate pushed the violence profiles toward audience research; and indeed, a less sympathetic take on TV. Funding from the National Institute of Mental Health came along with the suggestion of adding survey data to the violence profiles. The idea was to examine how patterned violence affected audience



attitudes (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). The move to a method that combined content analysis with survey data gave birth to what became recognised as content analysis. The new objective was to discover how perceptions of social reality were affected by exposure to TV violence.

Cultivation analysis began to make waves from the mid-1970s to early 1980s, via a series of 'violence profile' studies, published in the *Journal of Communication*. Between 1976's 'Living With Television: The Violence Profile' (Gerbner & Gross, 1976) and 'The Mainstreaming of America: Violence Profile #11' (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980a), the ASC team solidified an approach that would confront the widespread conviction that the main danger of screen violence was its capacity to induce copycat behaviour. After ten years of measuring televised violence, Gerbner and his colleagues observed that the industry appeared oblivious to state concerns, as entertainment relied on violence just as much in the late 1970s as it had a decade before. Violence was still something that happened about eight times an hour in peak evening time slots. However, by deploying other methodologies in content analyses and surveys, the ASC team produced a new and provocative argument about what screen violence represented and what it did to those who saw it.

Across the *Journal of Communication* violence profiles, the researchers came to define violence as a universal story device that acted as a symbolic representation of social power; who had it, and who did not. Violent acts were recorded alongside demographic details of victim and aggressor. This produced victimisation ratios. These numbers compared how often a social type committed violence to the frequency of that type's victimisation. Victimisation is discussed further in Chapter 3, because in the digital age it has become a source of political power. The violence profiles are therefore a significant part of the 'backstory' behind the political storytelling that characterises mediated digital politics. But for now, the main lessons of the victimisation ratios were that television showed more victims than aggressive villains overall and that while men were more likely to be those violent people, women had a far higher victim to violent ratio. In other words, where women were less likely to start trouble than men, they were still more likely than men to find themselves in the wrong screen time at the wrong screen place, as it were. The same was broadly true for young people, the elderly and people of colour (Gerbner et al., 1978).

As to the effects of these depictions, the combination of content analysis and survey data opened another new line of inquiry, based on a provocative hypothesis. Having noted rampant violence across a medium that had become the mainstay of American leisure, the Annenberg team thought it a good idea



to measure if watching TV affected two things: beliefs about social facts, and beliefs about what caused social problems. They did this by comparing the beliefs and attitudes of heavy, light and medium viewers (heavy viewers being people who watched three or more hours of TV per day). For example, one of the violence profiles used a survey of school children, in New Jersey, and found that heavy viewers in that sample were significantly more likely to overestimate the number of times police officers used violence in the course of their duties (Gerbner et al., 1979). When it came to ideas about what the world was like, the violence profiles concluded that heavy viewers were more likely than light viewers to believe that violence happened far more frequently in the real world than was the case, according to crime statistics.

More importantly, these erroneous beliefs about the reality of violence had political correlates. Over the course of their survey work, the researchers also found evidence of what they called the 'mean world' syndrome. Survey data suggested that heavy consumption of TV, which could be taken as a proxy measure of exposure to violence, since most programming relied on that entity – one way or another – corresponded with heightened sense of risk *and* suspicion of everyone from neighbours to governments. Heavy TV viewers were significantly more likely to feel that others could not be trusted, that most people were out to help themselves and that powerful people had no interest in the thoughts or needs of the common person (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1981).

These sentiments mattered politically, because they fuelled a process that the researchers called 'mainstreaming'. Mainstreaming will be discussed further in Chapter 4, but for now it was a concept that emerged from the observation that differences of opinion on the nature of social reality between different groups appeared less pronounced among heavy viewers. That is where, say, African American and white survey respondents had different experiences that correlated with different views on the state of the US polity, those differences were less pronounced between heavy viewers from each group. Television had the power, so it seemed, to narrow the perception gap between groups who otherwise tended to see the world differently. Moreover, this convergence seemed to move the overall political spectrum to the right; what television cultivated, generally speaking, was the conviction that society worked better when it was governed with a strong authoritarian hand that protected individuals from untrustworthy others.

The ASC violence profiles continued until 1993, and as we shall see, the approach has enjoyed something of a revival in the second decade of the 21st century. While the digital media environment is very different from



the broadcast world, there are reasons to believe that new conditions have recreated a welcoming environment for a 'mean world' redux. All of this is explained in further chapters, but for now the point to be made is that the 'return' of cultivation is not especially surprising, given the currency of the conceptual suppositions it established in this early period. Three points can be made here. First, cultivation analysis provided a different way of understanding what media violence was, and what it did, that remains useful in conceiving the things at stake in debates on social media, gaming, mediated extremism and the like. Second, the notion that audiences were scared into a mainstream provided a view on how media manage political difference, which is especially relevant to studies of the role that media play in the success of 21st-century populism and radicalism. Third, in facing criticisms of their work, the Annenberg team addressed a number of significant methodological and conceptual issues that have returned to challenge digital media scholars.

The basic idea behind the violence profiles and the mean world syndrome was that violence reflected the risk-averse production strategies of corporate production companies and that the most insidious effect of this violence was a narrowing of the political spectrum. With this conclusion, Gerbner and his colleagues announced the controversial view that concerns about television's capacity to provoke violent behaviour was a red herring, in terms of understanding the medium's most widespread influence. The team acknowledged that it did make sense to look for behavioural consequences of exposure to violence, and they also acknowledged that behavioural studies had contributed significant insights to media scholars (Gerbner et al., 1979). However, it was just as right that the effects of a medium as pervasive as TV, which addressed audiences of unprecedented diversity, could not be reduced to a single measure. The mean world syndrome did claim that TV had significantly affected how American viewed society. Because TV had become the primary source of ideas about the social, and because so many of these social stories featured violence as the thing that either made things right or wrong, television violence mattered because it narrowed political imaginations and conversations. The argument was *not* tantamount to claiming that television made everyone believe the same thing (Gerbner et al., 1981).

Moreover, the idea that TV reduced political differences between otherwise heterogeneous social groups emerged through interactions between Gerbner, his team, other media scholars, media industries and even the state. To understand why cultivation theory matters today, we have to return to the events surrounding Gerbner's time as ASC Dean. This is because



this experience directly exposed Gerbner to intense political industrial and scholarly pressure.

GERBNER AND WALTER H. ANNENBERG: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF MEDIA STUDIES

Clearly, by the early 1980s, Gerbner had hardened his stance on television's cultural role. In the late 1960s, the tone of his initial violence profiles suggested a somewhat sympathetic view; corporate television had taken off so rapidly as the dominant form of popular culture that there had been no time to take stock of some of its unimagined and unwanted influences. Having presented this evidence, and seen little change, the violence profiles were taking a much harder line, and being criticised by the television industry for it.

One of the most intriguing aspects of Gerbner's career is that he enjoyed the patronage of media tycoon-cum-politician Walter H. Annenberg throughout the period when he was crafting his most savage indictments of American mass entertainment. In the 1940s, Annenberg had taken over his father's media holdings in the racing paper *The Daily Post*, purchased the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and then set about making a name for himself in the spheres of popular culture and politics. It is no exaggeration to say that Annenberg was one of the creators of post-war American teen culture. During the Second World War, Annenberg made the best of paper rations by founding *Seventeen* magazine, betting that there was money in the teen market. He was right, and in the 1950s, Annenberg followed up by creating a pop music show called *Bandstand* for his Philadelphian TV station. The show went on to become a mainstay of American teen culture as Dick Clark's *Bandstand* (Ogden, 1999).

Then in 1958, Annenberg founded a school for communications at the University of Pennsylvania. His bust stands in the School's foyer to this day, and it reads:

The right to free communication carries with it responsibility to respect the dignity of others – and this must be recognised as irreversible. Educating students to communicate this message effectively and to be of service to all people is the enduring mission of this school.

Looking at this inscription, Gerbner's early work on popular culture and the violence profiles, and Annenberg's career, it seems the three things did not go together. One of Gerbner's central concerns was that post-war magazines and TV stifled women by portraying them as victims or doormats, scaring them into roles as wives and consumers, as their primary social identity. Annenberg's



Seventeen was part of that culture. However, if we look at the relationship between these two very different men, we find that each could give the other something he wanted. There were reasons why Annenberg had a vested interest in *not* forcing Gerbner to be more 'pro media', and these reasons created the environment in which cultivation analysis blossomed. When conflict did emerge between the two, that conflict revealed much about the political point that the violence profiles were making about the relationship between corporate TV and democracy.

Annenberg was something of a fabulous figure. Entrepreneur, art collector and philanthropist, by the late 1960s the tycoon was turning his eyes toward politics. A friend of Richard Nixon, Annenberg was the President's surprise nominee as ambassador to London in 1969. Congressional hearings over his appointment and internal memos sent during his tenure as an emissary to the Queen give clues as to why he may have been willing to allow Gerbner to say whatever he pleased about commercial media, even at the risk of being the hand that fed.

In pull-no-punches hearings before a congressional panel, Annenberg was obliged to defend both his suitability for the Ambassadorial appointment and his family name. Interrogators presented him with some unflattering criticisms, many from hostile journalists; he was ill-suited for a job usually occupied by foreign office career civil servants, and he was mostly interested in the role as a means of restoring his family name. Annenberg's father was jailed for tax evasion in 1942, and the London press went so far as to suggest his links to organised crime (Nominations of Walter H. Annenberg, 1969). Annenberg coolly sidestepped these charges. Nevertheless, Nixon administration records did mention Annenberg's determination to restore the family name (Briefs for Secretary of State, 1970).

We can be sure that Gerbner's installation as Annenberg Dean in 1964 initiated a professionally intimate relationship between the two men bent on creating an unimpeachable institution. According to their regular correspondence, both were determined to establish ASC as a leading centre for media research that bore the hallmarks of conventionally defined academic excellence; something that could never have happened had Annenberg imposed an industry-friendly editorial line. From his first day in post, Gerbner kept Annenberg regularly informed of his actions, persuading the magnate that the quickest path to acclaim was to establish graduate programmes and research directed at examining media's role in democracy through peer publication. Gerbner persuaded Annenberg that America needed intellectuals who appreciated the political and cultural implications of mass storytelling, with the added

advantage that a school devoted to such study could rapidly win scholarly kudos. The road to reputation lay in hiring the best young scholars to teach the best graduate students and publish in the most respected academic journals. Indeed, it would behove the school to own or at least direct one of these journals (Gerbner, 1964–1992, Gerbner to W. Annenberg, April 22, 1965; March 23, 1967; April 10, 1967; May 27, 1968; November 4, 1968; September 28, 1970).

Whether Annenberg did crave this sort of accreditation or not, he certainly supported the Dean's vision. By 1973, the Cultural Indicators Project was up and running, staffed by talented scholars and precocious postgraduates. In another coup, ASC had assumed publishing responsibilities for the esteemed *Journal of Communication*, with Gerbner installed as editor. At the very least, we can say that both figures gave the other what they appeared to want: kudos and research resources. Certainly, Annenberg sometimes delighted at Gerbner's criticism of the TV industry, observing in one memo 'you'll never be the networks' darling, George!' (Gerbner, 1964–1992, W. Annenberg to Gerbner, March 31, 1980). In another, he noted that the scholars he funded were free to say what they pleased; if he disapproved of their scholarly conclusions, 'the problem is mine, not theirs' (Gerbner, 1964–1992, W. Annenberg to Gerbner, October 18, 1983).

Annenberg was not always true to his word. There were occasions when Gerbner felt the heat of his benefactor's wrath. Retrospectively, these moments indicated where the violence profiles sat within a broader scholarly mission. Gerbner and Annenberg's relationship became strained when both men found themselves in the middle of a diplomatic row. 1975 saw the signing of the Helsinki Accords. This international deal ushered in a new political order where the Western and Soviet blocs found new ways to tolerate one another, or at least pursue their conflict via less openly aggressive means (Romano, 2009). Critics felt the deal ceded too much to Moscow, especially regarding information flows (Cosman, 1985). Culture was one of the so-called 'baskets' of issues that the Accords considered, including the view that nations should respect other nations' cultural differences when communicating with them. Where the exchange of ideas through the free flow of information was to be encouraged, so too were the rights of nations to have other nations respect their cultural rights and norms. This was read in some American media and diplomatic circles as amounting to an insidious new form of global censorship, impinging on the West and America's right to say whatever it pleased to whoever wished to listen (Cosman, 1985).

At this point, Gerbner had been *Journal of Communication* editor for two years, impressing Annenberg with his work in this role. It was just as well that

Annenberg felt so; his foundation covered sizeable publication losses in these years (Gerbner, 1964–1992, W. Annenberg to Gerbner, March 21, 1984). Annenberg became less enamoured of the journal, however, when it published an essay by Kaarle Nordenstreng and Herb Schiller on Helsinki's implications for American media and global power (1976). In their essay, the authors proposed that the undoubtedly complicated Accords did witness a clash between Western and Eastern views on how media industries should operate, and did cede ground to the Eastern perspective. That is, after Helsinki, the idea that unfettered media communication was an inherently good idea was no longer sacrosanct; a blow to American interests. The idea that the free flow of communication offered, as Schiller had argued in an earlier *JOC* piece, US carte-blanche to flood global markets with its content and values had been acknowledged, such that the free flow thesis could no longer count on its previous common-sense status.

However, Nordenstreng and Schiller then continued to accuse the US of craftily ceding less at the Finnish summit than many imagined. America's apparent willingness to live with restrictions on global information flows reflected the changing nature of global media influence. In this new formation, technology counted more than content. The coming battle in media politics, they argued, would surround the provision of new technologies, like satellite television. The spread of ideas, they argued, and political values, would likely shortly be about technological hardware, not soft content, and evidence was that the US State and media industries were willing to cede the content fight, signalled by the Accords, to win the technology war.

Annenberg, then a doyen of the Republican Party, wrote to Gerbner in a fury over the piece. He accused Nordenstreng and Schiller of writing a 'ridiculous' argument and 'purveying' the Communist Party line (Gerbner, 1964–1992, W. Annenberg to Gerbner, March 10, 1976). The newspaper tycoon was horrified that *JOC* had taken such a nakedly anti-American stance on Helsinki, and indicated his wish to write a rebuttal (Gerbner, 1964–1992, W. Annenberg to Gerbner, March 11, 1976). Gerbner first complimented, then cautioned his benefactor. While Gerbner stated his journal would be 'delighted' to publish Annenberg's thoughts, the volume that enraged Annenberg so had included a range of opinions. Gerbner contested the assertion that the 'offending piece' could be deemed as representative of the entire volume. In any case, he had commissioned a rejoinder to Nordenstreng and Schiller from an eminent political scientist. Grudgingly, Annenberg conceded the point (Gerbner, 1964–2006, W. Annenberg to Gerbner, March 10, 1976). The story is worth noting as an index of Gerbner's historical significance. When scholars argued

that global American media content was not merely concerned with entertaining and informing the world, but also spreading distinctly ideological ways of viewing reality, Gerbner had to directly justify this argument to a media mogul who was also a Republican grandee, in the period when that party set about recalibrating its strategies for combatting global Communism.

So why does this history matter? One reason is, the Gerbner–Annenberg relationship was a crucial place where scholarly research, media interests and politics all sat cheek by jowl. The Cultural Indicators Project produced many negative criticisms of commercial popular culture, but it did so under the auspices of a school that was funded by media industries, and a magnate through whom Gerbner was able to confront industries with new ideas about their role in the post-war political order. The intention, in this regard, was to engage scholars not only with industry but also policy. Cynical as the best-known ‘violence profiles’ were, they were not divorced from an understanding of the complexities of media production, nor did they assert that evidence-based policy and production practices could not change things. Indeed, as we see in Chapter 6, Gerbner was convinced that evidence from these studies could empower both media creatives and audiences to demand and make more diverse entertainment.

It has been observed that the North American Mass Communication tradition has been widely misunderstood among critical media scholars, since the late 20th century. Jeff Pooley (2016), for example, has pointed to a tendency to see those American-based scholars who used experiments, surveys and content analysis to wrestle with the mysteries of early mass communications industries as being too methodologically focused to see the bigger cultural and political questions that explained why media mattered. However, the idea that cultivation theory evolved in isolation from the conditions that placed media industries in the middle of post-war politics does not fit the reality of how that work evolved as an explicit response to those conditions. Neither does it recognise Gerbner’s direct accountability to America’s media and political establishment, in the figure of White House darling Walter H. Annenberg.

GEORGE GERBNER AND RESEARCH METHODS: THEN AND NOW

The violence profiles also provoked a series of methodological controversies bearing lessons for digital media researchers. They were published amidst divisions between quantitative and qualitative scholars. As Pooley suggested, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, qualitative scholars viewed quantitative methods as

rather clumsy attempts to capture volatile media cultures. According to these accounts, the desire to base knowledge on reliable measurement led to a methodological preoccupation (Ang, 1989). Busy with methods, North American Mass Communication scholars spent too little time considering conceptual problems. For example, when persuasion studies had failed to find evidence that newspapers, films, radio and television had much influence over things like voting decisions and consumer choice, they concluded that media were less potent than interpersonal ties. Another option, so the argument went, would be to ask if they had been looking for the right sort of influence all along (Gitlin, 1978; Hall, 1982).

The latter criticism could not be levelled at cultural indicators, which was a reaction against this tradition. The approach to quantifying violence, and correlating it to political view, was extensively criticised. One of the first critiques came from TV itself. CBS commissioned its own study, which concluded that the Annenberg team's findings had been concocted from the eminently contestable gerrymandering of definitional categories. CBS objected that the violence profiles counted all acts of violence as violence regardless of context (Blank, 1977a, 1977b). For example, one of the reasons why children's TV scored so 'highly' was because it featured much slapstick. It was hardly feasible, the network argued, to equate being shot with being hit in the face with a custard pie (Cultural Indicators Research Team, 1977; Morgan, 2012).

The idea that one can hardly equate cartoon slapstick with prime-time murder was not without its academic supporters. Most notably, respected TV scholar Horace Newcomb complained that the violence profiles carelessly mixed apples and oranges in its measurements. If one were trying to grasp how culture worked, he argued, one could hardly do so by abstracting acts of violence from the narrative contexts that explained them (Newcomb, 1978). So, contemporaneous industrial and scholarly critics accused the Cultural Indicators Project of making a classic mass communications error. Its methods, critics thought, were reliable but wildly invalid. Most viewers recognised the differences between cartoon and cop shows. In this case, how could a bullet and a custard pie be classified as an index of the same 'thing'?

Other critics thought the survey evidence for cultivation effects was less than robust. Dissenters argued that the size of cultivation effects, though statistically significant, were small. Worse still, some reanalyses suggested that even these small effects disappeared entirely under multiple controls. What that meant is that although there seemed to be correlations between watching TV violence and fear, distrust of others and authoritarian leanings, it was possible that watching lots of TV and being afraid etc. were both 'effects' of something else.

Thus, the idea that television was a primary driver of fear, and all of the political consequences that followed, was, like the measure of violence, more of a statistical apparition than lived social reality (Hughes, 1980; Hirsch, 1980). In fact, the violence profiles authors had admitted as much in crafting their theory of ‘resonance’. Gerbner, Gross et al. argued that viewers were especially influenced if they also lived in neighbourhoods with relatively higher rates of crime. Under these circumstances, encountering real-world crime amplified TV’s mean world effects. Critics simply saw this as an admission that personal experience was more influential than screen narratives (Hirsch, 1980).

Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli (1981) countered all of these charges. Their rebuttals are noteworthy because they established principles that remain true in digital media studies. These are:

- Media content emerges from industrial processes, and is never accidental, spontaneous or trivial.
- TV effects evidence would always be barely discernible in media-permeated societies.
- Failure to find universal effects that survive multiple statistical controls does *not* mean media are powerless. The capacity to sway subgroups can have significant social implications.

The core of the CBS criticism was that most of the violence in children’s TV was accidental; it typically took the shape of slapstick pratfalls that were comedic, and entirely different to prime-time assaults and murders (Blank, 1977a, 1977b). The CIP team countered this argument by pointing out that no screen violence is accidental; it is put onscreen by production decisions that intend the violent act – whatever it is – to play a narrative role, in terms of carrying a story or establishing the nature and value of a character. Seen this way, a pie in the face to take an arrogant character down a peg or two is similar to ‘solving’ a villain by killing her or him. Another similarity was that in both cases violence was portrayed as a viable solution to a problem, which is why the team felt it defensible to code both acts as indices of the same ‘thing’.

The Annenberg team took this approach because they thought about ‘messages’ and ‘texts’ in concrete ways. In their view, it was essential to do research that treated TV communication as a flow. Gerbner acknowledged there was a place for criticism that looked in close detail at the specific characteristics of specific TV shows and films. However, making sense of a pervasive medium like TV, which most people watched for several hours every evening,

no matter what was on, clearly signalled the need to consider the ideas that flowed across the screen in the course of a typical viewing week. *That was the 'text'* (Gerbner, 1989). Gerbner and his colleagues regarded TV content not as 'messages' that were deliberately designed to evoke some audience response, nor as an amalgam of aesthetic objects that stitched meaning together by using generic conventions. Instead, they conceived television as something that produced a cultural climate through a steady flow of stories that reflected the pressures of retaining mass audiences under conditions where quality was measured as the capacity to turn a profit.

Although that argument did justify a quantitative approach to media content, it was not a contention that was tied to such methods. The notion of TV as *the text* made sense to other qualitative scholars at the time. Raymond Williams (1974) wrote of 'TV Flows', inspired by the process of watching multiple channels by the then new remote control in the United States. James Carey (1989) outlined his thesis that commercial culture had saturated every corner of American symbolic life, right down to the streets that people walked. Writers like Angela McRobbie and Stuart Hall were writing of a British culture shackled by values of race, class and patriarchy in every corner of popular culture.

More recently, digital convergence has made it even more sensible to consider symbolic flows across genres and platforms. Celebrity culture is enormously useful to commerce and media because celebrities drag paying viewers across platforms and content, buying as they go. The idea that one can make sense of, say, an Angelina Jolie movie without knowing of her work as a human rights and health advocate, or that one can divorce blockbuster movies from their surrounding PR and marketing, the idea that such texts are 'bounded' is a notion to which no-one would subscribe. The idea that digital media can be interpreted by establishing a 'flow' of images and ideas across different texts is explored further in this book's chapter on women and reality TV.

As regards how TV flows shaped societies, the Cultivation Team began to explore the diversity of media effects. The idea of mainstreaming, for example, did *not* imply that television exposure had the same impact on all or even most who saw it. Cultivation evidence argued that exposure to TV reduced the difference between groups who otherwise tended toward different worldviews. It did this by affecting viewers belonging to social groups who were otherwise unlikely to see the world as a mean place that needed authoritarianism. There were, of course, people who already saw the world as such, belonging to groups within which there were no real perceptual differences between light and heavy viewers. However one feels about this argument, the point was TV didn't have to affect everyone to have a social impact. Nor did it need to be



the primary source of political socialisation to affect governance. Making some people less hostile to ideas that might otherwise have been objectionable was enough to fashion meaningful political shifts. We will see an example of how this thinking applies to digital cultural phenomena in the chapter on the mainstreaming of extremism.

Curiously, the argument that evidence of media influence is hard to find in worlds where we are all heavy media users, in absolute terms, helps define the assistance cultivation theory can offer to qualitative digital media studies. The idea here is that subgroups are worth examining for the glimpse they may give of the processes that most of us are too enmeshed in to notice. It was clear from the write-up of the late 1960s violence profiles that TV had already affected several social changes almost before anyone had decided to take the medium seriously. Two observations follow. First: Wikileaks, Facebook and Twitter have all been credited with changing the face of governance, privacy (or lack thereof) and social relations in ways that seem as much of a surprise to the likes of Mark Zuckerberg as they are to anyone else; so there are historical analogies between the dawn of broadcast TV and new digital platforms, especially social media. Second: there is value in examining how the things that happen among subgroups, especially those who appear further from the centres of social power, reflect the logic of a 'media centre'. This is explored in chapters on right-wing extremism, and the media strategies employed by school shooting survivors. Very different politically, as we shall see, both became 'visible' by cleverly engaging with digital media practices and discourses.

CONCLUSION: APPLYING GERBNER TO DIGITAL MEDIA STUDIES

This opening chapter has outlined the main aspects of cultivation theory, as they developed under George Gerbner's stewardship. The ideas and rationale behind the violence profiles and mean world syndrome form the basis for the following chapters. Each chapter that follows elaborates on a specific aspect of Gerbner's studies. Each follows a similar format.

- Identifying an issue or challenge relating to digital media cultures
- Explaining how a cultivation concept helps to clarify what is at stake in that issue or challenge, as regards comprehending digital power dynamics
- Developing a method, inspired by cultivation theory, to show how one might go about gathering and analysing evidence about how digital media work



However, this chapter has also explained why it is essential to consider cultivation theory in the context of its historical development. Some late 20th-century media scholars criticised cultivation theory for its lack of interest in the concept of culture, and what was perceived as a monolithic and simplistic understanding of media industries as lumpen purveyors of homogenous content (Gauntlett, 1998). Looking at the violence profiles alone, and Gerbner's work, in particular, it is easy to see why scholars saw things this way. Gerbner's line on commercial media and the narrowing of the public mind remained dogmatically steadfast, right until the end of his life (see for example, Gerbner, 2002).

At the same time, the image of Gerbner as a man who was irretrievably hostile to American media industries does not tally with his long, fruitful and often warm relationship with a captain of American media industry who also functioned at the heart of the American conservative political machine that had such seismic global impacts in the 1970s and 1980s. Why is this worth noting? There are a few reasons. First, Gerbner was motivated by his conviction that media industries and American political culture could change. One of the things we will see in further chapters is that there were places where Gerbner saw TV entertainment as playing an enormously useful social function. We will also see that he intended his work to promote creative potential within media industries, and to empower media audiences to advocate for more inclusive media cultures.

George Gerbner was a unique man who worked in a unique setting. However, it is his unique history and situation – combined with the fact that we can know more about him than we can of other scholars, because he left archived records – that renders Gerbner as an object lesson in things to be mindful of when considering the genesis of media research practice. That practice has histories, and chance and surprising alliances often exercise considerable influence over the course of events. In that sense, it is worth noting that cultivation theory developed at a time when media policy was implicated in the political alignments of a changing global order. Gerbner was one of the people who led the way in exploring the political import of global media practices (in the realms of technology, use and policy), in a setting when he was answerable to a media tycoon who was one of the faces of American diplomacy in the closing stages of the Vietnam War. Knowing this helps us to appreciate how the CIP was in many ways a daring project, deeply invested in the relationship between media and democracy. Gerbner was not at all interested in how TV violence begat the real thing. He was only interested in violence as a vehicle for figuring out how an all-encompassing media environment cultivated tangible political formations.

The purpose of this endeavour was to empower greater creativity in media industries and more participation among audiences. Gerbner wanted to help media workers and users demand more imaginative, diverse and inclusive cultures. It is this goal and attitude, ultimately, that justifies efforts to analyse digital media questions via cultivation theory.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Cultivation theory was one of the first models of media influence associating media use with political socialisation.
- Gerbner capitalised on governmental interest in TV violence to create the argument that TV damaged society by inhibiting creativity and discouraging political participation.
- Gerbner worked closely with media industry figures, and hoped his studies would encourage industrial and policy change.
- The CIP and violence profiles established methods for conceiving and investigating a range of media influences. These ideas can be applied to media other than TV.