

Cultivation Theory Effects On Students Interested In Journalism

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Television is an easily accessible medium that has escalated in popularity since the 1950s, when it became commonplace in U.S. households. It has evolved from small screens, showing only black-and-white images, to screens showcasing full-color images so large they can cover entire walls in homes. In the last seven decades, advances in technology have increased television's reach and power so much that viewers can now watch multiple channels at one time and simultaneously record shows they choose not to watch live. What's more, viewers also can watch television on their computers or via their mobile devices while on the go. (Studies measuring the media effects of watching television on newer technology seem to still be in exploratory stages.) Research also suggests that television has come to punctuate all parts of a lifetime – from initial exposure to shows as infants and children through end-of-life experiences, during which television often is a companion to elderly viewers (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Signorielli, 2004; Morgan, Shanahan, & Signorielli, 2015).

Through television, the world is entertained, educated, influenced and informed (Rubin, 1986; Signorielli, 2004; Hetsroni, 2008; Tsay & Bodine, 2012). Against this background, research showed that television has the power to influence people developing images of what real professions – in the case of this literature review, journalists specifically – look like. For years, literature has demonstrated that television is an accessible, 24/7 medium with powerful media effects. A 2014 report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics showed about 54,000 practitioners working in the field of journalism as reporters, correspondents or broadcast news analysts; many of those practitioners work for or with the 1,800 full-power television stations in the United States. So, the social significance of how viewers use television to form opinions about different occupations (which people often occupy for a significant amount of their lives)

cannot be disputed.

Using books and scholarly, peer-reviewed articles from some of the most well-respected communications research journals in the world, this literature review synthesizes studies that demonstrated that audiences make strong connections with what they see on television and associate those portrayals with real people in real professions. This literature review's goal is to add to the understanding of cultivation theory as a media effect. It employs cultivation theory as the primary model for understanding how entertainment television shows depicting journalists influence viewers who are students interested in journalism, absent of legitimate exposure to the profession. Furthermore, the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (2016) listed 118 ACEJMC-accredited journalism programs in the United States and abroad. That means twenty-six percent of the 450 colleges or universities with formal journalism programs valued accreditation of their programs so much that they voluntarily went through a process that is both extensive and expensive in an effort to tout accreditation, meaning these institutions have placed some level of importance on the endorsement.

Cultivation Theory

Gerbner and Gross (1976), the founders of cultivation theory, asserted in their landmark research that “television is a medium of the socialization of most people into standardized roles and behaviors. Its function is, in a word, enculturation” (p. 175). The authors suggested that television's foremost role is to oil the wheels of life in America and to regulate society's order. In short, television presents how life is. “Television's stories show and tell us about life—its people, places, power, and fate as well as how things work and how to solve problems” (Signorielli, 2004, p. 279). At the outset, cultivation theory was constructed as a television theory

and still is widely accepted as such. Recent research identified other platforms as contributors to cultivation, but television has remained at the base of the theory. Gerbner and Gross (1976) pointed to three underpinning idiosyncrasies of cultivation: it is a television-based theory; it makes a distinction between heavy viewers (those who watch four or more hours of television daily) and light viewers (those who watch fewer than four hours of television daily); and its effects on viewers are both gradual and long-term. Message system analysis and cultivation analysis found empirical evidence supporting that heavy viewers were more likely to give “television answers,” or answers that reflected what they saw in the television world, specifically concerning violence (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Over the last 40 years, cultivation theory research has evolved to study how television influences viewers’ perceptions of various occupations with which the viewers do not have direct experience (Hoffner, Levine, & Toohey, 2008; Gehrau, Brüggemann, & Handrup, 2016).

Critiquing Cultivation Theory

In drawing relationship from what viewers saw on television to what they perceived as reality, Potter (1988) criticized early research for not clearly defining reality and reality perceptions. “The shortcoming is that the ostensive definitions do not provide the detail needed to classify other forms of television content. For example, is a docudrama real?” (Potter, 1988, p. 24). Hetsroni (2008) criticized cultivation theory research as being overly engaged with the same television topics, including violence and law enforcement. When viewers do not have direct experience with what they view on television, television is a crucial social teacher, especially for heavy viewers. Based on the powerful effects and wide reach of television, researchers could question the social responsibility of Hollywood and other content producers.

Some researchers argued that drench hypothesis, articulated in Greenberg (1988), has a stronger effect on audiences than cultivation because cultivation takes a longer time to affect an audience. With the drench hypothesis, the effect on an audience is more immediate. Think: A child watches a scary movie and is jolted awake from a nightmare later that night. Drench hypothesis is the quick soak, “whereas cultivation can be characterized by a drip-drip-drip effect over a long period of time” (Quick, 2009, p. 42). However, in keeping with the established methods of cultivation theory research, scholars have continued to evaluate cultivation as a gradual effect, to demonstrate macro-level influence, instead of micro-level influence of singular messages (Potter, 2014).

Cultivation effect of occupations

Recent research has added to the understanding of the cultivation theory, which supposes that viewers of television shows featuring characters working in a particular profession will associate the characteristics of those fictional characters with how real-life people in that profession act or should act (Gehrau, Brüggemann, & Handrup, 2016; Koliska & Eckert, 2015). Though there is little literature that specifically used journalism portrayals on entertainment television as a background for understanding cultivation theory, there is research surrounding a well-admired, fascinating profession: medicine.

Quick (2009) applied cultivation theory in examining how heavy viewers of the primetime medical drama *Grey's Anatomy* (over 32 episodes) perceived real-life doctors. The author hypothesized that, among heavy viewers of *Grey's Anatomy*, perceptions of real-life doctors would be in line with the depictions of television doctors on this television program (Quick, 2009). Most of the viewers were college students, and the show allowed them to get a

behind-the-scenes look at a teaching hospital – something they likely had not experienced, which supported the suggestion that the less people know about what they view, the easier they are influenced and cultivated to believe the TV world is real. In this study, specifically, as viewers watched more episodes of *Grey's Anatomy*, the credibility of the show among them grew – possibly because those viewers didn't have enough first-hand knowledge to dispute what is presented, so instead, they bought into what they saw. Additionally, doctors are widely known (or assumed to be) intelligent, possibly some of the most intelligent people in the world. However, that established credibility of the show among viewers did not directly affect how the viewers perceived courageousness in real-world doctors; credibility and courageousness were positively associated though. The empirical evidence positively linked doctor courageousness and patient satisfaction. Quick (2009) used a single program to advance cultivation theory concerning a particular occupation (something that hadn't been done before because the focus had been on total television viewing).

As cultivation theory is foundationally a television theory, it's a fitting theoretical framework to apply to identify television effects on its heavy viewers concerning how these viewers form opinions about occupations with which they do not have direct experience. Empirical evidence supported that heavy viewers started to believe more of what they saw on television and that they believed it to be credible (Quick, 2009). In examining whether the perceived credibility of *Grey's Anatomy* mediated the relationship between viewing the show and perceived courageousness of real-world doctors, the empirical evidence supported the following: the television show established its own credibility, which established feelings among viewers that real-life doctors were courageous, which led to patient-satisfaction.

Potter (1988) explained that a viewer's real-life experience is an active variable in

separating fact from fiction on television. However, at least one study challenged the verity of that explanation. In a textual analysis of more than 90 reviews, interviews and articles featuring journalist-reaction – most of it negative – to the first season of HBO series *The Newsroom*, Koliska and Eckert (2015) highlighted the influence of television shows about journalists. While a tenet of cultivation theory is that cultivation is present as a media effect absent of a viewer's first-hand knowledge or information about the subject matter, Koliska and Eckert (2015) to some extent suggested that journalists were not exempt from cultivation; the authors both recognized and criticized how journalists have imitated what's seen in the very television shows those journalists criticized. The authors wrote "...our findings suggest that journalists also appear to turn fiction into reality by taking the TV show *The Newsroom* literally, often too literally" (Koliska & Eckert, 2015, p. 762). The authors also pointed to the public's inability to separate fact from fiction among an industry's actual practices when viewing television. "The public does not or cannot always distinguish between myths and practices; it only perceives the myth" (Koliska & Eckert, 2015, p. 753). The authors also critiqued the representations of journalism industry myths portrayed in *The Newsroom* as being in need of updating to reflect more recent journalistic forms if the show's producers wanted to steer clear of denunciation by the industry's professionals.

Hetsroni (2008) used cultivation theory to help determine whether viewing of overrepresented occupations on television distorted viewers' perceptions of people and issues linked to those occupations in real life – or whether this also happened when an occupation was underrepresented on television. The study's content analysis of primetime programming in Israel and a follow-up survey placed occupations in a category of overrepresented topics on television. The survey's 517 respondents (all freshmen at an Israeli public college) estimated how

frequently TV represented certain topics, which researchers eventually placed into four content domains: criminality, occupations, demography and sex life. On the strength of cultivation theory research methods, respondents were divided into three categories related to the amount of time they spent viewing television with heavy viewers being those who watched more than 3.5 hours of television daily; medium viewers being those who watched more than 2.5 hours of television daily; and light viewers being those who watched less than 2.5 hours of television daily. “Across the board, heavy viewers gave TV answers more frequently than medium viewers did, and medium viewers gave TV answers more frequently than light viewers did” (Hetsroni, 2008, p. 205).

Though uses and gratification was not heavily researched for this literature review, that theory is useful as a peripheral framework in understanding media selections within cultivation theory. According to Kim (2011), uses and gratification theory asserted that audiences choose media to fulfill their social and psychological needs. Accordingly, television viewers watched shows they like for entertainment value, education value or information value. Drawing a connection from viewers’ social needs, Bilandzic (2006) extends the research on cultivation theory to evaluate how viewers’ social realities affected the cultivation process and how close or remote viewers felt to the content they viewed on television. The author proposed “the perception of closeness or remoteness of television information plays a major role for cultivation, both with respect to the processing of television content and the construction of judgments” (p. 344). In simpler terms, the study proposed that closeness – whether experiential or mediated – was how well people related to what they saw on television, and if they related closely to what they saw, the topic’s importance for them increased. That being said, the closer a viewer feels to journalism or the more salient their desire to understand journalists, the closer they will feel to

content featuring those topics. This amplifies the importance of studying how students who are interested in journalism come to develop images about the profession and its practitioners.

Occupational Choices

There's a question children can't seem to escape: "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Even if their answer changes several times through childhood, adults are genuinely interested in children's answers to the question. For high school students, adults want to know what classes teenagers favor and what colleges teenagers are considering. Once students get to college, people ask what they're majoring in and what they want to do professionally after they graduate. Career choices are big deal and part of the fabric that establishes class systems around the world. Gehrau, Brüggemann and Handrup (2016) underscored how television affects career aspirations among adolescents. As prevalent as children's television programming is and as often as people are asked about their career aspirations throughout their lives, there is not an abundance of literature about the role television plays in young people making and voicing these ambitions.

Gehrau, Brüggemann and Handrup (2016) pointed to the difficulty of changing careers in countries such as Germany. Similar difficulty exists in the country of Brazil, where professions for its people often are predetermined based on family lineage (Perry, 2015). For example, in Brazil, if a child's mother is a maid and father is a gardener, it's likely that the child will grow up to become a maid or gardener as well. However, a country like the United States of America offers more latitude for entering and exiting professional fields. For example, the person expected to be sworn in as the 45th U.S. president had no political experience prior to his election. The November 2016 election cycle in the United States brought the notion that "you can do anything you set your mind to" to life. Gehrau, Brüggemann and Handrup (2016)

acknowledged the importance of media portrayals of occupations on television when they wrote “it is possible for deviant media images of occupations to cause problems by cultivating false expectations about the accessibility of jobs; it is also possible that they will often inspire occupational aspirations for professions that are rare” (p. 468). In an 14-week analysis of primetime television drama in 1993 and 2002, Signorielli (2004) found depictions of occupations on television to be “somewhat unrealistic compared to the types of jobs most people have” (p. 292). Several television shows feature characters in the role of U.S. president, as detectives and as doctors, but securing those positions in real-life takes years of education, landing ideal opportunities at ideal times, and making the connections with the right people at the right times. Having those necessary details fit perfectly together is easier said than done. In many instances, Hollywood television shows and movies forgo showing the struggle of reaching professional goals in favor of skipping to the glamour of already being immersed and successful in the profession. Hoffner, Levine and Toohey (2008) pointed to cultivation theory as an explanation for how television affects career choices and suggested that television led viewers to believe certain occupations were glamorous and high-paying but that the jobs didn’t take as much effort as they actually do in real life.

Gehrau, Brüggemann and Handrup (2016) hypothesized that television increases the likelihood that students will be drawn to a particular profession depicted on television, but the authors pointed to three other factors to help understand the process of using media to determine career paths. They formed three sub hypotheses related to media use (H1), mediation (H2) and media impact (H3). In line with what Bilandzic (2006) found, Gehrau, Brüggemann and Handrup’s (2016) H1 anticipated that viewers would choose media showing their occupational aspirations. For example, a child with expressed aspirations of wanting to be a journalist would

be a fan of *Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman*, which prominently featured a journalist. The authors' H2 suggested that as a result of H1, viewers' career aspirations were strengthened. That is, the more a child watches *Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman*, the child's desire to be a journalist will grow as a result of watching the show. The authors' final hypothesis, H3, suggested viewing occupation-related television would increase the likelihood that the viewer would want to enter that occupation. That is, watching a show about journalism would make a viewer want to become a journalist. Limitations of the study lie in potential regional and cultural differences among adolescents. Also, in related research, Gehrau, Brüggemann and Handrup's (2016) cultivation study found that television had only a small impact on the desire for easy work when low-stress and carefree jobs as well as small slightly increased desires for more money, power and respect on the job. These results of cultivation theory studies have presented a challenge for scholastic journalism educators to make sure students are exposed to accurate depictions of the journalism profession.

Implications for Journalism Education

Scholastic journalism experiences are an instructional tool that expand and strengthen language arts curriculums at secondary- and post-secondary institutions. Scholastic journalism programs have a positive effect on how the students involved in those learning experiences communicate in public and interpersonal correspondence beyond high school and college. Increasing interactivity in the classroom is a valuable approach for scholastic journalism educators, who Renfro and Maittlen-Harris (1986) challenged to get back to the basics of teaching through interaction and discussion, instead of relying so much on technology. Even in 1986, the hypothesis that students' writing would improve (generating longer news stories, fewer errors in those news stories, and fewer factual and mechanical errors) with more computer time

was rejected. Renfro and Maittlen-Harris (1986) underscored the responsibility that journalism educators have to be increasingly active in the learning environment. Renfro and Maittlen-Harris (1986) wrote the following:

Computers are a tool. They do not write; students do. And they do not teach writing; teachers do. The relationship between an instructor and students is complex, and it is more significant than time spent using computer terminals. (p. 51)

Borrowing from the field of psychology, there were ample suggestions to combat the negative effects of potentially distorted views of journalists and journalism through television portrayals. There were strong ties to psychology's social learning theory as a model to support combating adverse influence of television on students interested in journalism. The theory explained how people's cognitive, behavioral and environmental influences shaped their actions. The social learning theory also adopts a pseudo monkey-see-monkey-do philosophy. For example, students who participate in scholastic journalism experiences continue to imitate what they learn during these experiences when they communicate within and outside of the profession's realms. That being said, scholastic journalism programs would be wise to encourage students to get real-world experience through internships and service-learning projects that expose them to the diverse populations they will need to know how to interact with as reporters, photographers, videographers so that the students become well-rounded, well-educated, well-exposed media activists. "Service-learning opportunities provide such occasions, and thereby may help students to reconsider their own predetermined definitions of what journalism is, what the responsibility of the journalist is, and how journalism is to meet the needs of various publics" (Clark, 2013, p. 886).

In Clark (2013), through the Youth Participatory Action Research framework, students from a private university spent a semester working on a service-learning project that allowed them to create videos about the role of media in society. The students who would watch the videos were urban high school students in an after-school digital media club. The author acknowledged that the experience did not automatically make the students feel like journalists. Clark (2013) found the following:

Yet when journalism educators pair critical service-learning interactions with opportunities for thinking about the role of media in public life, we may open the possibility for students to reconsider what it means to be a media creator and an activist engaged in changing the way media industries operate and to report in the interests of the publics they serve. (p. 896)

Proper training of students interested in entering the journalism profession has a direct effect on the scholarship of media effects. However, the onus of increasing exposure of future professional journalists to the populations and real-life situations they will one day encounter is not only on journalism educators; they will need practitioners' help. McDonough, Rodriguez, and Prior-Miller (2009) also suggested that internships help students hone skills. Many journalism and communications professionals have had internships that helped them hone their skills, and the authors clearly defined internships, a way to measure student performance during internships and also suggested that use of interpersonal communication skills be evaluated during internships. Their research also developed a web-based system for evaluating interning students, which would be useful to universities because many schools do not officially track evaluations of students who have interned for a news outlet. McDonough, Rodriguez, and Prior-Miller's (2009) call-to-action required the academy and practitioners within the journalism industry to join forces

to create indispensable opportunities for students studying journalism to work in professional newsrooms, thereby decreasing the likelihood that students will be cultivated to believe Hollywood's depiction of journalists and journalism.

For students who are interested in pursuing advanced degrees in fields such as journalism, communication studies and public relations, it is impressive and often required to have work published in reputable communication journals or to present research and papers at national conferences. It is tough to earn publication in a reputable academic journal or a presentation slot at an academic research conference, and the caliber of work is much more advanced than what students may learn just through classroom experience as undergraduate journalism students. However, the skills students learn in undergraduate journalism school within and outside of the classroom give them a strong foundation for being able to clearly communicate their ideas clearly. Carpenter (2008) suggested that highly regarded training and mentorship is necessary for student authorship to happen, and scholastic journalism programs are a steppingstone to those opportunities. While Carpenter (2008) mentioned that the Association of American Universities criticized universities in 1998 for placing more emphasis on research than teaching, she acknowledged that "research productivity is key in helping Ph.D. students secure a job in academia" (p. 224). Students with dedicated mentors within their career fields have career advisors who are ready, willing and able to direct them in professional decisions. Being able to call on those advisors – often gained as a result of networking before, during and after internships and during other out-of-class learning experiences – is advantageous for students and the professional overall.

King's (2008) article sustained a James Baldwin quote that says: "Know from whence you came. If you know whence you came, there are absolutely no limitations to where you can

go.” The article was encouragement for journalism educators and practitioners to do a better job of upholding the tenets of teaching its profession to its future professionals so that the field is regarded as a legitimate profession with authentic best practices. If journalism as a profession does not respect and teach its history to its students, the field’s respect will dwindle. In an effort to gain readers and increase traffic to news sites, practitioners spend so much time focused on their individual beats/topics that the nostalgia of the profession being full of language connoisseurs has taken a beating.

Cultivation research sustained television is a social teacher with strong, lasting media effects. That college students watch television to pass time cannot be disputed. As one of the most common appliances in U.S. households and in college dorm rooms, television is a far-reaching, powerful teacher for students, especially outside of class. Universities often list televisions as suggested items for residential college students to have in their dorm rooms, and televisions often are included in shared spaces, such as residence hall lobbies and student centers, on college campuses. Viewing parties – social gatherings where students come together to watch popular television shows – also can happen in those shared spaces. An increase in social television watching and social engagement also has increased conversation among viewers about what they see on entertainment programming (Guo & Chad-Olmsted, 2015). Additionally, technological advances have made television available to viewers on their mobile devices, including cell phones, computers and tablets. Viewers not only watch television on those devices, but they also use social media to discuss what they see on the programs before, during and after they view them. As Hollywood is in the business of entertaining – whether the depictions they present are accurate or not – it remains the academy’s responsibility to teach future journalists how to be future journalists.

Conclusion

Cultivation has been identified as one of the most vital theories developed in the last 50 years (Morgan, Shanahan, & Signorielli, 2015). As a television-based theory, cultivation theory features the most far-reaching medium for entertainment, education and information. Technology has increased television's power and effects and such advances (including increased access, decreased costs and broadened capabilities) are not without massive effects on all parts of life around the world. Television's popularity also has forced communication scholars to expand their research of its efficacy and domination over viewers (and all media) to incorporate advances in technology that have made television more accessible and inexpensive.

In relation to journalism education (the focus of this literature review), television's growth has presented new challenges for the academy, industry practitioners and even Hollywood. Journalism educators must find ways to combat distorted images of the journalism profession if they want to continue to draw students to the academy to study journalism. Doing so would help manage students' expectations about the field they are preparing to enter. With an increase in "citizen journalism," the number and reach of blogs and websites run by people without extensive, formal training in the journalism field may have an effect on the decisions of professional journalists at competing organizations. Ultimately, whether or not the academy takes action, media effects scholarship will be affected. A study that suggests an entertainment-education approach (a media literacy course, of sorts) to improving the understanding of journalism could be interesting as well.

Future research should investigate how and if Hollywood answers the call from some scholars (Quick, 2009; Koliska & Eckert, 2015) to produce more accurate depictions of the

occupations on television and in movies. Empirical evidence from Quick (2009) supported that opinions of real-life doctors are cultivated as a result of heavy viewing of *Grey's Anatomy*. The article pointed to several ways to advance the research surrounding cultivation theory and the perceived credibility of media on viewers perception, including whether entertainment shows have a responsibility to present accurate information about organ donation. Koliska and Eckert (2015) challenged creators of *The Newsroom* to update their portrayals to reflect more recent journalistic forms in an effort to avoid criticism from journalism professionals.

The social significance of how television affects viewers' opinions of different occupations cannot be disputed. This literature review added to the understanding of cultivation theory as a media effect and synthesized research that explored how audiences make strong connections with what they see on television and how they associated those portrayals with real people in real professions. Finally, it employed cultivation theory as the primary model for understanding how television shows depicting journalists influence viewers who are students interested in journalism.

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