

LIVING WITH TELEVISION:  
THE DYNAMICS OF THE CULTIVATION PROCESS

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The longer we live with television, the more invisible it becomes. As the number of people who have never lived without television continues to grow, the medium is increasingly taken for granted as an appliance, a piece of furniture, a storyteller, a member of the family. Ever fewer parents and even grandparents can explain to children what it was like to grow up before television -- an age cultural historians will surely call BT.

Television is the source of the most broadly-shared images and messages in history. While new technologies transform business and professional communications, the public and much of the research community continue to be concerned with over-the-air television, and for good reasons. Saturation and viewing time, incredibly high for decades, continue to increase. The mass ritual that is television shows no signs of weakening its hold over the common symbolic environment into which our children are born and in which we all live out our lives. For most viewers, new types of delivery systems such as cable, satellite, and

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cassette signal even further penetration and integration of established viewing patterns into everyday life.

And yet far too little is known and even less agreed about the dynamic role of television in our lives. The reasons for this lack of consensus include institutional resistance (high economic stakes and political interests might be affected), the relative youth of the field, the inherent clumsiness of research methods and measures, and the "hit-and-run" proclivities and sporadic funding of those who seek to understand television's overall impact. In contrast, we have been fortunate to obtain research grant support from a variety of public sources over a long period of time. We have thus been able to follow a fairly consistent line of theory and research on the implications of television for over a decade and a half. Our research project, called Cultural Indicators, has accumulated large amounts of data with which to develop and refine our theoretical approach<sup>1</sup> and the research strategy we call Cultivation Analysis (see Gerbner, et al., 1980b). In this chapter we summarize and illustrate our theory of the dynamics of the cultivation process.

### Television in Society

Television is a centralized system of story-telling. It is part and parcel of our daily life. Its drama, commercials, news

and other programs bring a relatively coherent world of common images and messages into every home.

Television cultivates from infancy the very predispositions and preferences that used to be acquired from other "primary" sources. Transcending historic barriers of literacy and mobility, television has become the primary common source of socialization and everyday information (mostly in the form of entertainment) of an otherwise heterogeneous population. The repetitive pattern of television's mass-produced messages and images forms the mainstream of a common symbolic environment.

Many of those who now live with television have never before been part of a shared national culture. Television provides, perhaps for the first time since preindustrial religion, a daily ritual of highly compelling and informative content that forms a strong cultural link between elites and other publics. The heart of the analogy of television and religion, and the similarity of their social functions, lie in the continual repetition of patterns (myths, ideologies, "facts," relationships, and so on) which serve to define the world and legitimize the social order.

The stories of the dramatic world need not present credible accounts of what things are in order to perform the more critical function of demonstrating how things work. The illumination of the invisible relationships of life and society has always been the principal function of story telling. Television today serves that function, telling most of the stories to most of the people most of the time.

This superimposition of a relatively homogeneous process upon a relatively diversified print and film context is a central cultural feature of our age. Television is different from other media in its centralized mass-production and ritualistic use of a coherent set of images and messages produced for total populations. Therefore, exposure to the total pattern rather than only to specific genres or programs is what accounts for the historically new and distinct consequences of living with television -- the cultivation of shared conceptions of reality among otherwise diverse publics.

We do not deny or minimize the importance of specific programs, selective attention and perception, specifically targeted communications, individual and group differences, and research on effects defined in terms of short-run and individual attitude and behavior change. But exclusive concentration on those aspects and terms of traditional effects research risks losing sight of what is basically new and significant about television as the common story-teller of our age.

Compared to other media, television provides a relatively restricted set of choices for a virtually unrestricted variety of interests and publics. Most of its programs are by commercial necessity designed to be watched by nearly everyone in a relatively non-selective fashion. Surveys show that amount of viewing follows the style of life of the viewer and is relatively insensitive to programming. The audience is always the group available at a certain time of the day, the week, and the season,

regardless of the programs. Most viewers watch by the clock and either do not know what they will watch when they turn on the set or follow established routines rather than choose each program as they would choose a book, a movie or an article. Nielsen studies (reported in the trade paper presstime, October 1984, p. 11), show that only 3.6 percent of prime time viewers switch channels during programs and 7 percent switch during commercials. The number and variety of choices available to view when most viewers are available to watch is also limited by the fact that many programs designed for the same broad audience tend to be similar in their basic makeup and appeal.

According to the 1984 Nielsen Report, in the typical home the television set is in use for about seven hours a day, and actual viewing by persons over two years old averages over four hours a day. With that much viewing, there can be little selectivity. And the more people watch the less selective they can and tend to be. Most regular and heavy viewers watch more of everything. Researchers who attribute findings to news viewing or preference for action programs, etc., overlook the fact that most of those who watch more news or action programs watch more of all types of programs, and that, in any case, many different types of programs manifest the same basic features.

Therefore, from the point of view of the cultivation of relatively stable and common images, the pattern that counts is that of the total pattern of programming to which total communities are regularly exposed over long periods of time.

That is the pattern of settings, casting, social typing, actions, and related outcomes that cuts across most program types and defines the world of television -- a world in which many viewers live so much of their lives that they cannot avoid absorbing or dealing with its recurrent patterns, probably many times each day.

To repeat, the patterns central to cultivation analysis are those central to the world of television. They pervade most if not all programs. What matters most for the study of television is not so much what this or that viewer may prefer as what virtually no regular viewer can escape. Therefore, the focus of cultivation analysis is not on what this or that campaign may achieve but what all campaigns are up against: a widening circle of standardized conceptions superimposed upon a more selectively used print culture and appearing to be increasingly resistant to change.

#### The Shift from "Effects" to "Cultivation" Research

The vast bulk of scientific inquiry about television's social impact can be seen as directly descended from the theoretical models and the methodological procedures of marketing and attitude change research. Large amounts of time, energy, and money have been spent in attempts to determine how to change people's attitudes or behaviors. By and large, however, this

conceptualization of effect as immediate change among individuals has not produced research which helps us understand the distinctive features of television: massive, long-term and common exposure of large and heterogeneous publics to centrally-produced, mass-distributed, and repetitive systems of stories.

Traditional effects research perspectives are based on evaluating specific informational, educational, political, or marketing efforts in terms of selective exposure and immediately measurable differences between those exposed and others. Scholars steeped in those traditions find it difficult to accept the emphasis of cultivation analysis upon total immersion rather than selective viewing and upon the spread of stable similarities of outlook rather than of remaining sources of cultural differentiation and change. Similarly, we are all imbued with the perspectives of print culture and its ideals of freedom, diversity and an active electorate producing as well as selecting information and entertainment from the point of view of a healthy variety of competing and conflicting interests. Therefore, many also question the emphasis of cultivation analysis upon the "passive" viewer being "programmed" from birth, and the dissolution of authentic publics that this emphasis implies. These scholars and analysts argue that other circumstances do intervene and can affect or even neutralize the cultivation process, and that many, even if not most, viewers do watch selectively, and that those program selections do make a difference.

We do not dispute these contentions. As we shall describe below, we account for them in our analytical strategies. But we believe, again, that concentrating on individual differences and immediate change misses the main point of television: the absorption of divergent currents into a stable and common mainstream.

Others have, of course, suggested that mass media may involve functions and processes other than overt change. Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948) argued long ago that the primary impact of exposure to mass communication is likely to be not change but maintenance of the status quo. Similar notions have been expressed by Glynn (1956) and Bogart (1956). Our own studies in institutional process analysis show that media content and functions reflect institutional organization, interest, and control (Gerbner 1969c, 1972). Television's goal of greatest audience appeal at least cost demands that most of its messages follow conventional social morality (cf. Weigel and Jessor, 1973).

Communications researchers have often bent over backwards to avoid simplistic, unidirectional ideas about effects, but rarely have concrete alternatives been proposed. As McQuail (1976) noted, television "is said to 'stimulate', 'involve', 'trigger off', 'generate', 'induce', 'suggest', 'structure', 'teach', 'persuade', 'gratify', 'arouse', 'reinforce', 'activate'; but the variety of terms masks a vagueness in many attempts to characterize media impact. Indeed, the wide variety of terms may



stem from the tendency of media research to isolate and dissect pieces from the whole.

Culture cultivates the social relationships of a society. The mainstream defines its dominant current. We focus on the implications of accumulated exposure to the most general system of messages, images and values that underly and cut across the widest variety of programs. These are the continuities that most effects studies overlook.

If, as we argue, the messages are so stable, the medium is so ubiquitous, and it is accumulated total exposure that counts, then almost everyone should be affected. Even "light" viewers live in the same cultural environment as most others and what they do not get through the tube they may get from others who do get it from the tube. It is clear, then, that the cards are stacked against finding evidence of effects. Therefore, the discovery of a systematic pattern of even small but pervasive differences between light and heavy viewers may indicate far-reaching consequences.

A slight but pervasive (e.g., generational) shift in the cultivation of common perspectives may alter the cultural climate and may upset the balance of social and political decision-making without necessarily changing observable behavior. A single percentage point difference in ratings is worth millions of dollars in advertising revenue -- as the networks know only too well. It takes but a few degrees shift in the average temperature to have an ice age. A range of 3 to 15 percent

margins (typical of our "cultivation differentials") in a large and otherwise stable field often signals a landslide, a market takeover, or an epidemic, and it certainly tips the scale of any closely balanced choice or decision. Cultivation theory is based on the persistent and pervasive pull of the television mainstream on a great variety of currents and counter-currents.

If that theory is correct, it is the current system of television, and not our methodology, that challenges theories of self-government predicated on print-based assumptions of ideologically diverse, distinct and selective publics conscious of their own divergent interests. So the decision to focus on what most viewers share in common is more than a shift of research emphasis. It is an attempt to develop a methodology appropriate to the distinct and central cultural dynamics of the age of television. That requires a set of theoretical and methodological assumptions and techniques different from those of traditional media effects research. Through the Cultural Indicators project, we have begun to develop such an alternative approach.

### Cultural Indicators

The project we call Cultural Indicators is historically grounded, theoretically guided, and empirically supported. As so many projects in the history of communications research, it was launched as an independently funded enterprise in an applied

context, though it was based on earlier theoretical considerations (Gerbner, 1969a). The project, as such, began with a systematic analysis of television violence for the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence (Gerbner, 1969b). It continued with follow-up analyses for the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior (Gerbner, 1972), and with yearly Violence Profiles funded by a variety of organizations.

Although these early efforts (and many published reports) focused primarily on the nature and functions of television violence, the Cultural Indicators project was broadly conceived from the outset. Even violence was studied as a demonstration of the distribution of power in the world of television, with serious implications for the confirmation and perpetuation of minority status (Gerbner et al. 1979; Morgan 1983), and the project continued to take into account a wide range of topics, issues, and concerns (Gerbner and Gross, 1976). We have investigated the extent to which television viewing contributes to audience conceptions and actions in such realms as sex and age-role stereotypes, health, science, the family, educational achievement and aspirations, politics, and religion.

The Cultural Indicators approach involves a three-pronged research strategy. (For a more detailed description see Gerbner, 1973.) The first prong, called institutional process analysis, is designed to investigate the formation of policies directing the massive flow of media messages. Because of its direct policy

orientation, this research is the most difficult to fund and, therefore, the least developed. (For some examples see Gerbner 1969c, 1972.) More directly relevant to our present focus are the other two prongs we call message system analysis and cultivation analysis. Both relate to -- and help develop -- a conception of the dynamics of the cultivation process.

In the second prong, we record week-long samples of network television drama each year and subject these systems of messages to rigorous and detailed content analysis in order to reliably delineate selected features of the television world.<sup>2</sup> We consider these the potential lessons television cultivates, and use them as a source of questions for the cultivation analysis.

In the third prong, we examine the responses given to these questions (phrased to refer to the real world) among those with varying amounts of exposure to the world of television.

(Non-viewers are too few and demographically too scattered for serious research purposes.) We want to determine whether those who spend more of their time with television are more likely to answer these questions in ways that reflect the potential lessons of the television world (give the "television answer") than are those who watch less television but are otherwise comparable (in terms of important demographic characteristics) to the heavy viewers. We have used the concept of "cultivation" to describe the contributions television viewing makes to viewer conceptions of social reality. "Cultivation differential" is the margin of

difference in conceptions of reality between light and heavy viewers in the same demographic subgroups.

### Cultivation, a Multidirectional Process

Our use of the term "cultivation" for television's contribution to conceptions of social reality, however, is not simply a fancier word for "effects". Nor does it necessarily imply a one-way, monolithic process. The "effects" of a pervasive medium upon the composition and structure of the symbolic environment are subtle, complex, and intermingled with other influences. This perspective, therefore, assumes an interaction between the medium and its publics.

The elements of cultivation do not originate with television or appear out of a void. Layers of demographic, social, personal, and cultural contexts also determine the shape, scope, and degree of the contribution television is likely to make. Yet, the "meanings" of those contexts and factors are in themselves aspects of the cultivation process. That is, while a viewer's sex, or age, or class may make a difference, television helps define what it means, for example, to be an adolescent female member of a given social class. The interaction is a continuous process (as is cultivation) taking place at every stage, from cradle to grave.

Thus, television neither simply "creates" nor "reflects" images, opinions, and beliefs. Rather, it is an integral aspect of a dynamic process. Institutional needs and objectives influence the creation and distribution of mass-produced messages which create, fit into, exploit, and sustain the needs, values and ideologies of mass publics. These publics, in turn, acquire distinct identities as publics partly through exposure to the ongoing flow of messages.

The question of "which comes first" is misleading and irrelevant. People are born into a symbolic environment with television as its mainstream. Children begin viewing several years before they begin reading, and well before they can even talk. Television viewing is both a shaper and a stable part of certain lifestyles and outlooks. It links the individual to a larger if synthetic world, a world of television's own making. Most of those with certain social and psychological characteristics, dispositions, and world views, and fewer alternatives as attractive and compelling as television, use it as their major vehicle of cultural participation. The content shapes and promotes their continued attention. To the extent that television dominates their sources of information, continued exposure to its messages is likely to reiterate, confirm, and nourish -- i.e., cultivate -- its values and perspectives.

Cultivation should not be confused with "mere" reinforcement (although, to be sure, reaffirmation and stability in the face of pressures for change is not a trivial feat). Nor should it

suggest that television viewing is simply symptomatic of other dispositions and outlook systems. Finally, it should not be taken as saying that we do not think any change is involved. We have certainly found change with the first "television generation" (Gerbner and Gross, 1976) and with television spreading to various areas of a country (Morgan, 1984) and of life (Morgan and Rothschild, 1983). When we talk about the "independent contribution" of television viewing, we mean quite specifically that the generation (in some) and maintenance (in others) of some set of outlooks or beliefs can be traced to steady, cumulative exposure to the world of television. Our longitudinal studies of adolescents (Gerbner, et al., 1980b; Morgan, 1982) also show that television viewing does exert an independent influence on attitudes over time, but that belief structures can also influence subsequent viewing.

The point is that cultivation is not conceived as a unidirectional but rather more like a gravitational process. The angle and direction of the "pull" depends on where groups of viewers and their styles of life are with reference to the center of gravity, the "mainstream" of the world of television. Each group may strain in a different direction, but all groups are affected by the same central current. Cultivation is thus part of a continual, dynamic, ongoing process of interaction among messages and contexts. This holds even though (and in a sense especially because) the hallmark of the process is either relative stability or slow change.

As successive generations grow up with television's version of the world, the former and traditional distinctions become blurred. Cultivation thus implies the steady entrenchment of mainstream orientations in most cases and the systematic but almost imperceptible modification of previous orientations in others; in other words, affirmation for the believers and indoctrination for deviants. That is the process we call "mainstreaming."

The observable manifestations of the process vary as a function of the environmental context and other attributes of the viewer. In order to explain these variations, however, it is necessary to describe the central components of the symbolic environment composed by television. We will return to the concept of "mainstreaming" after a brief consideration of the values, ideology, demography, and action structure of the television mainstream itself.

### The World of Television

Message system analysis is a tool for making systematic, reliable, and cumulative observations about television content. We use message system analysis not to determine what any individual viewer (or group of viewers) might see, but to assess the most representative, stable and recurrent aggregate patterns of messages to which total communities are exposed over long



periods of time. The analysis is based on the premise that while findings about media content cannot be taken at face value as evidence of "impact," representative and reliable observations of content (rather than selective and idiosyncratic impressions) are critical prerequisites to a valid consideration of media influence. In other words, a relatively few unambiguous, dominant, and common content patterns provide the basis for interaction and shared assumptions, meanings, and definitions (though not necessarily agreement) among large and heterogeneous mass publics. Message system analysis records those patterns and establishes the bases for cultivation analysis. We have been conducting annual analyses of prime time and weekend daytime network television drama since 1976.<sup>2</sup>

The world of prime time is animated by vivid and intimate portrayals of over 300 major dramatic characters a week, mostly stock types, and their weekly rounds of dramatic activities. Conventional and "normal" though that world may appear, it is in fact far from the reality of anything but consumer values and the ideology of social power.

Men outnumber women at least three to one and women are younger (but age faster) than the men they meet. Young people (under 18) comprise one-third and older people (over 65) one-fifth of their true proportion in the population Figure 1 shows difference between the age distribution in the

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FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

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television world and reality. Similarly, blacks on television represent three-fourths and Hispanics one-third of their share of the U.S. population, and a disproportionate number are minor rather than major characters.

The point is not that culture should duplicate real-life statistics. It is rather that the direction and thrust of cultural amplification or neglect provides a clue to the treatment of social types, groups, and values, and yields suggestions for cultivation analysis. For example, the prominent and stable overrepresentation of well-off white men in the prime of life dominates prime time and indicates a relatively restrictive view of women's and minority opportunities and rights. As Figure 1 suggests, the general demography of the television world bears greater resemblance to the facts of consumer income than to the U.S. Census.

The myth of the middle class as the all-American norm pervades the world of television. Nearly seven out of 10 television characters appear in the "middle-middle" of a five-way classification system. Most of them are professionals and managers. Blue collar and service work occupies 67 percent of all Americans but only 10 percent of television characters.

In the world of prime time the state acts mostly to fend off threats to law and order in a mean and dangerous world.

Enforcing the law of that world takes nearly three times as many characters as the number of all blue collar and service workers. The typical viewer of an average week's prime time programs encounters seemingly realistic and intimate (but usually false) representations of the life and work of 30 police officers, seven lawyers, and three judges, but only one engineer or scientist and very few blue-collar workers. Again, nearly everybody appears to be comfortably managing on an "average" income of the mythical norm of "middle class."

But threats abound. Crime in prime time is at least 10 times as rampant as in the real world. An average of five to six acts of overt physical violence per hour menace over half of all major characters. However, pain, suffering, and medical help rarely follow this mayhem. Symbolic violence demonstrates power, not therapy; it shows who can get away with what against whom. The dominant white men in the prime of life are more likely to be victimizers than victims. Conversely, old, young, and minority women, and young boys, are more likely to be victims rather than victimizers in violent conflicts. The analysis of content data as a message system rather than as isolated incidents of violence or sex, for example, makes it possible to view these acts in context as representing social relationships and the distribution (as well as symbolic enforcement) of the structure of power according to television.

The stability and consistency of basic patterns over the years is one of their most striking (but not surprising) features. A central cultural arm of society could hardly avoid reflecting (and cultivating) some of its basic structural characteristics, as well as more specific institutional positions and interests. While television has obviously changed on many levels (e.g., there have been ebbs and flows in the popularity and distribution of various genres, new production values, visible but token minority representation, and many short-lived trends and fads), these changes are superficial. The underlying values, demography, ideology, and power relationships have manifested only minor fluctuations with virtually no significant deviations over time, despite the actual social changes which have occurred. The remarkable pattern of uniformity, durability, and resiliency of the aggregate messages of prime time network drama explains its cultivation of both stable concepts and the resistance to change.

#### Modes of Cultivation Analysis

Our tracking and documentation of the shape and contours of the television world has led to several analytical strategies concerning the cultivation potential of television. These include analyses of the extent to which television "teaches" various "facts" about the world, of extrapolations from those

"facts" to more general images and orientations, and of the incorporation of the lessons into viewers' personal assumptions and expectations.

Each of these involves somewhat different processes and relies on the specific findings of message system analysis to varying degrees. The content findings form the conceptual basis for the questions we ask respondents. The margins of difference ("cultivation differentials") between demographically matched light and heavy viewers' response patterns defines the extent of cultivation. Where possible or appropriate, we use large surveys which were conducted for other purposes, with the accompanying advantages and limitations of secondary analysis. In any case, the questions do not mention television, and the respondents' awareness or perceptions of the source of their information is irrelevant for our purposes. The resulting relationship, if any, between amount of viewing and the tendency to respond to these questions according to television's portrayals (with other things held constant) illuminates television's contribution to viewers' conceptions of social reality.<sup>3</sup>

The cases of clear-cut divergence between symbolic reality and "objective" reality provide convenient tests of the extent to which television's versions of "the facts" are incorporated or absorbed into what heavy viewers take for granted about the world. For example, television drama tends to sharply underrepresent older people. While those over 65 constitute the fastest growing segment of the real-world population, heavy

viewers are more likely to feel that the elderly are a "vanishing breed" -- that compared to 20 years ago there are fewer of them, that they are in worse health, and that they don't live as long -- all contrary to fact (Gerbner, et al., 1980a).

As another example, consider how likely television characters are to encounter violence compared to the rest of us. Well over half of all major characters on television are involved each week in some kind of violent action. While FBI statistics have clear limitations, they indicate that in any one year less than one percent of people in the U.S. are victims of criminal violence. Accordingly, we have found considerable support for the proposition that heavy exposure to the world of television cultivates exaggerated perceptions of the number of people involved in violence in any given week (Gerbner, et al., 1979, 1980b), as well as numerous other inaccurate beliefs about crime and law enforcement.

In these cases, we build upon the patterns revealed through message system analysis (say, concerning age and sex-roles, occupations, prevalence of certain actions, etc.) and ask viewers questions that tap what they assume to be the facts of real life with regard to these patterns.

Our investigation of the cultivation process is not limited to the lessons of television "facts" compared to real-world statistics. Some of the most interesting and important topics and issues for cultivation analysis involve the symbolic

transformation of message system data into hypotheses about more general issues and assumptions.

The "facts" (which are evidently learned quite well) are likely to become the basis for a broader world view, thus making television a significant source of general values, ideologies and perspectives as well as specific assumptions, beliefs, and images. This extrapolation beyond the specific "facts" derived from message system analysis can be seen as "second-order" cultivation analysis. Hawkins and Pingree (1982) call this the cultivation of "value systems."

One example of this is what we have called the "mean world" syndrome. Our message data say little directly about either the selfishness or altruism of people, and there are certainly no real world statistics about the extent to which people can be trusted. Yet, we have found that one "lesson" viewers derive from heavy exposure to the violence-saturated world of television is that in such a mean and dangerous world, most people "cannot be trusted," and that most people are "just looking out for themselves" (Gerbner et al., 1980b). We have also found that the differential ratios of symbolic victimization among women and minorities on television cultivates different levels of insecurity among their real-life counterparts, a "hierarchy of fears" that confirms and tends to perpetuate their dependent status (Morgan, 1983).

Another example of extrapolated assumptions relates to the image of women. The dominant majority status of men on

television does not mean that heavy viewers ignore daily experience and underestimate the number of women in society. But it means that most of them absorb the implicit assumptions that women have more limited abilities and interests than men. Most groups of heavy viewers -- with other characteristics held constant -- score higher on our "sexism scale."

Other "second-order" extrapolations from content patterns have also led to fruitful discoveries of more explicitly political import. For example, we have argued that as television seeks large and heterogeneous audiences, its messages are designed to disturb as few as possible. Therefore they tend to "balance" opposing perspectives, and to steer a "middle course" along the supposedly non-ideological mainstream. We have found that heavy viewers are significantly and substantially more likely to label themselves as being "moderate" rather than either "liberal" or "conservative" (see Gerbner, et al., 1982, 1984).

Finally, we have observed a complex relationship between the cultivation of general orientations or assumptions about "facts" of life and more specific personal expectations. For example, television may cultivate exaggerated notions of the prevalence of violence and risk out in the world, but the cultivation of expectations of personal victimization depends on the neighborhood of the viewer. (See Gerbner et al., 1981a.) Different groups may hold the same assumptions about the "facts" but relate to them in different ways, depending on their own situations.



Thus the cultivation of a general conception of social reality (e.g. about women's "place" or violence in the world) may lead to taking a certain position on public issues or to some marketing decision but need not result in other behavior consonant with that conception. The latter (e.g. career expectation, likelihood of victimization) may be deflected by demographic or personal situations or other currents in the television mainstream. Our focus has generally been on those basic perspectives and conceptions that bear the strongest relationships to common expectations and the formation of public policy.

#### The Nature of Cultivation

Since the early 1970's, the range of topics we have subjected to cultivation analysis has greatly expanded. On issue after issue we found that the assumptions, beliefs and values of heavy viewers differ systematically from those of comparable groups of light viewers. The differences tend to reflect both the dominant patterns of life in the television world and the characteristics of different groups of light and heavy viewers.

Sometimes we found that these differences hold across-the-board, meaning that those who watch more television are more likely -- in all or most subgroups -- to give what we call

"television answers" to our questions. But in most cases the patterns were more complex.

As we looked into the cultivation process in more and more aspects of life and society, from health-related beliefs to political orientations and occupational images (and much more), we found that television viewing usually relates in different but consistent ways to different groups' life situations and world views.

We have found that personal interaction makes a difference. Adolescents whose parents are more involved in their viewing show sharply smaller relationships between amount of viewing and perceiving the world in terms of television's portrayals (Gross and Morgan, in press). Children who are more integrated into cohesive peer groups are less receptive to cultivation (Rothschild, 1984). In contrast, adolescents who watch cable programming show significantly stronger cultivation patterns (Morgan and Rothschild, 1983). The implication is that cultivation is both dependent on and a manifestation of the extent to which mediated imagery dominates the viewers' sources of information. Personal interaction and affiliation reduces cultivation; cable television (presumably by providing even "more of the same") increases it.

Personal, day-to-day, direct experience also plays a role. We have found that the relationship between amount of viewing and fear of crime is strongest among those who have good reason to be afraid. When one's everyday environment is congruent with and

reinforces television's messages, the result is a phenomenon we call "resonance." For example, the cultivation of insecurity is most pronounced among those who live in high crime urban areas (Gerbner, et al., 1980b; Doob and Macdonald, 1979). In these cases, everyday reality and television provide a "double dose" of messages which "resonate" and amplify cultivation.

Demographic correspondence between viewers and television characters also predicts the extent and nature of cultivation. Our message system analyses have revealed consistent differences in the relative likelihood of different demographic groups to be portrayed as victims or as perpetrators of violence (known as "risk ratios"). Relationships of amount of viewing and the tendency to hold exaggerated perceptions of violence are much more pronounced within the real-world demographic subgroups whose fictional counterparts are most victimized (Morgan, 1983). The symbolic power hierarchy of relative victimization is thus reflected in differential cultivation patterns.

### Mainstreaming

We have seen that a wide variety of factors produce systematic and theoretically meaningful variations in cultivation. We have named the most general and important of these patterns "mainstreaming."

The "mainstream" can be thought of as a relative commonality of outlooks and values that exposure to features and dynamics of the television world tends to cultivate. By mainstreaming we mean the expression of that commonality by heavy viewers in those demographic groups whose light viewers hold divergent views. In other words, differences found in the responses of different groups of viewers, differences that can be associated with other cultural, social and political characteristics of these groups, may be diminished or even absent from the responses of heavy viewers in the same groups.

Mainstreaming represents the theoretical elaboration and empirical verification of our assertion that television "cultivates common perspectives." Mainstreaming means that television viewing may absorb or override differences in perspectives and behavior which stem from other social, cultural, and demographic influences. It represents a homogenization of divergent views and a convergence of disparate viewers. Mainstreaming makes television the true 20th century melting pot of the American people.

The mainstreaming potential of television stems from the way the institution is organized, the competition to attract audiences from all regions and classes, and the consistency of its messages (see e.g., Seldes, 1957; Hirsch, 1979). In every area we have examined, mainstreaming is the strongest and most consistent explanation for differences in the strength and direction of television's contributions to viewer conceptions.

For example, data from the 1975, 1978, 1980 and 1983 NORC General Social Surveys combined to form the Mean World Index provides evidence for mainstreaming. These analyses have revealed that the overall amount of television viewing is significantly associated with the tendency to report that most people are just looking out for themselves, you can't be too careful in dealing with them, and they would take advantage of you if they had a chance. The relationship is strongest for respondents who have had some college education -- those who are otherwise (as light viewers) the least likely to express interpersonal mistrust. (The correlation between education and the Mean World Index is  $-.25$ ,  $p < .001$ .) Interesting specifications emerge for whites and non-whites. As can be seen on Figure 2, as a group, non-whites score higher than whites on

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FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

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the Mean World Index ( $r = .21$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Yet there is a slight negative association among non-whites between television viewing and this index, suggesting that television may play an ameliorating role in their anxieties. The relationship for whites, however, is the opposite. For the majority of (white) viewers, therefore, television plays an exacerbating role. Moreover, an analysis of variance of scores on the Mean World

Index by television viewing and race reveals significant main effects and a significant interaction. Thus, the heavier viewers of those groups who otherwise are least likely to hold television-related views of suspicion and mistrust are most likely to be influenced toward the relatively suspicious and mistrustful "mainstream" television view. In general, those who are most likely to hold a view already in the mainstream show no difference, while those who hold views more extreme than the television view may be "brought back" to the "mainstream" position.

Reflecting its tendency to balance divergent views and present a broadly acceptable political orientation, television also blurs traditional political differences. It can be seen on Table 1 and Figure 3 that significantly more heavy than light viewers of all political affiliations call themselves "moderate."

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TABLE 1 AND FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

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Heavy viewers are less likely to say they are conservative or liberal except among Republicans where, in a typical mainstreaming pattern, there is an extremely low number of liberals among light viewers while among heavy viewers the level approaches that of the "mainstream."

On the surface, mainstreaming appears to be a "centering" of political and other tendencies. However, a look at the actual positions taken in response to questions about a number of political issues shows that the mainstream does not always mean "middle of the road."

When we analyzed responses to questions in the NORC General Social Surveys about attitudes and opinions on such topics as racial segregation, homosexuality, abortion, minority rights, and other issues which have traditionally divided liberals and conservatives, we found that division mostly among those who watch little television. Overall, self-styled moderates are closer to conservatives than they are to liberals. Among heavy viewers, liberals and conservatives are closer to each other than among light viewers. Figure 4 illustrates these findings.

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FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE

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In regard to opposition to busing, we can see that heavy-viewing conservatives are more "liberal" and heavy-viewing liberals more "conservative" than their respective light-viewing counterparts. In the second example, opposition to open housing laws, viewing is not associated with any differences in the attitudes expressed by conservatives, but among liberals we see that heavy viewing goes with a greater likelihood of such

opposition. The third example shows that in response to a question about laws against marriages between blacks and whites, heavy viewers in all groups are more likely to favor these laws than are light viewers in the same categories, but this is much more pronounced for liberals. Finally, in the case of attitudes on homosexuality, abortion, and marijuana (examples 4, 5 and 6), there is considerable spread between light-viewing liberals and light-viewing conservatives, but, once again, the attitudes of heavy-viewing liberals and conservatives are closer together. This is due primarily to the virtual collapse of the typical liberal opinion among heavy-viewing liberals. We have also noted (Gerbner et al., 1982, 1984) that while the mainstream runs toward the right on political issues, it leans towards a populist stance on economic issues, setting up potentially volatile conflicts of demands and expectations.

Mainstreaming has been found to explain differences in within-group patterns in terms of the cultivation of images of violence (Gerbner, et al., 1980b), conceptions of science and scientists (Gerbner, et al., 1981c), health-related beliefs and practices (Gerbner, et al., 1981b), sex-role stereotypes (Signorielli, 1979; Morgan, 1982), views of racial and sexual minorities (Gross, 1984), as well as the ways in which television relates to academic achievement (Morgan and Gross, 1982), and other issues. Mainstreaming also explains variations in the intersection of patterns reflecting different "modes" of cultivation, such as in the distinction between general



assumptions about the prevalence of violence and perceived personal risks (Gerbner, et al., 1981a).

An increasing number of studies conducted by independent investigators in the United States and abroad contribute to the development and refinement of cultivation theory (e.g., Tan, 1979, 1982; Volgy and Schwarz, 1980; Bryant, Carveth and Brown, 1981; Pingree and Hawkins, 1981; Hawkins and Pingree, 1982; Singer and Singer, 1983; Williams, 1983; Bonfadelli, 1984; Weimann, 1984). We have moved from our early focus upon across-the-board consequences of television viewing (which still holds some of the most compelling evidence of television's contributions to conceptions of social reality) to further examination of the systematic processes of mainstreaming and resonance.

Our research has revealed a number of patterns of mainstreaming. The emerging models have two characteristics in common. First, heavy viewers in one or more subgroups are more likely to reflect in their responses what they have seen on television than are light viewers in the same subgroups. Secondly, the difference between light and heavy viewer conceptions is greatest in those groups in which the light viewers' conceptions are the farthest away from what might be seen as the television mainstream. As we can see on the illustration of different models of the cultivation process in Figure 5 (graphs a through e) the light-heavy viewer differences

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FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE

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need not point in the same direction or involve all subgroups. But they all (except graph f) reflect the cultivation process and relate to its "center of gravity," the television mainstream.

In summary, our theory of the cultivation process is an attempt to understand and explain the dynamics of television as a distinctive feature of our age. It is not a substitute for but a complement to traditional approaches to media effects research concerned with processes more applicable to other media.

Designed primarily for television, and focusing on its pervasive and recurrent patterns of representation and viewing, cultivation analysis concentrates on the enduring and common consequences of growing up and living with television: the cultivation of stable, resistant, and widely shared assumptions, images, and conceptions reflecting the institutional characteristics and interests of the medium itself. Our explorations of this process in many ways and contexts have been enriched and confirmed by studies of a growing number of independent investigators in the United States and abroad, and have led to the development of some theoretical models for further testing and elaboration.

We believe that television has become the common symbolic environment that interacts with most of the things we think and do. Therefore, understanding its dynamics can help develop and

maintain a sense of alternatives and independence essential for  
self-direction and self-government in the television age.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Cultural Indicators began in 1967-1968 with a study for the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence. It continued under the sponsorships of the U.S. Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior, the National Institute of Mental Health, The White House Office of Telecommunications Policy, the American Medical Association, the U.S. Administration on Aging, and the National Science Foundation.
2. By 1984, 2105 programs (1204 prime-time and 901 weekend-daytime), 6055 major characters and 19,116 minor characters have been analyzed.
3. In all analyses we use a number of demographic variables as controls. These are applied both separately and simultaneously. Included are sex (men, women), age (typically 18-29, 30-54, and over 55), race (white, nonwhite), education (no college, some college), income (under \$10,000, \$10,000-\$24,999, and over \$25,000), and political self-designation (liberal, moderate, conservative). Where applicable other controls, such as urban-rural areas, newspaper reading, and party affiliation are also used.

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Table 1

**Relationship Between Amount of Television  
Viewing and Political Self-Designation**

	Percent Who Say They Are								
	Liberal			Moderate			Conservative		
	ZL	CD	Gamma	ZL	CD	Gamma	ZL	CD	Gamma
Overall	29	- 2	- .031	34	+11	.136***	37	- 9	- .120***
Controlling for:									
Sex									
Male	30	0	.001	31	+ 9	.119***	39	- 9	- .121***
Female	29	- 4	- .050	37	+11	.132***	35	- 8	- .107***
Age									
Under 30	39	- 3	- .045	32	+12	.150***	28	- 8	- .136***
30 - 54	29	- 4	- .074*	32	+12	.160***	39	- 8	- .103***
Over 55	19	+ 3	.065	40	+ 6	.080*	41	- 9	- .126***
Education									
No College	23	+ 2	.040	41	+ 6	.068**	36	- 8	- .117***
Some College	36	- 2	- .034	26	+ 8	.110**	38	- 6	- .067*
Income									
Low	34	- 5	- .056	36	+ 7	.094**	30	- 2	- .051
Medium	29	- 4	- .062	32	+13	.162***	36	- 9	- .127***
High	28	- 1	- .043	32	+12	.154***	40	-10	- .120***
Race									
White	29	- 5	- .064**	34	+12	.148***	37	- 7	- .103***
Nonwhite	37	+ 4	.076	32	+ 6	.087	32	-11	- .194**
Region									
Urban	35	- 3	- .028	32	+ 9	.115***	33	- 6	- .095**
Non-urban	25	- 1	- .025	35	+12	.147***	40	-11	- .140***
Party									
Democrat	36	- 5	- .063*	36	+ 8	.095**	28	- 3	- .048
Independent	33	- 6	- .093**	36	+11	.146***	32	- 6	- .078*
Republican	14	+ 6	.126*	29	+12	.163***	57	-18	- .216***

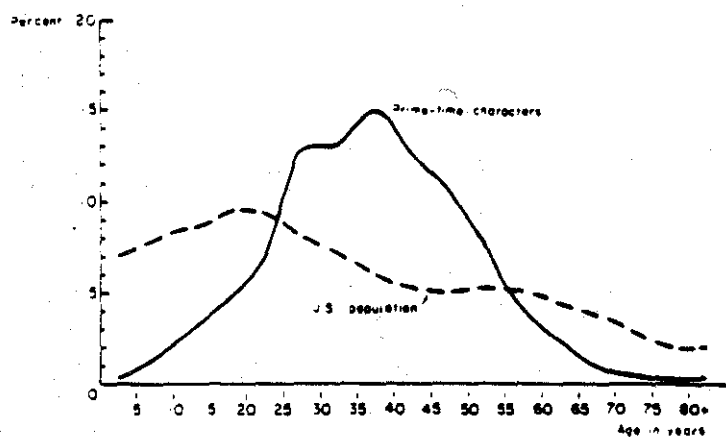
\* p &lt; .05

\*\* p &lt; .01

\*\*\* p &lt; .001

Data Source: NORC General Social Surveys (1975, 1977, 1978, 1980, 1982, 1983)

Note: ZL (percent light viewers) refers to the percent of light viewers giving the "television answer." CD or Cultivation Differential refers to the percent of heavy viewers minus the percent of light viewers giving the "television answer."



**Figure 1: Percentages of U.S. population and all prime-time TV characters by chronological age**

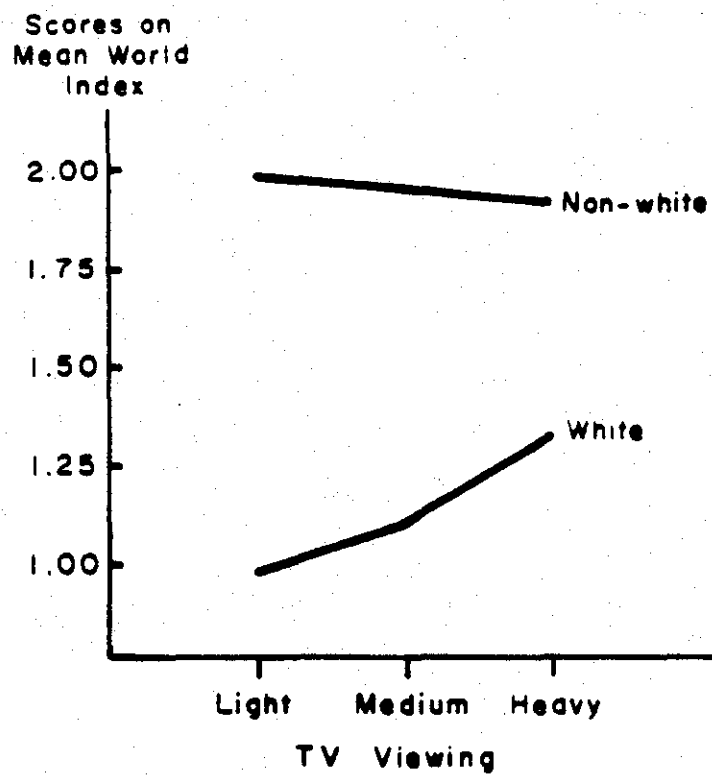


Figure 2  
Scores on the Mean World Index of  
Apprehension and Mistrust for White  
and Nonwhite Light, Medium, and  
Heavy Viewers

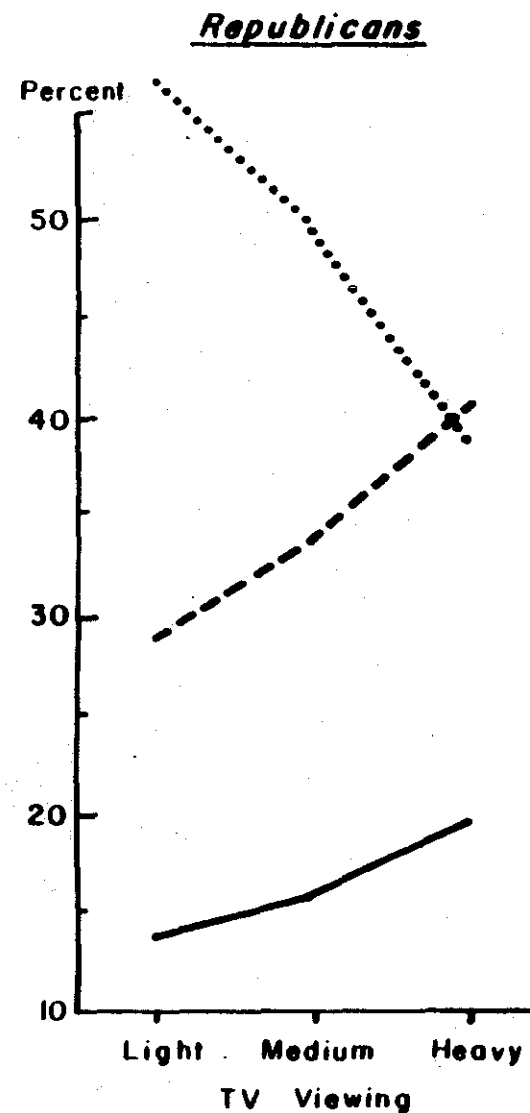
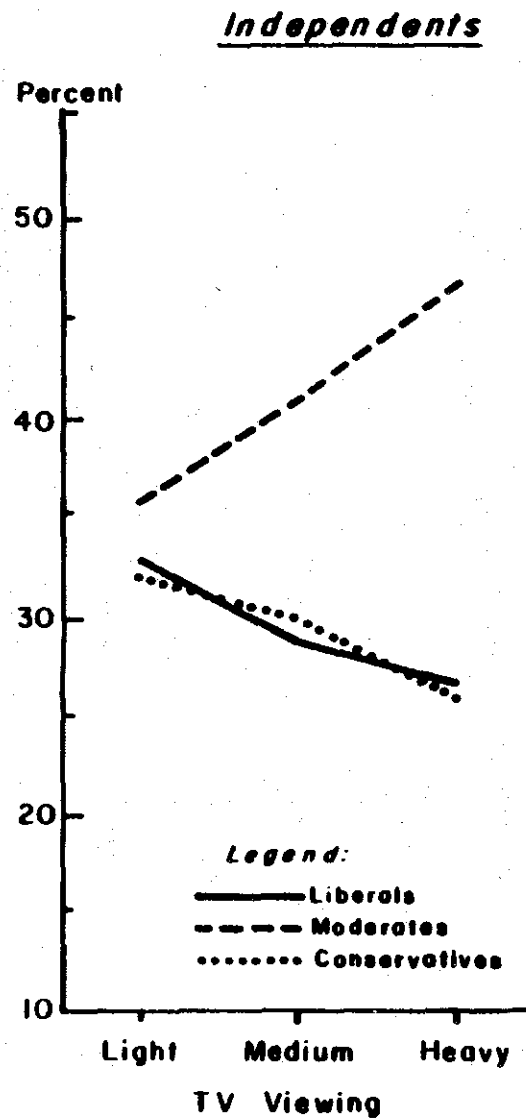
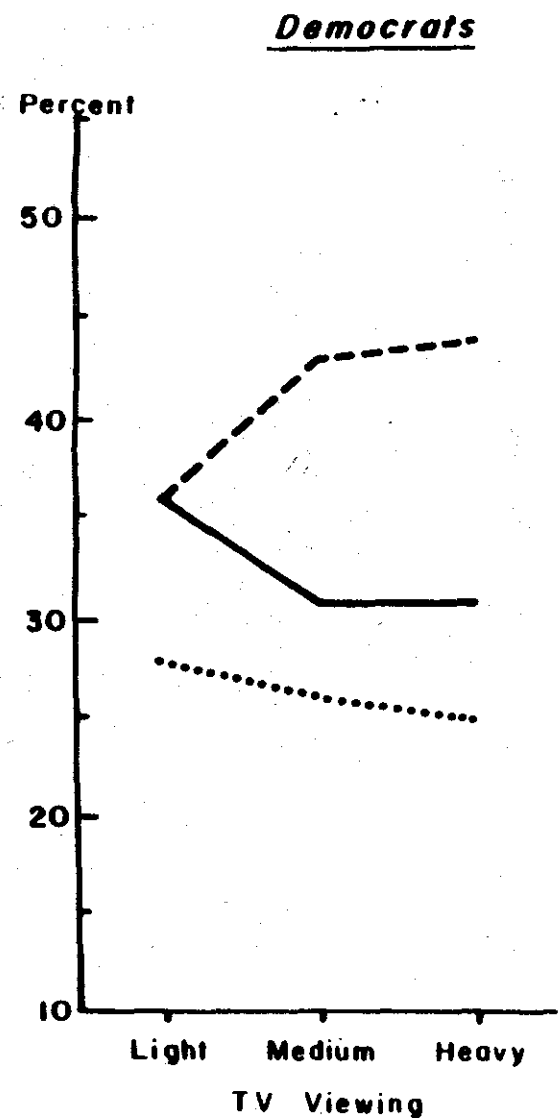


Figure 3  
Comparisons of Political Self-designation by Amount of  
Television Viewing Within Parties

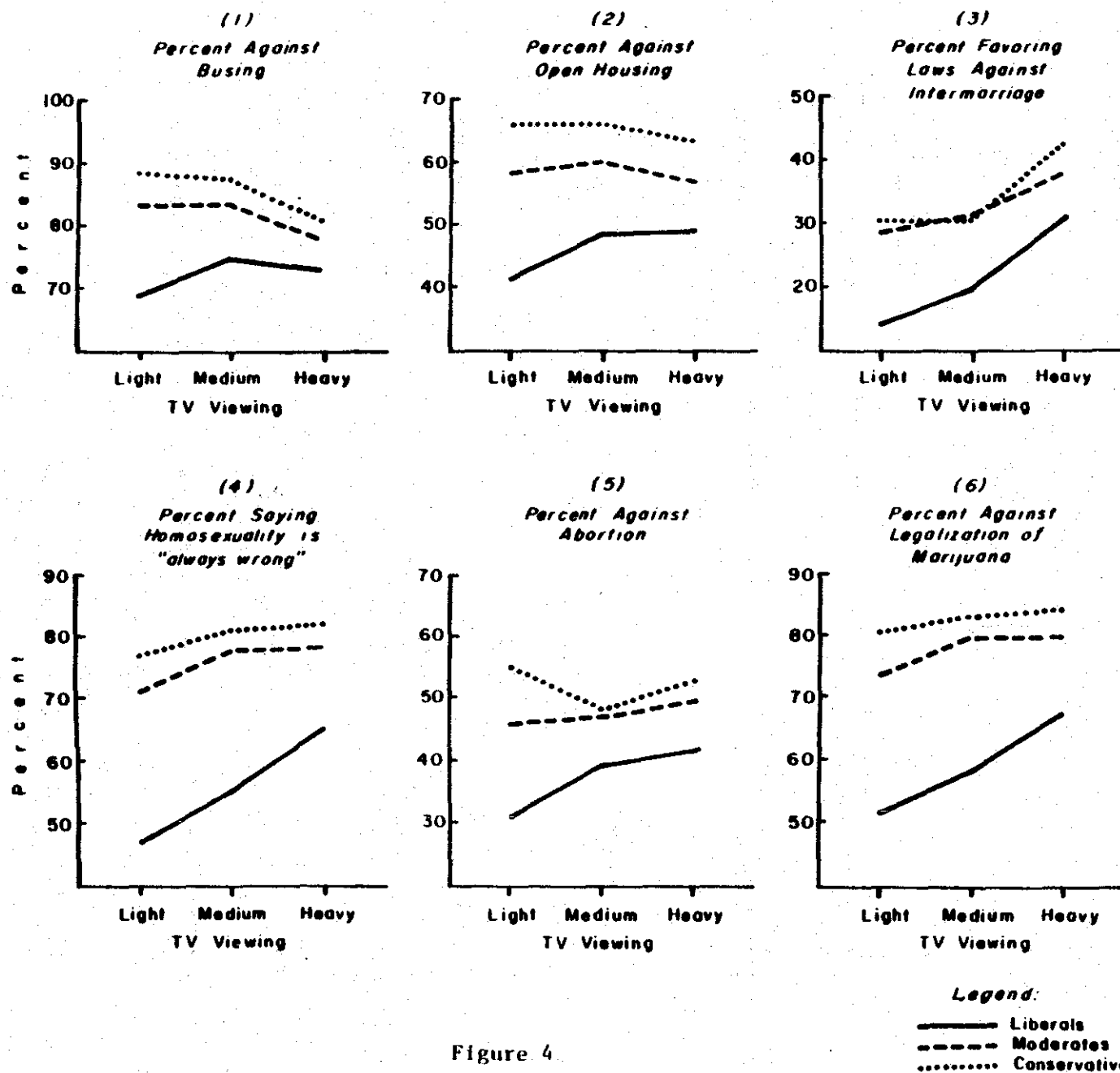
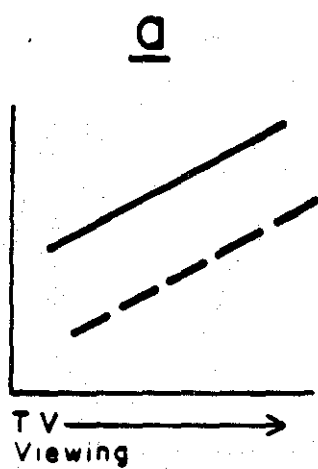
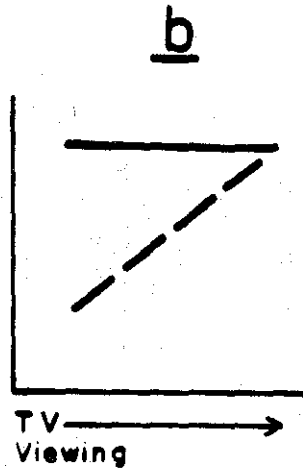


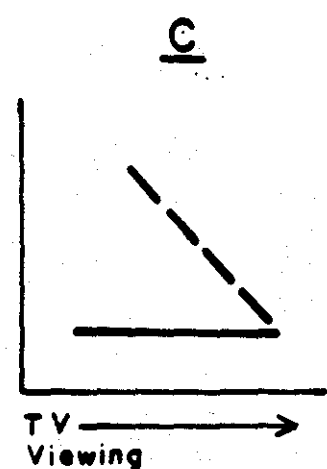
Figure 4  
 Television Viewing and Positions on  
 Racial and Personal Rights Issues by  
 Political Orientation



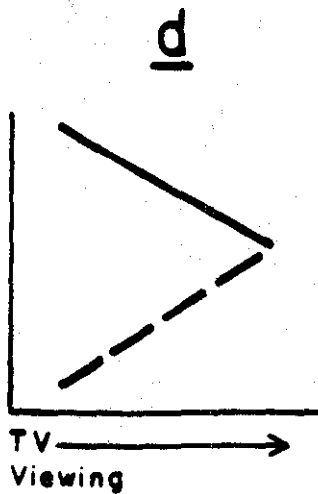
Across-the-Board  
Cultivation



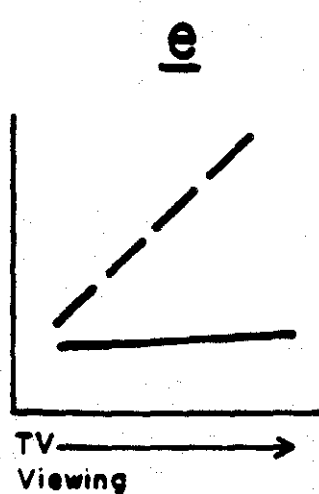
Mainstreaming



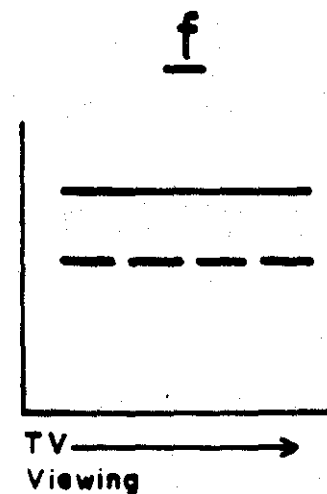
Mainstreaming



Mainstreaming



Resonance



No Relationship

Figure 5  
Models of Cultivation